

# Rewiring Shakespeare with *Elsinore*

## Moonlighting game developers shake up the adventure genre to win 2016 Intel® Level Up Contest award

Making a video-game on the side when you already have a full-time job is a major undertaking. Presuming to rewrite Shakespeare is quite another thing entirely. Combining the two, however, takes game-development *chutzpah* to a whole new level.

To paraphrase the character Polonius in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: "Neither an employee nor an independent be"—to which we'd add, "not when you can be both." This is the approach of the team at Golden Glitch Studios. Led by Katie Chironis, who in her day job is a VR game designer at Oculus\*, Golden Glitch is making *Elsinore*, a bold evolution in the point-and-click genre that won Best Adventure/Role Playing game in the [2016 Intel® Level Up Contest](#).



Figure 1. The *Elsinore* title-screen showing the playable character Ophelia, and the hand-painted art style.

*Elsinore* is a real labor of love. Nearly every member of its 11-strong team holds a full-time job in the games industry, and works on the project in their free time. This "moonlighting model" of game development is made possible by the lack of geographical barriers to online collaboration, and a team that is motivated by more than simple financial reward.

That's not to say that the team's chosen modus operandi doesn't come with its own particular challenges. How Katie, her game designer right-hand Connor Fallon, and the rest of the talented team are making it happen, is, like *Hamlet* itself, a story worth telling.

## Questioning Shakespeare

Katie's initial encounter with Shakespeare's best-known opus wasn't promising: "Like most other kids, I was forced to read *Hamlet*. I definitely didn't appreciate it at the time." A college course brought the play to her attention again, this time in a more flattering light, and Katie realized there were some questions she needed answering.

"The thing that stuck out to me was that Ophelia didn't get what she deserved," said Katie. "Hamlet can withstand all this crazy stuff, and manages not to lose his mind, but Ophelia, the second her dad dies and Hamlet rejects her, goes completely insane and drowns herself. That to me felt really unbalanced."

The final impetus to turn Ophelia's story into a game came from a Shakespeare-themed contest held by Carnegie Mellon University's Game Creation Society, of which both Katie and Connor were members. Once they started down the path with *Elsinore*, they realized they were onto something big, and, after a couple of summers developing the idea, followed by graduation, they decided to knuckle down and make it a reality.

## Tragic Transformation

As a reformed scholar of Shakespeare, Katie had few qualms about rewriting the *Hamlet* narrative to bring the balance she sought, safe in the knowledge that Shakespeare himself had indulged in something of a fan-fiction rewrite, having drawn on the Norse legend of Amleth.

In this spirit, Katie took a number of "liberties", which included making Ophelia a woman of color of Moorish descent, adding more women to the ensemble, and pouring something of herself into Ophelia's character. "Ophelia shares a lot of flaws that I personally have," said Katie. "I write a lot of myself in her. That's been my personal highlight on the project."



**Figure 2.** Screenshot showing the options Ophelia has for sharing information with Hamlet, each of which bears its own consequences.

The re-imagining provided an opportunity to play around with the point-and-click adventure genre, of which the team are ardent fans, bringing new ideas and mechanics into play. The most notable of these are the time-looping story—in which the player, as Ophelia, repeatedly relives the same 48-hour period—and the responsive narrative system that reacts to the information you share with NPCs, none of which they forget, despite the resetting clock.

“We set out to create a game that makes you feel like you are living through hell at the end of the world, but you get to know the people who are along for the ride with you,” said Katie. “There is something very compelling about repeatedly facing down the same tragedy,” added Connor.

### **Moonlighting Strangers**

“It is really, really hard to make a game in your spare time when you work in the games industry full time,” admitted Katie. “I didn’t fully appreciate that when I started.” Katie, Connor, and the rest of their original collaborators, were committed, however, so they began the process of pulling together a complete team of like-minded compatriots.

The initial team was comprised of members of the Game Creation Society they were part of at Carnegie Mellon. After graduating from the Pennsylvania college, the team was scattered to the four winds in search of work. “Some of us are in academia, and some of us are in the games industry,” said Connor. “Oculus, ArenaNet\*, Double Fine\*, Telltale\* ... we run the spectrum.”



**Figure 3.** Still showcasing the artist Wesley Martin's hand-painted work, and a character's bloody fate.

Most, however, eventually found themselves heading in the same direction: the West Coast's game-development hubs. With team-members based in Seattle, San Francisco and Los Angeles, as well as a couple of stragglers still resisting the pull of the West Coast, it remains a challenge to get people under the same roof.

To help keep things on track, they use a number of online tools. "We love Trello\*," said Katie. "We rely heavily on Trello and Google\* Docs to make sure that we are synced up on workloads and current tasks. [Engineers] Eric and Kristen have also hand-developed a number of tools in Unity\* that we use to track information about the game," she added. "Those have been incredibly helpful."

One interesting addition to the team is composer Adam Gubman, who creates music for high-profile clients including Disney\* and NBC\*, and game publishers Square-Enix\*, Activision\*, and Ubisoft\*. Katie credits him with more than the music on *Elsinore*: "He was my piano teacher when I was a kid," she explained. "Back then he was in college to become a game composer. He was one of the first people in my life that made me realize that I could have a career in games. The fact that he decided to join the project is something I'll always be grateful for."

### Fringe Benefits

In 2015, the Golden Glitch team made the decision to run a Kickstarter\* campaign to help fund the nascent *Elsinore*. Despite the campaign's intensity and its baptism-of-fire in community- and social-media-marketing, it proved worthwhile. "I'm really glad we did it," said Katie. "It was stressful at the time, but we didn't want to seek out a publisher because it's not our full-time job, so there was no other avenue of funding open to us."

Not only did they hit the initial target in three days, and smash through numerous stretch goals to reach more than USD \$32,000, they also found themselves Greenlit on Steam\* in under 48 hours. Katie fondly remembers receiving an email from a Valve\* staffer along the lines of, "Hey, in my former life I was an English teacher and I taught *Hamlet* to my students, I love your game. It's been passed though."



Figure 4. Storyboard art showing Hamlet and the ghost.

One side-effect of any successful Kickstarter campaign is a committed community of fans following and supporting the project, but what Golden Glitch didn't anticipate was tapping into the huge community of Shakespeare fans on Tumblr\*. In addition, many members of the current team contacted Golden Glitch as a direct result of the Kickstarter, offering their professional expertise to make the game happen.

"After the Kickstarter, we took on a wave of people: our composer, Adam, our sound designer, Steve, our 3D-animator, Becca, and our cinematic artist, Tati," said Connor. And while the original core-team continued to work for free, the Kickstarter funding meant they could pay their new hires. "I think a Kickstarter is something that every indie game should consider," added Katie.

### Rough and Smooth

One obvious handicap with the moonlighting model is the limited time the team can dedicate to the game. "*Elsinore* moves more slowly than other indie games," affirmed Katie. "We can't iterate as quickly, or devote time to creating. It's really frustrating not being able to move and react as quickly as a full-time game."

"Real life gets in the way a lot of the time. I have so little time to spend on *Elsinore* already, that when other things blow up, the game has to be put on the back burner," continued Katie. "That's just how it has to be, because it's not making us any money right now."

The part-time approach means that efficiency is vital to the development process, which Katie sees as a definite plus: "The upside is that we really carefully consider every single decision that goes into the game, whereas, if you're working under a tight deadline at work, you might be rushing decisions because you just have to get it in." The hope is that the careful deliberation about how to best use the limited resources available will result in a better game. Based on *Elsinore's* reception to date, that theory appears to be accurate.



Figure 5. Side-by-side screenshots showing the visual evolution of *Elsinore's* dungeons.

Ultimately, the combination of Kickstarter funding, the lack of daily overheads, and moonlighting colleagues working for love, makes for a creative freedom without which *Elsinore* may not have happened. "We don't have a publisher, we don't need anyone's money, and we can work to a schedule that makes us happy," affirmed Kate.

But while Katie, Connor and the team naturally want to see *Elsinore* succeed, some of their immediate goals are more humble—and symptomatic of the remote-working model. “We have not yet had the chance to all meet up in the same place, at the same time,” admitted Katie. “It’s on our bucket list.”

## Levelling Up

In early 2016, the team decided to enter *Elsinore* in the Adventure/Role Playing category of the Intel Level Up Contest. “We’ve had our eye on the contest for a couple of years,” said Katie. “I think it’s a little more democratic than a lot of indie game festivals and submission groups. I was immediately drawn to it.”

Looking at the game from the point-of-view of the first-time players who would judge the entries was a valuable exercise for the team. “Submitting your project to a contest forces you to consider all the little things that affect how people see the game,” said Connor. “It encourages you to zero-in on what areas need touching up, that you might have been putting off.”

From that perspective, the impetus gained from entering would have been reward in itself. The contest judges, however, had other ideas. The panel, comprised of games industry luminaries including writers Chris Avellone and Anne Toole, Vlamber\*’s Rami Ismail, and Double Fine’s Tim Schafer, saw fit to bestow the Best Adventure/Role Playing Game award on *Elsinore*. “We thought there’s no way in hell that we’ll win this thing, but we should submit anyway just to see,” said Katie. “We were very, very happy when we won.”



Figure 6. The Intel Level Up Contest award for *Elsinore*.

The benefits of winning went far beyond the cash prize. Following the win, Intel invited the team to demo *Elsinore* on the show-floor at PAX West, giving them an opportunity to put the game into the hands of hundreds of players, and gather valuable feedback. “The exposure that we have gotten as a result has been incredible, and something that would never have come to us otherwise,” said Katie.

Just as important was the morale and motivational boost to the team. “This is our side project, so we don’t get a lot of the normal feedback, so the fact that we were selected was this enormous motivating push for us,” said Katie. “Motivation is basically your currency when it’s a side project, so that’s huge.”

That’s not to say the extra cash isn’t being put to good use. “It actually helped us bring team members up for PAX to demo at the Intel booths,” said Katie. “It’s also going to be really useful in getting our voice-acting as top notch as it can be.”



*Figure 7. Katie Chironis (left), with a visitor playing Elsinore, on the Intel stand at PAX West 2016.*

The benefits of entering, and ultimately winning, the contest have turned the team into committed Intel Level Up Contest advocates. “When you work on something for so long, it’s really nice to be validated,” said Connor. “The whole experience has given us another boost of momentum.” Katie added her endorsement: “I would absolutely encourage people to enter.”

## The Home Straight

It's an easy assumption to make that the members of the *Elsinore* team harbor dreams of quitting their day jobs, and turning Golden Glitch Studios into a full-time gig. However, that's not the goal at all. "Honestly, I really like my day job," said Katie. "I don't think any of us have any plans to leave our jobs."

In fact, they believe that working on a personal game-project on the side can bring important benefits, and not only to the individual. "I personally like the setup of having a day job, and working on artsy games like *Elsinore* on the side," said Connor. "It only helps our professional lives; things you learn on one project benefit the other, and it gives you an opportunity to stretch yourself in different ways."

For this reason, Katie believes gaming companies should actively encourage their staff to develop side-projects. "It has allowed us to gain skills that we never would have otherwise, and bring them back to the job for free," she said. "I now have skills in marketing and PR, releasing a game, and showing it publicly, that cost my employer nothing. It's basically self-motivated training."

And should the game find its audience, they expect more extra-curricular opportunities to arise. "I'd say the biggest benefit that would come with success would be having more clout and reputation to assemble and promote future side-projects," said Connor, with the clear intention of making the "moonlighting model" an ongoing feature of his working life.



Figure 8. The courtyard of *Elsinore* showing the game's main interface, top left.

For now, however, Golden Glitch Studios has a game to finish. Thanks to the visibility *Elsinore* has gained through its Kickstarter, from the Intel Level Up Contest, and exposure at GDC and PAX shows, the game has a growing fan-base. "So many people have reached out to tell us they're connecting with it," Katie said. "It's become something way larger than any of us thought it would. It's kind of wild, to tell you the truth."

*Elsinore* by Golden Glitch Studios is coming to PC via Steam in 2017.

For more information about *Elsinore* and Golden Glitch Studios, visit <https://elsinore-game.com/>

For details on the Intel® Level Up Game Developer Contest and this year's winners, go to: <https://software.intel.com/sites/campaigns/levelup2016/>

*Elsinore* is an IndieCade\* Festival 2016 finalist. Read more about the festival here: <http://www.indiecade.com/2016/games>.

Follow Golden Glitch Studios on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/goldenglitch>.

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