

## ***‘The Games Industry is a shadow of its former self, in terms of creativity and innovation’***

Quite often we hear or read about the computer games industry getting compared to the movie industry. And there isn't anything unnatural about this – after all, the two are close siblings in the big family of the entertainment business. And how could so many parallels not be drawn, when it seems that these days games have caught up with movies and follow roughly the same path – movies get higher budgets, there's a constant surge of new technology (mostly in the field of computer generated graphics) and box-office statistics keep breaking records for gross income per day of release, week, year etc. The same goes for games – the size of the teams involved in production grows, there's a race in how much new technology would be applied, and revenues are higher than ever with a massive growth to them to make things even more staggering. Games are more popular than ever, they have a much wider audience and seem to benefit from much higher budgets. Despite those facts, recent years have seen the games industry on trial for a “serious crimes against culture”, one of those crimes being the lack of creativity and innovation in today's games, the overuse of franchising and a general feel of way too much commercialism over art. So what are the reasons for these accusations are they truthful, who are to blame if they are and what could be done to reprimand them?

Before even beginning to answer these questions an important clarification has to be made – that of what the definition of creativity in the context of computer games is. Are story-telling concepts such as narrative, plot, character development and setting what defines at least a part of creativity in computer games? If we are to accept that they are one of the most important parts of the creative process of producing a game, we will find that something doesn't add up, as computer games from recent years feature plots and characters written by professional writers, especially hired for the purpose of creating the game's story more intriguing and compelling and the environment more immersive; stories from popular books get adapted; long cut-scenes meant to rival the abilities of movie-makers are added. In other words – modern games have much more Hollywood-esque excitement tied to them than before. Can we not assume then that creativity in the story-telling sphere of games is all good and thriving and is not the real problem? Yes and no. Because the question of whether original stories and unique universes have taken a step back becomes present and will be discussed further in this essay.

What about gameplay mechanics then? Are they the main product of the creative process in computer games? Certainly the answer to that question must be yes, as they are what games are essentially about – playing and having fun while doing so(or acquiring new skills and knowledge) in an environment that presents you with rules and goals. But if that's the most important part of the creative process how could it be stated that computer games are suffering from lack of innovation, when every year new ways for the players to interact with the games they play are devised; whole new genres of games emerge; designers strive to break the moulds of already established genres (“Super Mario Galaxy” comes to mind here). On the opposing side stands a complete denouncement of the previous statement – computer games today feature nothing more than recycled old ideas and revamping of long forgotten concepts.

As we can see, just by trying to define what innovation and creativity is in computer games we can gather arguments for and against the statement that this essay is about. These arguments are not enough to come to a definite conclusion though. There must be something else happening in the

industry that has given it this diagnosis of “innovation anaemia”. Maybe the disease runs deeper and the causes for it are more complex and rooted somewhere else. And what if the people actually involved in “the examination” are using the wrong methods to discern the problem. Let’s take a look at an example then. Chris Crawford is an acclaimed games designer and the writer of the famous book “The Art of Game Design”; he is regarded as one of the pioneers of computer games but for the last 14-15 years has been almost completely detached from the industry working on a project called “Storytronics”. In a recent interview he states:

***“What I meant by that was that the creative life has gone out of the industry. And an industry that has no creative spark to it is just marking time to die.”***

***“I looked over the games at the Independent Games Festival...It was just straight amateurs trying to be innovative and even they couldn’t be innovative.”***

***“During the 80s there was a lot of experimentation, a lot of new ideas being tried...”***

#### [SUTRA06]

It seems strange that a person that started his career in a time when most people involved in making games were actually amateurs by today’s standards especially, would say that it’s straight amateurs trying to be innovative and failing at it, who build up the “young blood” in the industry today. These quotes are all just the opening part of the interview. Later on Chris goes on to explain how games these days don’t appeal to the general public(a statement obviously wrong in the light of the Nintendo DS sales statistics), because there’s a lack of anything new, then goes on to say that he is sceptical about how innovative the Nintendo DS would be(which essentially means that his opinions are completely wrong on that matter as the DS did offer something new and innovative and through that innovation the market broadened to a wider audience in terms of sex and age). And much later on he “sincerely” advises modern designers to follow Hollywood more closely, as Hollywood takes care of new ideas with an almost motherly love – something the games industry doesn’t do apparently (obviously such things as the IGF don’t count as nurturing creativity). This paragraph might sound like an aggressive attack on Mr. Crawford’s opinions but so are his statements on the state of the industry. And it seems not too many people take him seriously these days. But this interview shows a trend that has developed recently. The trend of people that have played/produced computer games for over 15 years now stating that “things aren’t as good as they used to be”. It seems that the main problem here is the use of language because a much more believable statement would’ve been “things aren’t as good as what I remember them to be before”. Quite often the opinion that the industry has gone wrong and nothing new has been around for a while comes from the people that used to play the first computer games when they were kids and are older and presumably more mature now. And there’s nothing strange about that, as this is the only generation today that can say – “I have access to modern games and I remember playing the old ones when they were coming out.” After all, whose opinion can hold more weight than theirs? But it is the tinge (and sometimes more than a tinge) of nostalgia that always seems to creep in to their arguments. It seems that a lot of the time the idea that games have lost their spark, comes from people that have lost their own spark for playing games. What seems to have impressed them and entertained them when they were young could simply be gone now, with the problem been on their side of the pitch, not the industries. But this doesn’t mean that they don’t have a point amidst the nostalgia-ridden arguments.

It could be a bizarre notion but it seems that the concept of games as escapism from reality has undergone a strange change. Computer games have always been criticised by their opponents about the fact that they consume so much of the players time and detach them from reality. But how is this escapism expressed today and how was it expressed in the past. Sports games (and some other genres) aside, games in the past featured fantastic realities with hardly any similarity (in most cases) to what the real world was. Quite often games looked like designers let their imagination run rampant, creating a world not much like our own. That was considered to be an escape from reality and a total waste of time by people not interested in playing games. But was it really? Was it so bad to turn on your computer and entertain yourself for several hours by playing a bizarre adventure game featuring a deranged jester trying to exact his revenge on a wacky cartoon world (the game described is “Legend of Kyrandia 3”)? There is no nostalgia in the previous sentence, but a question as to why game designers are no longer concerned with creating worlds that are unique and imaginative with more concern put on “but is this plausible”. So where did things go from there. With the advent of computer graphics and the ability to create almost photo-realistic characters and environment it seems that have taken a strange turn. A lot of games these days seem to strive to emulate our own world with as much effort spent on detail as it is possible. The recent hype around WWII games is a good example of that. These games have no space for creativity and innovation as all the design effort is used for making the experience of playing them as close as possible (but bearable as well, as there was nothing fun about WWII) to what fighting in WWII was. And then comes the new, much sadder it seems, form of escapism – the live-your-life-the-way-you-want-it games. An example to illustrate this idea is the recent GTA games. They are games that put the player in an environment not much different from the one we live in every day, but with the added twist that players can commit crime as much as their hearts please with the safe knowledge that once the console is turned off no one is going to persecute them in the real world for gunning down 30 civilians. The ethics of such a game are not to be discussed here but the fact that it isn’t a mark of great creativity to figure out that “if players want to commit wanton violence in a manner that is as realistic as censorship laws would allow, then let’s give them that” is to be noted. In contrast the first GTA game featured a greater tongue in cheek feel to it, enhanced by it’s cartoony art. Not to mention that it was made in a time where such a concept was quite controversial. In another words – have game designers actually toned down their creative sparkle in order to create games based on what is required in order to achieve a wider commercial success?

Most probably yes, as the industry these days is run by publishers whose only concern is profit and the shortest route to it. A game developer can not survive if they just produce what they want to, as those endeavours are almost always high-risk, something publishers would not allow. But are the consumers to blame for the lack of innovation then? Surely if publishers want “safe bet” games to be made and those games are lacking in imagination then it is the people buying them that don’t want to be presented with new concepts, stories and worlds. Are the new generation of people buying computer games a shadow of the former ones, with “casual gaming” and “massively multiplayer gaming” (the two being in the two extremes of the spectrum) being the two dominant movers in the games industry today? If computer games where major game mechanics are aptly called “grinding” and “farming” (spending hours on end engaged in repetitive tasks in order to achieve some form of game progression in MMORPGs) are hugely successful and played by literally millions then why are the people involved in making games to blame for lacking creativity when they can’t express it because most consumers demand only the addition of new dungeons where they can do “raids” and updated versions of their favourite sports game, where the appropriate athlete’s new haircut has been added?

The truth as always is somewhere in the middle. Innovative computer games exist. And they are hugely popular with the people interested in them. What makes the computer games industry seem so stagnated is the simple fact that the computer games that lack creativity are the ones usually geared for a broader audience or larger target groups and as such are more “in your face”, creating the image that they are the only games available. Creative games get released all the time (think “Pikmin”, “Shadow of the Colossus” etc.) and just because they don’t take the top places in charts does in no way mean that they don’t exist. It is safe to say that the industry is not a shadow of its former self in terms of creativity, but is simply casting a new shadow as it has changed in to something else.

#### References:

[SUTRA06] Chase Murdey . (12/06/2006). *Video Games are Dead: A Chat with Storytronics Guru Chris Crawford*. Available: [http://www.gamasutra.com/features/20060612/murdey\\_01.shtml](http://www.gamasutra.com/features/20060612/murdey_01.shtml). Last accessed 10/10/2008.