

HOW HE HERDS CATS

FORMER WILD-ANIMAL HANDLER MARK HARWOOD DEFTLY JUGGLES THE CHALLENGES OF CREATING AND SELLING VR VIDEO GAMES.

WRITTEN BY KATIE GRANT

Mark Harwood loves a challenge, whether that's working with African lions as a wild-animal handler or working with multiple stakeholders to create a video game and deliver it on time. For 10 years, Harwood volunteered to do general labor at the Wildlife Waystation animal sanctuary in rural LA County. He eventually began working alongside professional animal trainers as a handler. He credits lessons learned from working with lions for helping with his producing career.

"Literal herding of cats translates well to virtual cat herding," he says. "It's also helpful when you're trying to keep perspective if things aren't going well. When you've been roared at by a big cat at close range, it's hard to get too worked up about whoever might be yelling about something."

Harwood is an executive publishing producer with Beyond Frames Entertainment, a publisher primarily of VR games, based in Stockholm, Sweden. After earning a degree in film production from Boston University, he moved to LA. In between jobs, Harwood found himself playing games on his PC and reading gaming magazines like *PC Gamer*.

"I suddenly realized that many of the game companies were based in California," Harwood says. "I shotgunned out a bunch of résumés to local companies, and when one made me an offer, I took it and never looked back."

Harwood's job often involves remote work across many time zones. He generally starts his day by checking in with people to see how they're doing, both personally and projectwise. He focuses on what's most urgent, whether new opportunities or a project that's gone offtrack. At times, new data about the latest hot tech or the most current sales reports affect whether he'll continue with a project, readjust to make the game relevant, or pivot and shift release dates.

When it comes to creating new games, Harwood says, "Ideas are the easy part. It's the execution that's tough." Third-party games looking for remaining funding and distribution, after bootstrapping their way to a demo for proof of concept, are often assigned to him. As a publishing producer, he ensures the game is properly tested, which includes prepping it to work in different markets. He ensures that the marketing team has what



Mark Harwood with a furry friend.

they need to sell the game, so they can line it up for a successful release on the chosen date.

Harwood also handles opportunities for putting packages together. He may get a pitch for a game where the core loop is solid but could use help with storytelling, visuals or other elements to make it stand out in the market.

"If needed, you can bring a writer in to help out, an artist to help with lighting, or voice talent to attract fans or punch up production value," Harwood says. "Sometimes you can make a deal for an IP that fits a game that's already built and try to get more eyes on it than it might otherwise receive."

As a player, some of Harwood's all-time favorite games include *Archon* and *TIE Fighter*. Recently he's been enjoying *Pistol Whip* and *The Seventh Guest* in VR. As for games that he has produced, he says, "*Tiny Tank* is my favorite overall, but *The Mummy: Prodigium Strike* and *HERO* are location-based VR titles that also stand out."

Harwood's experience has taught him that the bulk of the job revolves around communication and making sure the right people have the right information at the right time. "You can't yell your way to success with a 500-pound African lion, so you have to figure out a different way to achieve the goal," Harwood says.



Mark Harwood demonstrating *The Mummy: Prodigium Strike* in the StarVR headset on the Universal Lot.



Outside of tech and games, Mark has worked with native and exotic wildlife.

IF HE WERE STRANDED ON A DESERT ISLAND (WITH WI-FI AND A COMPUTER, OF COURSE) THESE ARE THE FIVE TOP TOOLS HE'D TAKE WITH HIM TO MAKE THAT HAPPEN:

Graph-ruled Notebooks and Mechanical Pencils

"There's something about the physicality of writing that helps me retain information better."

Post-its and Whiteboard

"I find it helpful being able to look at the full slate of projects on a timeline, but most project management tools are designed around handling the needs of a single project. You can work around it, but I just find Post-its and markers easier."

Transcription Software

Programs like otter.ai and Tactiq are critical. "After the fourth back-to-back meeting, it's hard to remember the nuances and discussion from the first one. Being able to refer back to what was said is great."

1.5x Speed

Playing recordings of meetings or presentations back at 1.5 speed is "not a tool per se, but it's a great time-saver."



Google Flights

This browser plug-in displays the amount of legroom on each flight. "I travel a fair bit, and I'm tall, so this is a huge benefit."



Runners-up

USB-rechargeable AA batteries to put in consoles, and a 5m USB link cable.



Other tools that don't make Harwood's top five but are still daily software essentials include Excel, PowerPoint, Google Sheets, JIRA (for bug tracking), Irfanview for image viewing, paint.net for light image editing, and a PDF viewer—his current choice is Foxit reader.

His favorite app is Google Translate for times when a gamer leaves useful feedback in a foreign language.

To help Harwood achieve the producing priority of clear communication and timely feedback,

he relies on email, IM, Slack, MS Office/Google Suite, Discord and Google Meet.

Sometimes, herding so many cats can seem impossible, but Harwood doesn't let it faze him. "Like Walt Disney said, 'It's kinda fun to do the impossible.'" ■