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Derek Smart Talks Line Of Defense, Alganon



The

man who made a career out of complex space-sims and controversy is moving on. He's now president of Quest Online, and has been rebooting free-to-play MMO [Alganon](#). He's also just announced an ambitious MMOFPS, [Line Of Defense](#). We talked to him about both these things in the interview that follows...RPS: It's been a while since we talked, and it seems like things are changing – can you explain what your involvement with Quest Online is all about? This seems like quite a different project for you?

Smart: Well, it all happened suddenly and quite by accident actually. Having wrapped up my last two projects (All Aspect Warfare and Angle Of Attack) in 2009, I resumed focus on my first MMO game, Galactic Command Online. So I started looking around for partnerships through the various MMO networks (e.g. K2). Then in June 2009, I got a LinkedIn message from a contact of mine about Quest Online. Supposedly this was going to be a network funded by investors and that their first game would be Alganon.

Anyway, in June 2009, I spoke to the then head of the company and then again in Nov 2009 about collaborating. My thought process was that since I didn't need much by way of support, just a network to "plug" my game into without my having to build any backend (e.g. database, billing, web services etc), I felt that it was more beneficial for me to work with a small startup than with the larger behemoths. If you recall my history in the industry, you will immediately understand why this would be my thought process.

In Nov 2009, around Thanksgiving, I got a frantic phone call from the aforementioned person in which he informed me that he had a problem that he needed my help with and that if successful, there was a possibility of our collaboration as previously discussed.





So

I went along. He introduced me (through a conference call he setup) to the majority investors, as well as the co-founder. Most of this is well documented on my website blog at dereksmart.org, but by the time the dust settled in late Feb 2010, I found myself the President of QOL and head of the Alganon development team. The rest is history.

Yes, Alganon is a completely different project for me. However, most of what I bring to the company and the game relate to leadership, industry expertise and of course development related experience. Unlike my own games, I don't write any code for the game at all. Instead, I plot and plan the development path of the game, come up with dev schedules which the teams can act upon, devise various strategies for the game etc. Of course I also run the company as well, having been hired by the majority investors to do just that.

RPS: Can you tell us a bit about how Alganon has changed in the past year? What do you think you have brought to the game?

Smart: Wow! That would span quite a few pages. As is well known, in Dec 2009 the game was released by the previous lead and designer to disastrous results. Once I was made president in late February 2010, I pretty much scrubbed the entire planned dev schedule, design etc and started with a clean slate for how to proceed going forward and under my leadership. The primary goal was to first finish the game. We were able to do this around the end of April 2010. We branded that v2.0 and it was a far cry from the previous Dec 2009 v1 launch.

If you **compared** the original v1.1.1 (Dec 2009) to the official launch 2.0.0 (April 2010) and then to the recently released 2.5.2 build, you will see that a significant amount of work has gone into the game since that original disastrous launch.



We've

not only fixed all of the launch problems and actually FINISHED the game's first generation, but we also implemented a transaction system, a cash shop, went fully F2P, added a bunch of new quests, areas etc but we also made significant UI revisions to the game and added an extensive PvP (which should have shipped with the game from the start) to the game. It has been an extraordinary amount of work that was done in a very short time due to the determination, focus and planning that I brought with me.

Now we're designing and developing the game's third generation which will see the game's first expansion pack launch by the middle of this year. And that will bring a bunch of new technologies, features and assets to the game.

RPS: Why should the average MMO-playing RPS reader care about Alganon?

Smart: Well in the crowded fantasy MMO market, Alganon's standout strengths are in the fact that the game is a lot more than your standard fare. Even though a lot of people compare it to WoW, if you accepted that comparison – and you like WoW – well Alganon has no monthly subscription fee.

All kidding aside, the game has a rich lore, stunning environments, various unique and interesting gameplay elements such as the Studies and Library systems etc. And best of all it is F2P; and if

gameplay elements such as the Studies and Library systems etc. And best of all it's F2P, and if you like it enough to invest in it, then you have a well stocked cash shop specifically for that purpose.

I accept that a lot of the early adopters were jaded by the original release – and rightfully so. But judging by our increasing numbers, my guess is that the on-going marketing campaign and word of mouth getting out are helping us get the word out that this truly is a very different and unique game.

Best of all, the RPS guys – at least those old enough to have crawled out of their diapers – who know me, know that I never – ever – abandon anything. I've had to deal with a broken game before and despite all the detraction and ridicule, I stuck with that very first game. That decision alone got me where I am today. So, it is safe to say that as long as the majority investors (my clients) continue voting to keep the company going, Alganon isn't going anywhere as long as I'm at the helm. If something is broken, I will make sure that it is fixed. If something needs tweaking, I will make sure that it is tweaked. And as time goes on and the game matures, we will continue to build it up and improve on the gameplay experience and technologies.



RPS:

What is it like working in the fantasy MMO market? The competition looks ludicrously tough from where I am sitting... Isn't the space just over-subscribed?

Smart: Yes, the space is over-subscribed in terms of genre. The majority of the MMO games are in the fantasy genre. Of course everyone has taken notice, so other genres such as FPS and RTS games are making their debut. To be honest, it is not that much more saturated than standard games. The biggest issue in the MMO market is that the barrier of entry is the difference between life and death. With WoW dominating the market, those foolish enough to try and compete with it, rather than compete on their own strengths, have either gone away, switched to F2P or are hanging on for dear life.

When you give gamers a choice, most will vote with their dollars. This is the primary reason why most MMO games that are not WoW or one of the other big names, are going F2P. There are just too many games competing for the same space and gamer dollars. At the end of the day, those that stand out, provide rewarding gameplay and have a minimal (or \$0) barrier of entry will survive in the long term.

RPS: Is free-to-play really the future of the MMO space? Are we going to find ourselves canceling all our subs by the end of 2012?

Smart: Yes, I think so. However, there is nothing that says a hybrid model can't survive. You can still release a game purely F2P but offer some premium for those willing to pay for it. The issue with that is you then have to consider balancing issues. You certainly don't want to give some guy with money an edge over another without.

I do not envision MMO games that have a subscription only model surviving in the long term. At least not on the PC. On the console side, since MMO games haven't taken off there, those wanting to offer subscription based MMO games already have a head start there.

In fact, Alganon actually now has a hybrid model. You can download and play the game for free. As in F2P. You won't need to buy anything until you get to around level 30 or so. But if you want to hit the ground running, you can purchase the SuperPak (which contains a bunch of goodies) for about \$20. While it doesn't exactly give you an edge against other players (PvP) or in the PvE

game, it does give you a bunch of nice items and features if you feel that the game is worth the money spent. And you can buy this SuperPak at any time you choose.



RPS:

So, you've announced a new project – Line Of Defense – what can you tell us about that?

Smart: Ah yes! Basically, when I was designing All Aspect Warfare back in late 2007, I did it because I wanted to move away from the rather complex space/planetary games that had defined my career. As the game design and development progressed and the PC gaming side of things continued the downward spiral in terms of publishing and distribution deals and whatnot, I envisioned it as an MMO game.

However, I was already developing Galactic Command Online based on my long running IP. The problem for me was that in order to launch that game, I needed my own network backend because given the complex and niche aspects of my games, I felt that it was highly unlikely that I would be able to find a decent network for it.

If you follow the story of Eve, you will understand how and why they went their own way and thus are comfortable with a 300K player subscription game. My games in general, eclipse that number in sales. And so I figured that without upsetting the Apple cart or biting the hand the feeds, that I should just stick with my formula and do my own games. So if even a fraction of my install base were on board, we would be very successful. Plus, GCO was envisioned as my last game. I was simply tired of doing the two year song and dance that is the staple of standard game development schedules.

But I had no network, nor the team or expertise with which to actually build one. It is not enough to develop a multiplayer game and push it as an MMO game. The latter requires a LOT more than just having a multiplayer game.

So I decided to do those two 2009 games in order to shore up my cash flow so that I could not only fund GCO but also allow me to build my own network if it came to that. If I had a network willing to host the game, provide backend services etc and take a percentage of the cut as is standard for these deals, I would not have been thinking about building my own at all.





And

during the development of the AAW game, it hit me that the game would probably do well as an MMO game. So by the time it was finished and released, I already had the plan to do an MMO version to complement GCO itself. I figured that I could hedge my bets on one niche game and one mass market game. So I set out to design it, with a view to getting it out before the much – much – larger (and complex) GCO game.

When I came to QOL, my focus was on Alganon and on saving the company from going under as a result of the botched launch of that game. During talks with the majority investors, the discussion about my original contact with QOL came up and so talk of bringing my games to QOL – as a network – resumed.

With the MMO version of AAW being a much smaller and faster paced game – firmly out of my staple niche catalog of games, we started entertaining the thought of bringing that [LOD] game to QOL. By the end of 2010, I made the decision to license the game to QOL which would in turn act as the network and provide the back end services which 3000AD lacked. In a standard deal, the network would retain a percentage of the game's proceeds in exchange for providing said services. Pretty much the same thing that other networks offer.

With that decided – though nothing actually signed to secure the deal – work on the game continued.



RPS:

How do you feel the game will stand up against SOE's revamping of PlanetSide and Red 5's Tribes-like, Firefall? What is LoD doing that stands out?

Smart: Well, I have always felt that Planetside was a game that was well ahead of its time. Which IMO is the primary reason it didn't do as well as it should have back then. When you're competing with an industry in which the FPS genre is one in which you just buy the game and play it, a subscription based FPS game is more of a tough sell. That said, I don't envision SOE straying too far from the original or they run the risk of alienating the core install base that are still playing it. As a result, my guess is that the game is probably going to be more of the same. If they do that, then they're pretty much off my list of competitors because they won't stand a chance against LOD. At all.

Firefall is of no consequence because apart from the fact that it is a different type (and style) of game, I don't believe that they would fare any better than the likes of Global Agenda. That whole "Tribes-like" push is going to be their first problem. Several have tried and failed to capture the essence that was the original Tribes game. Not even Tribes 2 could pull that off. It looks like a very pretty game though and I'm sure that they're watching the industry closely. But lets face it, these days we all know that it is irrelevant what industry "names" you have attached to a project, how much money they have or what game they're developing. It all comes down to timing,

opportunity, gameplay and execution. So they're probably going to be competing with the likes of Earthrise and the upcoming Tribes revamp by the Global Agenda guys, not LoD.

Line Of Defense on the other hand is a totally different type of game. First and foremost, we have no time for silly things like crafting, resource gathering, instanced PvE or any of those grind-related rubbish. The focus is on character progression and pure twitch combat metrics.

So many things in LOD stand out that I simply don't even know where to begin. But let me highlight the top ones. For starters, we have a massive open world. A typical base in each of the continents is about 2x3km, with each continent being about 16x16km and filled to the brim with atmosphere and amazing environments. Absolutely no playing in a box here. In fact, with a brand new game engine designed from the ground up for this game, we started out with a 256 player per server instance, 500x500km game world, but my dev team quickly talked me out of the latter.

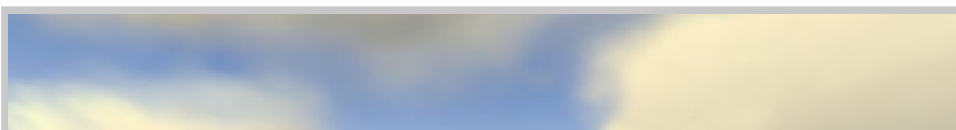


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have full on FPS and TPS gameplay, vehicles, aircrafts (seriously fast movers), gunships, naval units, LOTS of weapons of mass destruction, unique and innovative gameplay, space and planetary environments etc. We also have things like player housing right off the bat. Individual players and guilds – who can afford it – can build in the game environment. From small outposts to large military bases. The game's inventory sports prefab units ranging from buildings to defense units. So you can pretty much find a plot of land, lease it, go buy your prefabs, deploy them, then buy defense units to protect it etc. We're doing this because it fits within the game's overall premise.

And we have a space environment. Yes, the space region above the planet where this conflict takes place is fully accessible. Player characters can move from the planet to the space stations seamlessly because we're building the inside sections of the space stations as well. The end result is that a battle that started on the planet below, can spill into the space station in orbit, and vice versa. It's going to be absolutely crazy. And for those with access to space capable crafts, you can also engage in planetary and space combat depending on what it is you want to do. This is however not a full on space combat game. So no cap ships, trading, diplomacy or any of that. I decided to include the space region only for completeness and to somehow cater to my pre-existing space combat fans until GCO was out. So that aspect of the space combat is purely for fighters. There is no trading or any of the advanced gameplay found in something like the GCO game. Plus the space region is much – much – smaller but big enough for the conflict that I envision within.

Though I tend to dream and build big – having designed and developed several massive and niche games, LOD is a departure from that scope and complexity because the game is designed to be accessible to all as a “Jump In, Jump Out” type game. That's why I decided to make it purely PvP and with absolutely no resource or crafting type gameplay. There is no PvE component at all, no instancing whatsoever – it is all one massive, seamless game world.





RPS:

Can you tell us a bit about the roadmap for LoD? When can we expect to see it live etc?

Smart: We are on track for a late 2011 deployment, though depending on schedules, I may hold it until Q1 2012 depending on how crowded Q4 2011 is.

The first game features a small section of the massive planet that the conflict takes place on. Due to how it is designed, we plan to not only open up other surface continents by way of expansions and such post-release but also plan to introduce additional player classes, playable assets, new weapons etc.

RPS: How do you feel about the PC gaming space these days? Still exciting?

Smart: Well it is not as exciting as it was back in the day. Nowadays it is more about survival than it is about the fun and excitement of game development. In other words, it is all business for the most part. If you're lucky to be working on a fun project, then you've got it made. Anything short of that is just a paycheck. For my part, since I tend to only fund and make the games that I would play, the fun and excitement comes with the territory.

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