

# All work and all play

## Gillette pair try their hands at video game development

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### **Buy Now**

Zach Aars, the game developer for God Inspired Games, works on coding and irons out bugs for the game “Flood: The Prequel.”

- News Record Photo/Kelly Wenzel

To start a business, you need an idea and a plan to make that idea happen, and it also helps to have a little luck.

If it weren't for an empty chair and free pizza, Zach Aars, a 24-year-old self-professed “anime nerd,” and Paul Blinkinsop, a 40-year-old journeyman electrician and Air Force

veteran, would have never met. And they definitely wouldn't be working together to develop video games in the northeast corner of Wyoming.

The pair met at Gillette College last year while working on extra credit projects. Blinkinsop recalls walking into the common area and seeing all the tables full — except for one.

Aars was sitting at that table with some friends. He admitted that they were only there because “we were promised free pizza.” Blinkinsop sat down and started talking to Aars.

“I mentioned that I was wanting to make Christian-based video games, and he said, ‘What do you know?’” Blinkinsop said.

“Things escalated from there,” Aars said.

Last November, they came in second place at Techstars Startup Weekend, an event at Gillette College where participants pitch business ideas and team up to make those ideas a reality. The two pitched an idea for a video game, “The Philistine,” which follows the life of a Philistine foot soldier after he witnesses David killing Goliath.

Blinkinsop said that with the help of his team, which was made up of eight people, he got six months of work done in those three days, including financial projections, market research, a game design document and a demo of the game.

That weekend kick-started the company. One year later, they share a small office at the Energy Capital Enterprise Center and are grinding away, making games with the hope of diversifying the local economy while doing something they love.

The pairing might seem odd at first. Aars, CEO of Alkain Studios LLC, is a self-taught video game developer who would rather make games than play them. And Blinkinsop, CEO of God Inspired Games LLC, isn't the dictionary definition of the founder of a tech

startup as a full-time college student and single father who does part-time work as an electrician.

But they both share a love for video games and want to channel that into making games they hope others will enjoy. Aars handles the programming and coding, while Blinkinsop is in charge of the business side of things.

There's a lot of money to be made in the video game industry, Blinkinsop said, although it's often hit or miss.

"The amount of money you can make in games is stupid," he said. "I've seen junk games that netted over \$100 million."

The NPD Group, a market research company, estimated that the U.S. video game industry generated about \$30 billion in revenue in 2016, and research firm Newzoo projects that the global market for video games will be worth nearly \$120 billion by 2019.

In 2013, "Grand Theft Auto V" made \$815 million in revenue in the first 24 hours it was available and hit the \$1 billion mark three days after its release, setting a number of world records in the process. For comparison, the movie "Star Wars: The Force Awakens" took 12 days to make \$1 billion worldwide.

There are a number of independent success stories, the biggest one being "Minecraft," which in 2016 became just the second video game in history — after "Tetris" — to sell more than 100 million copies.

But neither Blinkinsop nor Aars are in it for the money. Blinkinsop said cash is "only a means to an end," adding that his goal is "to win souls to Christ," and Aars wants to "make as many fun games as possible."

Near the end of September, they released their first game, "Flood: The Prequel." It's available on Steam, a digital distribution platform for video games.

"Flood: The Prequel" is an action-adventure role-playing game where the player is transported back in time to six months before the biblical flood to fight corruption.

The game is on Steam Early Access, which "lets everyone know this is an early game, not in a completed state, but a playable state," Aars said.

The two went back and forth on whether they should release the game on Early Access. They eventually decided to do so because they want to build a community around the game, involve players in the creation of the game and work out the kinks so that the final product is as smooth as possible.

The week leading up to the game's release, Blinkinsop and Aars worked 16-hour days. When it finally came out, Blinkinsop said he felt like a weight had been lifted. But for Aars, it was a much different story.

"After it's released, all that weight is off your shoulders and immediately gets replaced with a different kind of stress," Aars said. "The stress of my having to work on the next update."

He's updating the game twice a week. One update adds new content to the game, while the other update fixes the bugs that came with the content update from the previous week.

To this day, Aars' biggest fear is negative reception.

"Every day I come into the office it's a huge fear, because it can go both ways, both extremes, just in the blink of an eye," he said.

The two are working toward a release date of the full game near Christmas.

Although creating a video game is no easy task, marketing isn't a breeze, either. Blinkinsop said it's important to get the word out as early as possible.

"I don't think it's ever too early to market, just a little," he said. "That marketing could just be telling your friends and family. But you got to start as soon as possible and work your way up."

It doesn't matter how good the game is if no one knows about it, Blinkinsop said, because if nobody knows it exists, there is a zero percent chance that they will buy it.

So far, it's been a struggle. Blinkinsop spent a couple hundred dollars on a Facebook campaign that reached 30,000 people in the U.S., U.K. and Canada, but he doesn't know if he got any sales from it. And it was too broad — he targeted Facebook users between 25 and 35 years old — to be effective.

"I hope other people learn through my mistakes. That was just throwing money down the toilet," he said.

### The future

The game that was pitched during Startup Weekend, "The Philistine," has not been made yet.

The game's price tag is what's keeping it from getting developed. Blinkinsop said it's going to cost \$100,000. The plan now is to make smaller games and gradually save up enough money to make "The Philistine." But both men have goals beyond this.

Blinkinsop said he hopes God Inspired Games brings in hundreds of millions of dollars in annual revenue somewhere down the road, and he also wants to make an online multiplayer game that takes players through the entire Bible.

Aars said he envisions Alkain Studios becoming an entertainment multimedia conglomerate. Like Blinkinsop, he hopes it becomes a \$100 million company.

As for their future games, Blinkinsop said they're going to be loosely based on biblical events, but the games' stories won't change anything that's already in the Bible.

And it's the story, he said, that really attracts people to play a game. He's seen video games develop over the past few decades, from the days of Pong and Atari to the virtual reality of today. Graphically, video games have never been better, but the storyline is the most important element.

"You wind up playing games for the story," he said. "You want to be completely engaged in that particular game. If you don't have a good story, it's not going to be engaging and people won't want to play it."

The two also want to bring career opportunities to those in Campbell County who might want to follow in their steps.

Blinkinsop said he thinks Gillette has a lot of skilled and talented people who can make video games. They just don't have an outlet.

"I think people think they have to leave the state to do game development. That's just not true," he said.

Blinkinsop's noticed that in Gillette, many people look at video game development like parents whose kid tells them he wants to start a band.

"They don't see it as a viable career path. They see it as a hobby," he said.

Aars said lots of kids dream of making video games when they grow up, but for some reason — whether because their interests change or because there aren't enough opportunities for them — that dream doesn't happen.

"That's why I wanted to stay here, to change that a little bit," said Aars, who wants to eventually teach workshops on different aspects of game development, such as psychology or city planning.

Although people might start out interested in making video games, the possible paths from that point are limitless. They just need someone to guide them.

“They could start making video games and wind up making cars. They could be the next Elon Musk,” Blinkinsop said. “You don’t know where your interests lie right away.”

“It’s a good way to teach people about the different types of things out there, see where they want to go, see where they thrive best and move on from there,” Aars said.

“Do something you’re passionate about, even if you don’t know anything about it, like me,” Blinkinsop said. “I knew nothing about game development when I got into this. I had a vision, and I saw it come to pass.”

Although these two men might not be successful in their current venture, that thought isn’t stopping them from trying.

“You might start a company and it flops, but as an entrepreneur, that means you get right back up and start a new company,” Blinkinsop said.

“Just do it. Don’t be afraid to fail,” Aars added. “You’re going to fail, but if you’re going to fail, make it as spectacular as possible.”