

February 25, 2005

Jason Hall Interview

Highlights:

I started off the day calling Warner Bros. studio to speak with Jason Hall, Senior Vice President for Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment. All I was really expecting to do was to see if Jason Hall's assistant or publicist could confirm an interview time with me. But the highly efficient Warner studio operators put me directly through to Jason Hall. I was a little startled to get him on the line that easily because I wasn't a major Hollywood agent, studio honcho or an important gaming exec that he regularly deals with 24/7. But because this is the lightning fast video game world--things can happen right away--like getting Jason Hall on my first call. But let me rewind a second and kick out some undisputable video game facts. RocSearch Ltd. estimates that the worldwide market for video games, computer games and interactive entertainment hardware and software would grow from \$20.7 billion to \$30 billion in 2007. The reason why I am talking to a Jason Hall in the first is because he probably is one of the most influential and powerful brothas in the \$10.5 Billion video game industry. Peep Jason's extensive E3 bio listed below:

“Jason Hall, Senior Vice President for Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment, leads WBIE in creating and managing the Studio's long-term interactive gaming goals and business objectives by leveraging its world-class brands across all current and future platforms. Prior to WBIE, Jason had been C.E.O. and founder of Monolith Productions Inc. since October 1994. Previously, Jason managed the multimedia department at Edmark Corporation and worked as a lead engineer at Broderbund Software. His career includes stints as a stockbroker, Marine, musician/composer, sound engineer and game developer. Jason understands the game-buying market because he is the demographic - a gamer, a technology buff and a gaming fan. His rare industry experience spans a broad range - from growing a high profile 3D technology licensing business to overseeing complete retail publishing and development efforts.”

Jason Hall is obviously by any objective standard a big baller in the vid game biz. He was responsible for overseeing Sega's development and launching Warner's The Matrix Online Massively Multiplayer Online RPG (MMORPG) or MMO game. This was a huge task since the majority of the Matrix films are basically us watching a fictional video game world. It had been widely reported in the game industry that Jason and Monolith had actually been working on The Matrix MMO game well before WBIE gave Monolith the Matrix MMO deal. Starting development of a game series without a formal contract was a gutsy move and high-risk move by Jason. But sometimes-big risks can pay off. As Monolith Games' CEO and co-founder, Jason was responsible for such popular titles like Blood 1 and 2, No One Lives Forever, Tron 2.0 and Predator vs. Aliens. Later on Jason did the unthinkable and got WBIE to acquire his old company Monolith Productions www.lith.com.

But Jason's road as a big time exec became quite rocky when he boldly declared that WBIE would hold game developers to higher Industry standards. Jason basically said that outside game developers that license game titles from WBIE, but produce sub par games would be penalized with royalty reductions. For example, Atari, who makes The Matrix video game, might want to make a game from Warner's new film Constatine. If the Atari Constatine title gets reviewed by the 100 or so leading independent Industry game reviewers and the unanimous consensus is that Atari's Constatine title scores below 7.0, then Atari would be paying royalty penalties to WBIE for making an less than stellar game. What Jason did was overnight rock the video gamming world by directly tying a title's actual tested performance with its overall potential revenue. Jason believes his mandatory "tough-love" licensing policy will create far better WBIE titles. Jason has previously stated in other gamming mag interviews that he wants to stop the practice of development folks grabbing great studio licenses and then hoping that a lot of media hype and catchy ads hide the fact that they made a weak title.

I asked Jason was he going to the upcoming 2005 Game Developers Conference (GDC) in San Francisco from March 7-11th. He said he was not planning on attending. But he would be sending his right hand man and leading WBIE creative executive Philippe Erwin to this year's GDC. I asked was his absence at GDC because he might get a less than warm reception because of his previous title royalty penalty edict. Jason said that was not the reason. He told me that many people in the gamming biz were highly skeptical of his royalty penalties, but now several months later everyone who wants to license WBIE titles has signed on to his policy. I then asked Jason if a company did not sign on would that company then in effect be admitting they were either afraid or willing to make and inferior title? Jason agreed with me and said that's exactly what would happen.

I then asked Jason if his royalty penalty policy was applied by every developer or became widespread might that not lead to "payola" scandals of game reviewers trying to ensure a title performed highly or was rated highly. Jason said that he was not worried about a "payola" scenario because it would almost be impossible for an unscrupulous or unethical game developer to effectively influence or manipulate the various 100 or more independent game reviewers. It would make more sense to have put that time, money and resources back into improving the game at beta stage than backing a title they knew would fail with most gamers. Jason should know best because unlike most game executives he comes from the development world unlike many publishing executives who have not actually built games from concept to cartridge.

I switched topics and asked about his unique status being a prominent African American in the vid game biz. A bit of awkward silenced followed. This became kinda touchy question for Jason to talk about because he told me that the video game industry is not black or white. Good ideas come from people of all colors.

From talking to Jason or other game biz insiders there is no practical or logical way to use one's race as an advantage or disadvantage when developing games. Scottish programmers thousands of miles from hood in South-Central created the initial Grand Theft Auto game and the subsequent GTA: Miami Vice and San Andreas titles. But those Scottish based developers had to create a fun game for anyone, not just black video game buyers. There is no urban/hip-hop title black video gamers would want to play that white gamers would not want to equally play as well.

Jason said if you look at the gaming industry overall you would not find a lot of blacks. He said it is mainly about upbringing and opportunity. Jason said we have few blacks as competitive swimmers not because of lack of talent, but rather lack of opportunities for blacks to regularly train at swimming facilities with good swim coaches. With schools around the nation making cutbacks to their regular athletic programs. You can only imagine inner city school districts trying to justify a swimming team or build and maintain an expensive swim facility when they cannot even afford new textbooks or computers for their students.

I went out on the limb and asked if there were any such thing as a black game development companies. I might have well asked when was Jason entering The Matrix because that was more likely to happen than an all-black video game developer company. Jason said people's mindsets in his biz are more open. Things are not as black and white like you find in Hollywood with black owned and run production companies. Jason says that because the game industry is designed to create titles that can appeal to all types of gamers you don't have an emphasis like studios to make urban films for urban audiences. Studios want urban films that can guarantee an urban audience and then crossover to bring in suburban moviegoers. Jason gave the example of a film like *Soul Plane*.

I agreed with Jason because last year I directly talked with a lone black creative exec at MGM who thought that *Soul Plane* should have been a \$100-Million dollar hit film. The creative exec was not alone because all of the other white MGM execs had this weird notion that a plane on 100" spinners, hopping up and down the runway and piloted by Snoop Dogg was going to be a break out hit. MGM foolishly thought urban DVD bootleggers held back the grosses of *Soul Plane* and not the fact that film was just not funny. You would never get a *Soul Plane* title even green-lit through an exec like Jason unless it was a well thought out game at every level and appealed to more than just minority gamers.

We shifted to topics to hip-hop and its growing influence on the game business. A top game insider who secures loans for game developers had suggested to me earlier in the week that big multi-platinum selling hip-hop artists do matter in regards to getting the attention of major publishers and developers.

But Jason's attitude was about the focusing on game first and not the star attachments. Jason said people who play a James Bond video game do not primarily do so because they see Pierce Brosnan's face on the James Bond video game character. The game still has to deliver on the excitement of the James Bond films before a gamer would care who is the actor used for James Bond.

Jason has worked directly in the past with Damon Dash to incorporate Rockafella brand clothes in the Matrix games. Jason knows what's popular in the hip-hop world will also effect the gaming business as well. White young males mainly buy hip-hop and that is exactly the same demographic of the average video game buyer. Jason said that he could easily envision a hip-hop musical video game; where an aspiring rapper had to go through the grueling and competitive trials a tribulation of making it in the hip-hop biz. Eidos Interactive already has a similar concept with Rock Da Mic, but I think a MMORPG hip-hop game could easily be developed. Unfortunately, there are enough feuds, shootings and crime in the real hip-hop world—like the current G-Unit beef and violence between 50 Cents and The Game--to ensure never a dull moment in a MMORPG hip-hop musical video game.

I ended my enlightening and enjoyable phone conversation with Jason with an understanding to do another more formal sit-down interview later. Probably after the GDC is over. I would like to follow-up with Jason and ask about his early start in the industry. Did he accomplish all his goals at Monolith before he took the job at WBIE? What are his long-term goals for WBIE? How does he see WBIE utilizing Blu-Ray DVD technology when Warner Brothers is aggressively backing the HD DVD format? I'd like to get into his development process of WBIE's new Dirty Harry title. I want to know at this early creative stage whether there will be an equal ethnic representation or of bad guys or will the majority of the bad guys be minorities? And how soon will studio interactive divisions like Warner Bros. be able to challenge EA, Activision and Midway on consistently creating hit games from their large resource of film properties. And how minorities can get more involved in being game developers? That's what I plan to ask if I get that opportunity to interview Jason Hall again.

Jason Hall's selection by WBIE to become their senior executive is not typical of the gaming industry, but it is already paying off in huge dividends for Warner Bros. As more Hollywood studios try to develop and self-publish their vast libraries of interactive creative content, it will be soon more common to find the new breed of "rebel sub par title royalty penalty imposing" execs like Jason Hall leading the way. And the fact that he's a brotha also should give more minorities encouragement to realize that hard work and creativity can pay off in the video game industry much quicker than achieving his same level of success and "green-lighting power" in Hollywood.

No African-American media, Black Enterprise, Vibe, The Source, XXL, King, etc., has made any real effort as of yet to interview Jason Hall. I'm just glad Hiphopbattle.com was one of the first to do so. But I am sure more interview requests will follow as Jason Hall's star grows brighter and brighter at Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment.

By,

David L. Watts a.k.a. Money Train



Jason Hall