Duel personality: How Mind Candy is growing World of Warriors

By James Batchelor (/contact/james-batchelor)
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We speak to the firm’s Edd Smith about the latest outing for its new IP

Following the world-conquering success of Moshi Monsters was never going to be easy.

While other companies would have been content with focusing on their best-selling franchise, taking it to as many possible markets as possible, Mind Candy knew it needed to do more. The firm tasked its development teams with creating promising new IP, and last year a fresh challenger emerged.

World of Warriors began as a single mobile title and has since been followed with a few spin-offs, the latest of which is now available. World of Warriors: Duel is a competitive ‘fastest finger first’ title starring various renowned fighters from throughout history.
We spoke to technical director Edd Smtih (pictured) about the new direction this spin-off takes the franchise and how the project has opened new opportunities to both monetise and reward gamers.

How does Duel stand out from other World of Warriors titles?
The most noticeable difference is the VS mode, where you and a buddy can battle it out on the same device. It was something we threw in for the team to mess about with, but it turned out to be so much fun we decided to polish it up and include it in the final release.

Where other World of Warriors games offer more strategic gameplay experiences, Duel is one of those great apps that you just pick up and play or grab a friend and battle when you get a spare moment. We like to think of it as the next Crossy Road or Flappy Bird, as it really has that 'one more go' sort of feel about it.

Why did you decide to take the franchise in this direction for this title?
We want everyone to engage with the amazing World of Warriors franchise, so we try to cater for all types of gamers. With the other World of Warriors games we offered deeper experiences with story and strategy, but sometimes you just want to play a game where you can bash up a load of enemies. With Duel you have that, it’s super simple and addictive so players can just dip in and out when they get a spare minute or two.

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What learnings from previous World of Warriors titles could you use when developing Duel?

The World of Warriors codebase is about two and a half years old and over that period we’ve learnt a hell of a lot, but the main thing we brought from the main title on to Duel is the tools. We’ve always been quite coder-light in comparison to artists, so we’ve done as much as we can to put the power in the artist’s hands.

I’ve never been very good at turning hand wavy gestures and vocal sound effects into exactly what the art guys want, so we give them the tools to turn what is in their head into a reality. This not only results in a higher quality product, but it frees up our coders to get on with adding features. This is really what enabled a single coder and a few artists to turn around Duel in such a short amount of time.

What new challenges did you face when developing Duel and how to did you overcome them?

Duel was our first attempt at using instant video rewards and the decision to add them came quite late on in development, so the challenge was understanding the technology and design implications quickly without derailing what we already had planned.

We used a third party service called Fyber, who provided a plugin which is simple to integrate and they have great technical support, so tech wise it was fine. Design wise we ended up taking a simple and not too aggressive approach which allowed the game to be enjoyed with or without watching the video ads.

I now live in Oslo and this was the first project that I’ve worked remotely on from the first prototype. The team’s availability also meant that work was split between Mind Candy’s Brighton and London studios. Interestingly, I feel that actually helped the team because we were all in the same boat and it forced everyone to communicate openly rather than assuming knowledge transfer through osmosis when working in the same office. We had daily catch-ups like you would on any other project – only now it happens on Google Hangouts. I’m a big fan of people getting up and going to people’s desk to discuss/resolve problems, only now that happens using a video call.
Specifically, how did you ensure as low latency as possible so that the 'fastest finger first' matches are as fair as possible?

When we started spec'ing out the feature list on Day 1 we all agreed that this game had to be 60fps. Day 2, a framerate counter went on the screen and stayed on all builds until we cut the final release, so it was instantly obvious when we started to drop frames. It was pretty easy to keep the framerate in check until that final polish stage where all the bells and whistles got thrown in. Most issues could be tackled with a general optimisation pass, but given the short time frame we cut some corners by turning off things like real time shadows on low end devices.

Aside from hitting 60fps, it made sense that we also minimise the input latency. The office Street Fighter nut was explaining how no one wants to play the PS3 version because it has one extra frame input latency over the 360 version. So we felt it was worth that extra effort to make sure it was tight as possible. Really it was just a case of following the logic through code to ensure the prompt to press the screen appears on the same frame the timer starts and that the timer stops on the frame the OS reports the screen being touched. I'm pretty confident it's as good as it can be and then we're just at the mercy of the hardware.
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**What plans do you have to update/improve Duel?**

There is always that desire to tweak, polish and optimise. Personally I really want to spend more time optimising because I know there are still some easy wins to be had, then we can get real time shadows back on the lower end devices and turn on anti-aliasing. Download size can come down too which is really important to these sorts of games.

According to our analytics, a fair number of people are playing the VS mode so there are a few discussions around extending this feature. Adding a party play game mode where a group of friends could all duel each other is the most likely candidate at the moment.

**What learnings will you take from Duel to future World of Warriors titles?**

Given that Duel is such a compact refined little app, there wasn’t a huge amount of new technology that has come out of it which we can repurpose for future titles. However, as I’ve already touched on, learning to work in a distributed team and integrating instant video rewards is something that we can take on to any future title. Specifically on instant video rewards there is lots potential for more compelling and innovative ways of integrating them and perhaps rolling them into some of our existing titles.