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The Conversation

# 'We're the most famous company you've never heard of': A conversation with Michigan's oldest video game developer

By Anna Fifelski

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**Credit:** Stardock  
Brad Wardell, founder and CEO of Stardock Corp.

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March 26, 2024 08:01 AM | 2 HOURS AGO

**Brad Wardell, 52, founded Stardock Corp.** in 1991 as an undergraduate student at Western Michigan University. Decades later, it is the largest software and video game development company in Michigan. Later this year, Stardock will release the fourth version of its simulation game, The Political Machine, as well as an expansion for Galactic Civilizations IV and additional downloadable content. The company has over 30 games on the market as of 2024 and, due to its success, has owned its own building in Plymouth since 2006 after moving out of a leased space.

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**What was the goal or dream behind founding Stardock?**

I founded the company back in the early '90s when I was in college at Western until I could find a real job. I never did get a real job, I ended up doing this as a career. It started out with me in the dorm room at Western and then when I graduated it seemed like I'd have to move to some other state and I didn't want to move, I like Michigan. I wanted to stay here but I wanted the technology company, so I said, "I'll just do it here and see if I can build up here."

**How has Stardock evolved since its founding?**

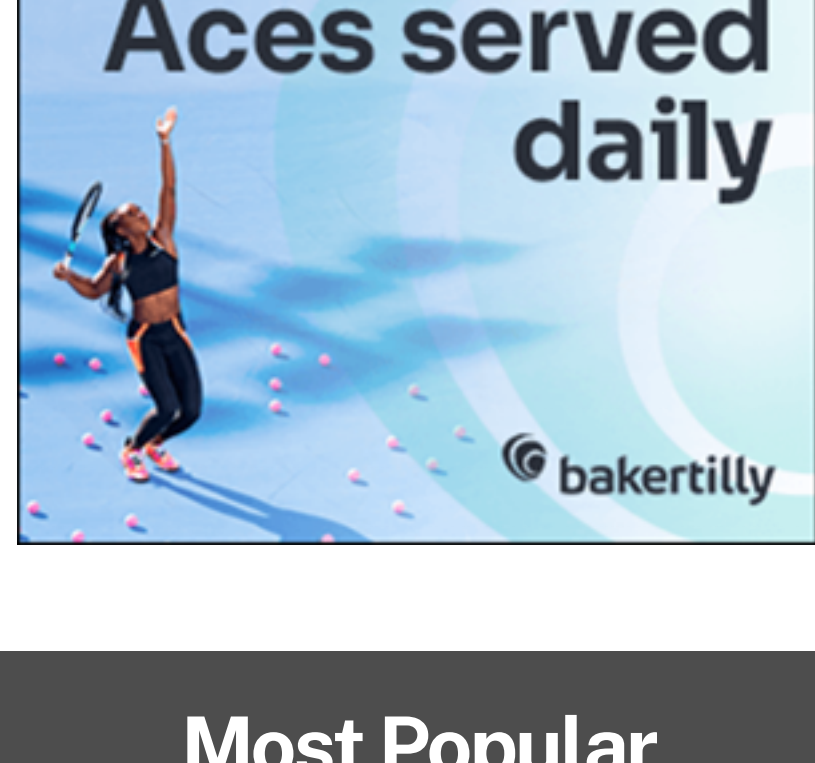
We have made software and done things that people today take for granted. One of our jokes has been, "We're the most famous company you've never heard of."

We've been around for 30 years. Stardock almost always acted as a think tank. And the challenge we always ran into is that we could come up with cool stuff, but we couldn't ever get to quite the critical mass and people in Michigan. And so whenever we were successful enough that we amassed enough capital, we would then go and start a new company where there were other lots of engineers. So we have started out companies in Maryland and Texas and the West Coast ... but now because of COVID and hybrid work, we don't have to do that. Now, we can invest directly into Stardock here in Michigan because it doesn't matter if we can't necessarily get a person to move to Michigan right away, though eventually, they tend to.

**Can you speak on the inspiration behind creating The Political Machine?**

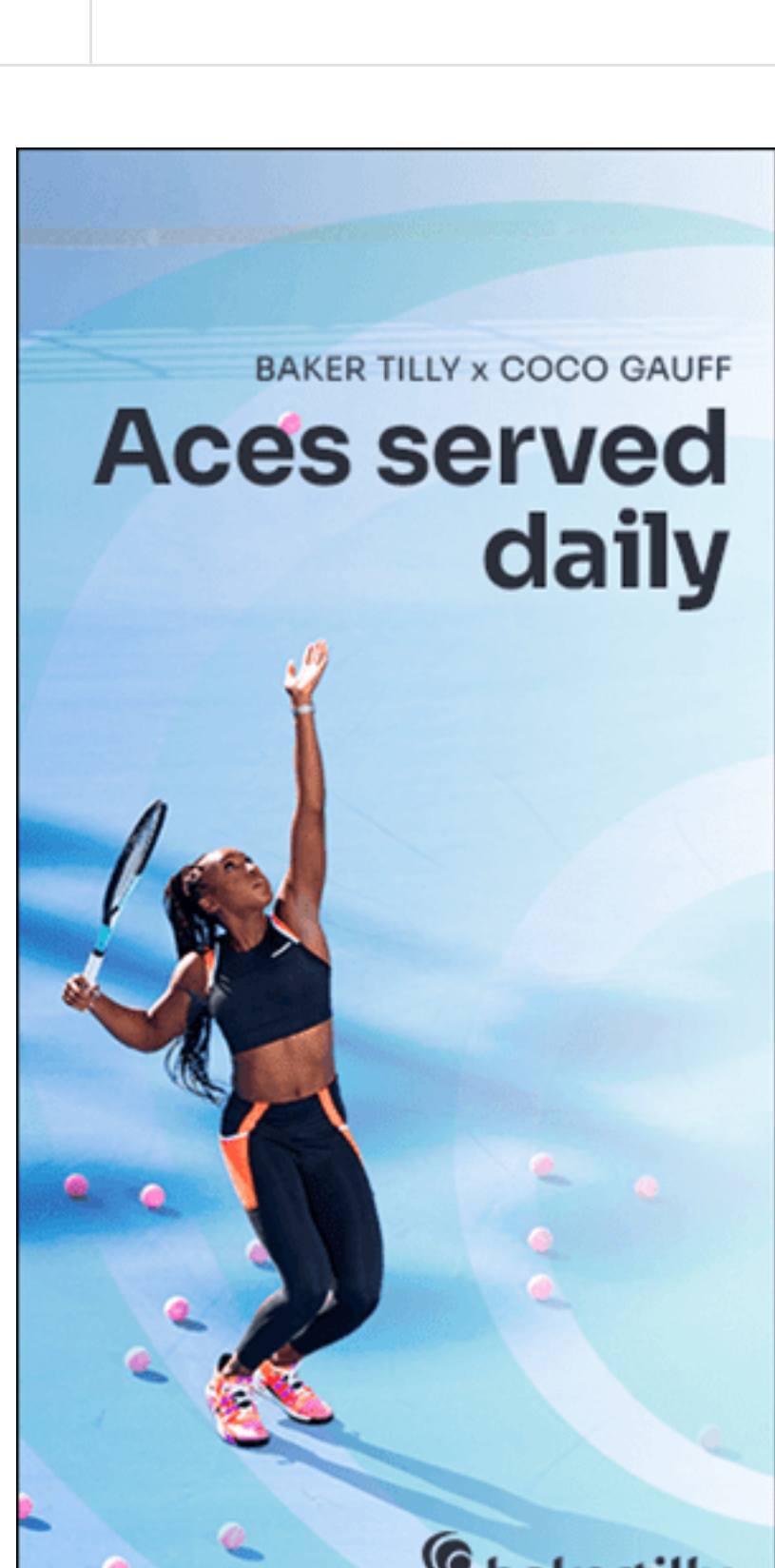
So we originally came with the idea for doing a political strategy game back in 2000 and we thought, "Well, Bush and Gore would be too boring." We didn't think anything interesting would happen in that election so we were like, "Well, we'll put this off until later." Yeah, that was a mistake.

In 2004 is when we first did it. And the idea was "I bet that we could make a really interesting game if we actually built a really sophisticated simulation." Now, we didn't think we could monetize it as an educational tool or even as a thing we could sell to political campaigns because it's actually extremely accurate in predicting election cycles. It has only gotten a few states wrong in every election. In 2004, we got every single state correct except Ohio.



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**What is the technology behind developing a simulation game like The Political Machine?**

Because we don't work off of polling, the way it works is that certain demographics of people vote a certain way. So I can pretty much walk up to someone, ask them what their job is, and a couple other things just going by demographics, and say, "I know who you're going to vote for."

Then it's about turnout. All we have to do is feed (the demographics) into the system, how much there are in each state and project how important the different issues are — which vary, and there's some subjectivity in that — and the game can predict at the state level. It may not be an exact percentage, but because of the way our electoral college works, it's good enough.

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**Where do you get all this data?**

It's all public. Even just from the Census. This is all public data. All you do is feed it in and the AI just figures it out.

**What's the process of launching a new version of The Political Machine?**

The first thing is we have to go in and update all of our demographic data. Where do people move? Grabbing all the census data from the last election. What has changed? Once you have that then the next most challenging thing — is, what are the issues? Because those demographics also care about different issues in certain amounts.

Once you do that, then we go into things like "Well, what are some of the new game features our players are wanting?" So this time around, this is our biggest update to the game we've ever made by far.

The first period takes almost a year of ... just updating all the stats we got. Then you have a few months to spec out the design, what are the new features we want? Like the aforementioned primaries, having political debates, that sort of thing. The engineering work and UI design of how we want to present that and we also have to update the graphics, make it prettier each time.

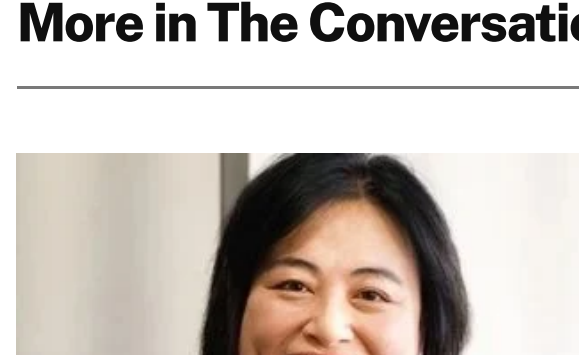
And then you have the period where we beta test, which isn't so much about finding bugs, it's about uncovering any accidental biases. And we usually know we're right when our beta testers simultaneously think the game has bias for Republicans and Democrats and they're arguing with each other. That's when we know it's right. When all of our customers are unhappy, we know the game is ready.

**By Anna Fifelski**  
Anna Fifelski is a reporter covering startups and technology companies in Southeast Michigan as well as banking and finance. She joined Crain's in September 2023. Fifelski is a graduate of the University of Michigan.

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