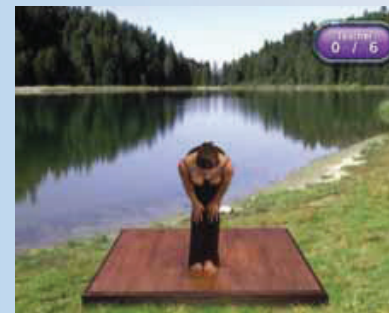
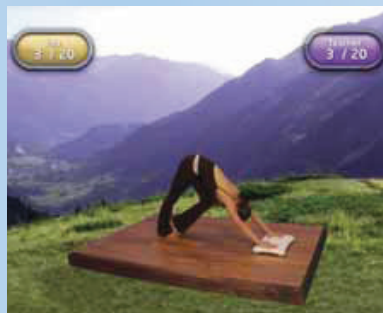


# Fitness thirst

For the next in our series of Game Changers spotlights focusing on the studios and companies evolving the face of the development sector, **Will Freeman** pays a visit to fitness and video capture experts Lightning Fish...



Above: Lightning Fish CEO and co-founder Prytherch, and right, *NewU* in action



Oxford developer Lightning Fish is only two-years old, but in that time has grown in size from its three founders – Simon Prytherch, Mike Montgomery and David Hunt – to a headcount of forty.

The studio first built its reputation creating the *NewU: Fitness First* exercise games, which quickly became recognised as a showcase for the potential of filmed actors in physically interactive video games. In fact, the studio has carved a productive niche for itself crafting motion-tracking games using video-based performers, and proprietary tech to support that drive.

"We work with Microsoft Kinect, Sony Move and Wii," reveals CEO and co-founder Prytherch, demonstrating his studio's confidence with new tech. "We have also developed our own technology that works on any camera-based system such as netbooks and laptops."

Presently Lightning Fish is going through an impressive period of transformation and expansion, as it readies *Get Fit With Mel B* for an end of year release on all three lead console formats.

"Lightning Fish are transitioning from a single team to multiple teams working on multiple titles on all the major platforms," explains Prytherch. "Our core creative and technical teams are in Banbury, but in June 2010 we opened a new studio in Pune, India.

"There are certain skills which are easier to find in India such as tools programmers, artists, Flash programming and QA. The key skills in the UK are console technology, management and creative game design. Each studio will play to its own strengths to create a bigger and better Lightning Fish."

## WELL KINECTED

Not only has a three-man team managed to expand on an ambitious global scale, but Lightning Fish's *NewU: Fitness First* games have done very well for themselves despite going head to head with the genre Goliath that is *Wii Fit*.

The reason for that, claims Prytherch, is because the team use real actors rendered using video technology, meaning that for the wider non-gamer audience the virtual trainers are recognisable, realistic and importantly, approachable.

"Computer generated characters that try to be realistic feel scary to the user," suggests the co-founder, hinting at the famous pitfall that is the uncanny valley.

"They are too perfect in their animation and expressions. Our video actors have more personality, plus it allows us to naturally place the video image of the player alongside the

**Computer generated characters that try to be realistic feel scary to the user. They are too perfect in their animation and expressions.**

Simon Prytherch, Lightning Fish

actor on Move and Kinect titles within the same environment."

Had Microsoft and Sony not moved to ape the fundamentals of the Wii's control system in such a manner, then Lightning Fish would surely have found another route to success. As it stands though, the new 'platforms' have allowed Prytherch and his colleagues to grab the bull by the horns and lead the charge to support the second wave of current-gen motion control.

"The development of new controller devices such as Move and Kinect has enabled us to bring our games to new platforms," says Prytherch.

"The further development of camera-based tracking systems will see a greater market for our skills and our games.

"We are the only studio that I am aware of that specialises in motion tracking, gesture recognition, gesture definition and using your whole body as a controller. We have been developing our technology and tools for over two years, so we have a very sophisticated production process. This allows us to create huge amounts of gesture-based content cheaply and quickly."

Aside from an ability to simultaneously offer expedience and quality, Lightning Fish has also evolved a shrewd knack for recognising industry trends from outside the sphere of development, and taking advantage of the opportunities afforded by such fashions.

Prytherch is quick to acknowledge that there are a smaller number of publishers who want to commission fewer retail titles, which in turn means there are less opportunities for developers in the boxed product retail market.

"As digital distribution ramps up there are more openings for developers to create income directly from consumers," confirms Prytherch, adding: "But in most cases the money generated from digital is not yet enough to replace what is lost in the retail side.

"Therefore at the moment most developers of the size of Lightning Fish and larger need to balance between the two. We are fortunate to be working on retail titles for the major consoles. We are also working on DLC for these titles plus supporting applications for other smaller platforms."

That added value digital content gives Lightning Fish additional experience, and allows the team to gradually shift some of the earning potential from the traditional retail to a wider variety of channels.

Nominated for the Best New Studio gong in the forthcoming Develop Awards, Lightning Fish stands out for its achievement and biz dev in a relatively short time, but perhaps its real secret to success comes from its heritage. The developer's staff shares experience of around 150 games on every platform in every genre.

Increasingly, Lightning Fish is beginning to read as 'big fish'.



## IN ASSOCIATION WITH...

Amicus Games is a leading provider of specialist talent to the video games Industry. The company recruits for some of the world's premier studios for artists, animators, producers, programmers, designers and executives such as studio heads and director level roles.