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Published January 2002

**#1 BioWare Corp.**

Call them picky, discerning or even fickle, role-playing gamers like BioWare's products, and the company has the bottom line to prove it. Over the past three years, the video game developer increased its annual revenues by 462% – no, a decimal isn't missing – to \$9.8 million in 2000.

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**High Score**  
by Will Gibson

Ray Muzyka loves Star Wars. When he first saw the science fiction classic as a youngster, he loved it so much that as the credits ended he wanted to get back in line to see it again. About 20 years later, a video game created by Muzyka and Greg Zeschuk at BioWare Corp. induced the same kind of addictive compulsion in Simon Jeffrey, now the president of LucasArts Entertainment Company. LucasArts, formed by Star Wars creator George Lucas to extend his movie brand to the interactive arena, consummated this mutual admiration with Edmonton-based BioWare by signing a deal in July 2000 to produce a role-playing video game based on the hugely popular science fiction movie series. It was a very easy sell: "We got an e-mail from [Jeffrey] while he was the development director at LucasArts.

He played Baldur's Gate all the time," says Zeschuk, referring to BioWare's immensely popular Dungeons & Dragons-based game, where players create their own characters that determine the adventure in a medieval setting filled with knights, rogues and monsters.

Zeschuk and Muzyka share Jeffrey's passion for video games; it's how they met each other in medical school. But in addition to creating cool games, BioWare has set high scores in sales. That also impressed LucasArts, which has produced more than 30 Star Wars titles for eight different computer and video console platforms. The BioWare game that hooked Jeffrey — Baldur's Gate — sold 1.5 million units for PC gamers while winning many influential industry awards for its graphics and game play. Subsequent releases in the series — Baldur's Gate: Tales of the Sword Coast, Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn and Baldur's Gate II: Throne of Bhaal — pushed the total sales to four million and earned BioWare even more industry kudos.

"Gamers are pretty smart. They're pretty picky, too," says Muzyka, 33. "They know what they want; they know what they don't like. Our customers are very discerning."

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role-playing gamers like BioWare's products, and the company has the bottom line to prove it. Over the past three years, the video game developer increased its annual revenues by 462% — no, a decimal isn't missing — to \$9.8 million in 2000. Those results have earned some impressive hardware for the company on an ego wall that would glitter in any foyer — the 1997 Young Entrepreneurs of the Year (Alberta) from BDC, the 2001 Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year — Software and Information (Prairies), the 2001 ASTech Award for Outstanding Commercial Achievement along with a slew of industrial kudos, product reviews and high profile media attention, including a 1998 front page blurb in the Wall Street Journal. Now, another space has been cleared as BioWare topped this year's list of Alberta's Fastest Growing Companies for 2001, the fourth straight year BioWare has made the top 30 growth roster.

Zeschuk and Muzyka — who often finish off each other's sentences — have two pillars at the foundation of their business: produce easy-to-play games with great graphics and create a climate to attract and keep the best coders, artists and other skilled developers to BioWare. "The people we have here are really world leaders, they are as good as anybody else in the industry and our value as a company depends on retaining these people and ensuring they are happy, ensuring their creativity is not limited in any way," says Zeschuk, 32.

To that end, the atmosphere at BioWare's Old Strathcona headquarters may leave old-school managers feeling like the parents went away for the weekend, leaving the teenagers to run amok. The walls are cluttered with quirky artwork from their past and future video games, some featuring medieval creatures from a nightmare that only could be spawned by a midnight burrito binge. The lunchroom is a video arcade where the employees gather to nosh on catered meals from the area's restaurants. The dress code seems to forbid ties because nobody — not even Muzyka and Zeschuk — wears one. "We don't care what people look like, what they wear or what kind of music they listen to," shrugs Muzyka. "What we care about is who they are as individuals and what they contribute."

Because they view BioWare's 110-odd employees as their chief assets, Zeschuk and Muzyka have gone well beyond the relaxed motif and buying breakfasts every morning to ensure they woo and retain them. Zeschuk and Muzyka sit at the bottom of an inverted pyramid structure, where credit flows uphill and responsibility seeps down to them. "Who makes the money for the company? Admin people don't actually generate any income. Our job is essentially to serve the people generating the income: that's the developers," Zeschuk says.

They also hold a meeting at least every two months with all employees, who are divided into groups based upon the year that they were hired. This

practice stems from a project for Muzyka's group behaviour class while he studied for his MBA through Western Ontario's executive program. "We decided to work on communications systems in the company as we had grown past 60 or 70 employees at that point and a lot of misinformation was flying around," he says. "It really works in dispelling the rumour mill."

But they credit much of their business acumen to medical school, which both men see as excellent training for entrepreneurs. "You learn the value of teamwork, working together," Zeschuk says. "Another really good entrepreneurial quality that you learn is that you can't let anything go. In medicine, you can't say, 'Oh, I'll finish off this case tomorrow.' It doesn't work that way."

Muzyka believes that working as the only physician in rural communities such as Slave Lake, Valleyview and Hardisty taught him a lot about meeting the demands of customers. "Patients are the ultimate clients," he says. "It was really challenging in small towns being the only doctor for a 100-mile radius and never knowing what you are going to see."

The formula has worked in a \$20-billion US industry that is anything but child's play, with multinational titans such as Sony, Nintendo and Microsoft jousting for joystick share. BioWare's inaugural 1996 release, the science fiction-inspired *Shattered Steel*, sold 170,000 units, a respectable figure for a company whose executives were practising medicine at the time. It also broke new ground as one of the first games that allowed players to play with each other on a computer network. BioWare followed up that success with *Baldur's Gate* and *MDKII*, a surrealistic sci-fi game with a comedic touch.

Now, with the releases later this year of *Star Wars Knights of the Republic* and *Neverwinter Nights* (another *Dungeons & Dragons*-licensed product), BioWare is poised to cement itself further in a booming industry. "Our goal is to be the market leader in role-playing games," Zeschuk says.

To achieve that goal, BioWare's employees — including their CEOs — will continue to create and play video games in order to improve their high score at the biggest game: making money. "Like our employees, we play a lot of things so we know what works and what doesn't work," Muzyka says. "We have to make games that sell."

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