



TECHSPOSE

Michael Capps

President & CEO, Epics Games

1. What was it about computer science and gaming that hooked you?

I've always been a math and computer guy. When I was 4 or 5, I'd have my mom make up big numbers for me to add together. In 1980, at 7, I had a teacher who gave me access to a computer in school, which was pretty rare then, and set up a special computer class to pursue how computers really worked. In college, math becomes more esoteric and less practical. I enjoyed the practical side of mathematics and focused on computer science and programming.

2. What keeps you excited about gaming today?

Three things:

One, it's the most fun thing ever, right!? Anything you love to do is better when it's interactive and you're part of it.

Two, the problems are really interesting to me because it's difficult to define success. It's a complex thing when you're combining entertainment and science; video games are complex stories and complex technology.

Three, because of the complexity, you work with the most fascinating people around, brilliant scientists and programmers and writers and artists, the people who are required to create those complex video games.

3. How many hours a week do you spend actually playing video games for fun?

"For fun" is a tricky question because I spend a lot of time playing our games and competitors' games. If you add it up, I'd embarrassingly say, 20 hours a week. Sometimes, I'm just playing.

4. What's the first video game you remember playing?

Probably Pong. I had a friend who had that machine. We had the very first Atari 2600 in England. 1979. My parents got us an Atari so I was the most popular kid in a 20-mile radius. That was the big famous Atari VCS [*video computer system.*]



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5. Which of Epic's games is your personal favorite?

That's hard to answer. I'll say [Unreal Championship 2](#). That one's very special. It was a game I designed. It wasn't Epic's best performing or best rated, but I've never put so much heart and soul into a game, and the same was true of my team.

6. Which role would be your preference – hands-on game developer or President?

That's something I struggle with a lot. As president, I'm the person here at Epic who's best qualified to do what I do as a manager, and others are more qualified at the development. There are times that I think, rather than retiring, maybe I'll just step into a product development role for a little while.

7. Summarize [Gears of War](#) for non-gamers.

Gears of War is an epic adventure game, the story of saving humanity. A monstrous race has emerged from under the earth and has attacked humanity and we're teetering on our last legs with the last survivors trying to save humanity. It's a third-person perspective shooter that's not set on earth. Mostly, what you're doing is shooting bad guys.

8. Which [Gears of War](#) character are you?

My role in the game is probably the chairman. When I took the quiz, I came up as [Baird](#), who is the misogynist engineer. My wife came up as [Sam](#), the character who hates Baird.

9. These games are riveting. Why?

They tap into a lot of our brain's most active centers. First, there's fear and anxiety. It sort of gets the adrenalin going when you're being charged by 6 monsters who want to chop you in half. It's exciting and visceral. Plus, again and again, you're having this feeling of success. There's a second level of challenge when you die and do it again, do it better this time. And then, of course, they can be beautiful.

10. Over the years, which games have you spent the most time playing, other than Epic games?



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I tend to play everything - and play them addictively. Including text-based adventure games. Now I play a lot of action games on the Xbox. I play racing games and iPhone games. It's my job so no one game defines where I spend most of my time.

11. For you personally, what makes a video game great?

I think what you're really trying to do with a video game, like many creative works, is maintain your suspension of disbelief. The way you do that is subtle. For us, it's paying attention to all the details to maintain the suspension of disbelief. It's the things you do to make the control seamless and the camera smooth.

So step 1 is, don't mess up. Step 2 is about finding and overcoming challenges. Let the player build to success by learning. There's a curve of where you make it hard, then you build a roller coaster and keep them playing at 4 in the morning. They never want to stop and they don't know what time it is. You put all that together and you've got a hit.

12. What makes a game developer great?

It really comes down to passion. Making video games is not a 9-5 job because, either your pride is on the line and you want things to be perfect, or you're glad to get rid of it. Generally, I'd say a great developer is one who's really, really passionate about the game player having a great time because they pour their hearts into it and focus on the player's experience. Then the other stuff comes naturally.

13. You've been in school much of your life, with an enviable educational legacy - UNC. MIT. Naval Postgraduate School. Tell us about your time at the Naval Postgraduate School and about [America's Army](#).

At MIT, my research area was very large-scale virtual worlds. When you do that kind of research, you're trying to design a game that scales to thousands of people at once. That's hard to do but the military can set that up. MIT has extremely strenuous requirements about teaching and I really wanted to teach; you have to be an assistant to a professor *3 times* to be a lecturer. The Naval Postgraduate School said, with a master's degree, they'd make me a full-time teacher, teaching masters' classes.



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Plus, the Naval School was a full-time job and it was in Monterey, California. You put all that together and So I joined the Naval School and taught computer programming classes, a virtual reality class, and computer graphics courses. I'm not an artist at all.

At the Naval Postgraduate School, one project we worked on was to have the entertainment complex collaborate more with the Department of Defense [DOD], finding common ground between million-dollar DOD simulators and fifty-dollar home simulators. The Army came to us, excited about developing an Army game for recruiting. We jumped up and down, saying, "We can do it!" We had no clue how to do it, but we convinced them and got a large grant from the Army.

[America's Army](#) was my very first game. I was the lead designer, lead programmer, and manager of the project. And I was on my way. There was a lot of learning on the fly, and luckily the game was quite successful.

14. When and why did you join [Epic Games](#)?

When I was working on America's Army, the first thing I did was look at gaming technology, and we settled on the Unreal Engine, which is Epic's technology. I visited their office and worked pretty closely with their team. We were the first to ship that engine, which was a little rocky, as you can imagine.

I think I told Cliff Bleszinski, Epic's lead designer, that I was from North Carolina and would like to return. They decided they wanted to start another studio in North Carolina and asked me to open that office. They said, "Make us 2 games and we'll give you the studio." Within a year and a half we merged the 2 companies, Scion and Epic. I drew the short straw and ended up president, where I've been ever since. I moved out here in 2002 and we merged the companies in 2004.

15. What should NCTA members know about Epic Games?

Epic's been here for a long time. We came to Raleigh because we picked it off the map for great quality of life and great talent. We kept quiet because we make mostly violent video games and didn't want to raise our visibility. I think we've been flattered by the level of attention and respect that we've gotten from the technology community and the government. We beat IBM and Microsoft as



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the best large computer company, that's crazy! It's been really nice to feel so welcome.

16. Why has Epic been so successful?

Me! No, I'm kidding. They managed to do it for 10 years before I came here. At Epic, we were lucky to learn some very bad lessons early on; we finished a product and had a dispute with our publisher, so we sat and polished the product. All the great things in that game came in that last 6 months. As a result, we learned to take a game and, when you think it's done, polish it for another 6 months. For a small studio, it's been a great lesson. I think it's why we've been special because we're willing to take the extra time and make it better.

The other reason is that we have ruthlessly picky hiring practices. We have the best folks in the business and it's really hard to get in and they don't leave. We give them great games to work on and they just make magic every time.

17. As President of Epic, what do you see as your most critical role?

I think that's changed year after year. For awhile, I was the bad guy because somebody needed to play that role. Then I became the court of last resort. I don't even do that anymore. Mostly now I spend time on strategic issues, measuring the standards of our organization and trying to balance between investing in projects that have a yield today versus projects that have a longer yield.

18. At year's end, how will you know if you've been successful in your job?

From my perspective, I'm never successful. I look at the things I did wrong and at how to make them better. I'm pretty hard on myself, so I don't know how to define success as much as how to do better.

19. Which parts of your job energize you?

The most fun to me is always brainstorming on games. But, lately, I've been focusing on the sustainability of the company without me, although I don't plan to go anywhere. I'm trying to pull out of tactical tasks and focus on strategy. A lot of things here couldn't run without me being involved, so, for the last several



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months, I've been taking issues that historically have gone to me and now we're having others design them. Figuring out how to work without me is exciting.

20. Which parts of your job would you like to outsource?

While I love working with our external partners, it would be nice not having to not deal with 6-10 hour time differences. And flying out to meet them is a lot of work. It can be troublesome to get up at 5:30 AM to have a phone call. I wouldn't mind letting that part go.

21. Which new technologies do you predict will make the greatest changes in the gaming world?

The rapid pace of mobile technology. If you look at game consoles, it's been 6 years since the Xbox 360 was released. It's been less than a year since the last iPhone was released. The iPad 2 is more powerful. It's hard for game makers and game developers to keep up with all that power. Everyone will have machines in their pockets that are more powerful than their consoles. That really changes the equation about how we'll make games.

22. How does Epic benefit from its NCTA membership?

For us, NCTA is about getting to know the local technology community. It's nice to meet other folks who are in similar positions and "steal" their ideas. I think it's been useful for us from that perspective.

23. How do you relax when you're not playing video games?

I run. I'm a distance runner. I'm up to a half marathon. Year after year I work my way up to a marathon but I get injured every time, but this is my year! And I run far away from cell phones.

24. Do you ever play board games these days?

Yes, puzzles more than board games.



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25. Is there anything you'd like to add to help fill in our picture of Michael Capps?

I thought of experiences that shaped me into what I've become. My 47th move was into my current house. I was a military brat and we moved every 3-6 months. It makes you a different kind of person. The longest I had ever lived anywhere was 4 years at UNC. I've been at Epic 8 years now and this is my home more than any place else in the world. The people at Epic are my family. That's part of why I put my energy and passion here.

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