COMPANY
**5 Lives Studios**

LOCATION
**Brisbane, Australia**

SOFTWARE
**Autodesk Maya**

# 5 Lives Studios Celebrates Indie Success with Satellite Reign

## Innovative Pipelines and Crowdfunding the Future of Games Development

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>
> —**Mitchell Clifford**
> Animator
> 5 Lives Studios



Image courtesy of 5 Lives Studios.

**5 Lives Studios was born of necessity and invention when Sega Studios Australia announced in early 2013 that it would be closing its doors.**

Mitchell Clifford, Chris Conte, Mike Diskett, Dean Ferguson, and Brent Waller were in the final stages of producing Disney's *Castle of Illusion Starring Mickey Mouse* when they received advance news of their job losses. The industry veterans first worked together at Krome Studios and had served on a wide variety of projects including *Grand Theft Auto, Darksiders, L.A. Noire, and Star Wars*.

But it was their work on the *Syndicate* series of games that led Diskett to suggest that they form their own independent team. He jokingly sent an email about creating a spiritual successor to *Syndicate* using the Kickstarter crowdfunding model to raise development funds. After first laughing, the four others signed up to the idea.

*Satellite Reign* became the title and its Kickstarter project began in June 2013, quickly finding an audience of appreciative fans who fondly remembered *Syndicate's* real-time tactical game play. *Satellite Reign* follows a similar scenario as a class-based strategy game, set in an open-world cyberpunk city. Players command a group of four agents through rain-soaked, neon-lit streets, where the law is the will of mega-corporations.

### The challenge

While Kickstarter seemed a great idea none of the five had any previous experience with the site other than buying and supporting other games. "We didn't know what to expect but we had nothing to lose other than the three months we spent putting together our pitch in our spare time while still working at Sega," said Diskett.

They researched other Kickstarter projects and went over every aspect of their campaign in exacting detail to explore options and finesse their objectives before launching.

"The games publishing model is broken these days - it can take six months just to negotiate contracts," explained Clifford. "A big advantage of crowdsourced funding is that it gave us creative freedom to develop the game we wanted while providing 15,000 supporters asking for features and providing feedback and input.

"While we understood what we were aiming to deliver depended on funding, we knew before we started that it was going to be huge project and that it would be a massive job for five people. It was a bit of a compromise because if we didn't deliver something that was compelling we would have been less likely to achieve our goal. If we had promised too much and under delivered our reputations would have been ruined."

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# "Being able to use Maya with Desktop Subscription was a perfect solution to help us manage our work load when we really needed it."



Image courtesy of 5 Lives Studios.

## The solution

Most strategy games have few animations whereas *Satellite Reign* required as many as typical third person games. With only a small team of developers undertaking the massive scope of work, the 3D content creation tool of choice was Autodesk® Maya® software.

Kickstarter funding financed the purchase of three Maya seats for the production of 3D assets involving animation by Clifford, character art from Ferguson, and environmental art by Waller. All three began their careers using Autodesk® 3ds Max® software before moving to Maya which they have used on every games project since.

"I just relied on what is stock in Maya with a touch of the bells and whistles features," said Ferguson. "I built the basic maquettes in Maya, used other solutions to sculpt them and generate the low polygon models, then went back into Maya to set up and use all the finishing tools. I also used a bunch of MEL scripts I have made and used over the years."

"Other than a 3rd party rigging system, I only needed Maya and its in-built features for all my animations," said Clifford. "I relied heavily on

HumanIK in Maya to transfer motion capture data over to our own rigs. It doesn't really care what the source and target rigs are like which made my job easier."

Clifford connected motion capture software to four Sony PlayStation® Eye cameras to track his own acted movements and output skeleton animations into Maya.

"It was not as perfect as the expensive, real-time mocap systems but for an indie studio with a strategy game where the characters are not very big on the screen, I was able to whip up animations for an entire city worth of people by myself."

When production peaked, the developers leveraged Maya Desktop Subscription (DTS) licensing to hire a freelancer. "Being able to use Maya DTS was a perfect solution to help us manage our work load when we really needed it," explained Clifford.

## The result

30 days from launch the Kickstarter project successfully passed its initial goal to raise more than US$660,000 from over 15,000 supporters. The additional funds also enabled the multilingual translation of the game text.

An early access build of *Satellite Reign* was released in December 2014 and the final version on August 28, 2015. Supported platforms include Mac, PC and Linux with online distribution through Steam, Humble Bundle and GOG.

With a small crew and a big production the 5 Lives team members were very happy not to have experienced technical problems during production. "This is the first time I have worked on a project without a dedicated technical artist and aside from the odd crash I don't recall any problems," said Clifford.

Future enhancements may include a much-requested multiplayer option but as the game was not written to support it the move would involve months of work. For now 5 Lives Studios are busy dealing with the many enquiries from people thinking the company are Kickstarter experts.

To learn more about Autodesk Maya 3D animation software, visit **www.autodesk.com. au/products/maya/overview.**

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(l-r) Dean Ferguson, Chris Conte, Mitchell Clifford, Brent Waller, Mike Diskett. Image courtesy of 5 Lives Studios.

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