

# Marleen Stikker and Alexander Fernandez on New Media and Gaming in the Netherlands

## “Grass-roots innovation”

**The Netherlands is teeming with new media companies and game developers whose creativity is generating an unstoppable flow of concepts and technological applications. The Dutch government is keen to support this new industry. Marleen Stikker of Waag Society and Alexander Fernandez of Streamline Studios in Amsterdam explain why the Dutch and IT-fuelled creativity are an unbeatable combination.**

By Marc Mijer

For three days in late September 2006, Amsterdam was the “creative capital” of the cross media world when the industry got together for “PICNIC 2006”. Five thousand visitors attended in-depth workshops on location-based play and other topics, a presentation on computer-animated film by Michael B. Johnson of Pixar (the animation studio responsible for *Finding Nemo* and *The Incredibles*) and lectures by Philip Rosedale (inventor of the Internet hit “Second Life”) and John de Mol (the Dutch TV producer who gave the world the “Big Brother” format).

The event was initiated by Waag Society, an R&D centre that focuses on new technology as it relates to the social environment, the care sector, education and culture. Waag

members collaborate on projects. One example is Frequency 1550, a mobile “city game” that uses GPS and UMTS technology to make history come to life for secondary school pupils. Armed with mobile phones, pupils wander around Amsterdam and get to know it as a medieval city. Waag Society worked with KPN and the Montessori Scholengemeenschap Amsterdam on this project; it has also worked with KPN, the City of Amsterdam and a number of schools to develop the Games Atelier, where youngsters learn how to create games as well as play them. Waag Society was awarded a prize by the Ministry of Economic Affairs for the project. Other development partners include Amsterdam University, the applied research centre TNO, Philips, and various local councils.

### “Come to Amsterdam and make your passion your work”

Society takes its name from the building in which it is housed: the “Waag” or Weighhouse, part of Amsterdam’s old city gate, dating from 1488. The Society’s director is Marleen Stikker. When asked to describe the Dutch new media sector, she immediately mentions cross media, i.e. concepts that make use of at least two of the available technical infrastructures for Internet, mobile telephony and television. “These are highly developed channels in the Netherlands. In fact, the Dutch have one of the highest penetrations of broadband and Internet in the world. With so many people online, it’s obvious that there’s a demand for services offered via those infrastructures.”

#### Mobile city game

So no wonder that there are so many enterprises – particularly SMEs – in the Netherlands involved in developing such services. They range from sole traders to companies with more than 100 staff. There are also countless alliances and partnerships. Waag Society itself is involved in various consortiums whose

members collaborate on projects. One example is Frequency 1550, a mobile “city game” that uses GPS and UMTS technology to make history come to life for secondary school pupils. Armed with mobile phones, pupils wander around Amsterdam and get to know it as a medieval city. Waag Society worked with KPN and the Montessori Scholengemeenschap Amsterdam on this project; it has also worked with KPN, the City of Amsterdam and a number of schools to develop the Games Atelier, where youngsters learn how to create games as well as play them. Waag Society was awarded a prize by the Ministry of Economic Affairs for the project. Other development partners include Amsterdam University, the applied research centre TNO, Philips, and various local councils.

#### Serious gaming

The result is a sector that is producing a seemingly unstoppable flow of new ideas, technologies and applications. One particularly notable area is edutainment or serious gaming, where gaming technology is being used for entirely different

purposes, such as education. Simulated environments – in fact, nothing more than game environments – offer an ideal opportunity to learn new social or management skills, for example. The Dutch government has so much faith in serious gaming that it has made EUR 10 mln available to the Game Research for Training and Entertainment (GATE) programme.

New media and gaming are obviously a serious business these days, and that's good news for gaming companies like Streamline Studios, which develops content for game publishers in the interactive gaming industry and solves customer problems with state-of-the-art solutions. Streamline Studios has worked on "Gears of War" by Epic Games, "THQ's Saints Row", "James Bond 007: Nightfire" by Electronic Arts, and Red Storm Entertainment's "Ghost Recon 2". It recently released "Hoopworld", its first game developed entirely in-house. Co-founder and current CEO of Streamline Studios, Alexander Fernandez, explains why he left the USA for Amsterdam to set up the company in 2001. "Amsterdam is a melting pot of cultures, with an open-minded design mentality. That's a great climate for creative companies like ours. We also have 50 employees and 15 different nationalities working here. We recruit them from around the world. We can say 'Come to Amsterdam and make your passion your work'. A lot of young people consider that an irresistible proposition."

### "Home town heroes"

Fernandez says that the Dutch gaming industry is "growing and flourishing" and consists of approximately 30 development companies, including Triumph in Delft (the makers of "Age of Wonders") and Guerrilla Games (which co-developed "Killzone" with Sony for the PS2). Nevertheless, he would like to see the sector grow stronger and is therefore active in the European Game Developers Federation (EGDF). "The EGDF is an association of companies like ours – not big multinationals, but home town heroes, the boys and girls who've taken their creative ideas and turned them into small, independent firms. We're talking grass-roots creativity here, but if we want it to stay that way, we'll have to work together to survive. That's why I'm involved in the EGDF. Our aim is to speak with one voice in Europe."

Another aim is to position the gaming industry in the arts and culture sector. That has already happened in France, and game developers there have access to greater financial support. "If that were to happen in other European countries, it would give many small-scale developers the capital they need to grow, and ensure that the Netherlands and Europe can retain their position as a centre of game development."

[www.waag.nl](http://www.waag.nl)

[www.streamline-studios.com](http://www.streamline-studios.com)



As CEO, the US-born Alexander Fernandez has helped build Streamline Studios from a fledgling creative studio into an internationally recognised creator of digital content for top interactive entertainment franchises as well as an independent developer of its own IP. He also serves as Commercial Director of BGI, the Benelux Game Initiative, and is active within the

European Game Development Federation.

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Marleen Stikker is the founder and director of Waag Society. She was previously the Mayor of the Digital City, the Netherlands' first Internet community. Stikker was and is active on various boards and advisory councils, including ICTregie and Cross Media Week. She recently launched the Media Gild, intended to help technology start-ups develop their concepts into prototypes and business plans.