

## Words Taken Out of Context

Wow did I strike a nerve! In the midst of a much longer more contextual conversation, PC Gamer noted “Wow, you just gave me my headline!” At that moment, I knew to brace for an out of context backlash. Without the broader real time discussion, as often happens, much can be made out of partial thoughts used as headlines of comments meant as quipping simplification of complex issues, as was the recent case for me. The variations of headlines where I either disparage others, or glorify myself are inaccurate representations of the intent of my full commentary.

Still, I have received numerous comments of support and numerous complaints about my recent words about the challenges of finding great game designers. But, please let me clarify! By no means did I intend to disparage others who have led the many great games of each era in gaming history. I was trying to say, and show why finding or growing NEW great game designers is hard!

Behind the inaccurate inflammatory headlines extracted from a longer dialog, I really do see a major challenge to our art form, specifically in the area of design. The design of a game is simultaneously 1) the most valuable aspect when it comes to the potential of success of a game, 2) the hardest part of game development to improve over previous efforts because of competition, and 3) the skill set with the least formal and informal training available to game developers.

Let me examine the history of design from where I watched it unfold.

Once upon a time, only one person made a game. By necessity that person was the programmer, artist and designer (as well as holding many other roles). I can honestly say that the first artist I ever hired was FAR better than I ever was. I was, and could still be, a passable programmer. Some programmers who my companies have hired have been better than me, some worse, as I would expect. And there are designers whose work in many areas is far better than mine. But I also think some of the work I have done as a designer remains a top contribution for its time.

However, while ALL artists in the industry are better than I ever was, and while I can easily hire a programmer who is better than I ever was, it is far more difficult to hire a designer who is clearly capable of leading a top 10 game. For any company, growth only comes when the company finds another leader who can make a top 10 game. Origin only grew when we found people like Chris Roberts and Warren Spector. Most other attempts at creating new game lines failed when we gave the reigns to junior people looking to advance. I want emphasize that this was not always the case, but it happened more times than not. As a business it's important to understand why.

At Origin, after we successfully added art teams and programming teams, we realized we had huge worlds to build that did not demand the same drawing skills as an artist. We also had NPC scripting needs that did not demand a top programmer. Thus we invented the Technical Design Assistant, often someone from QA (still a traditional source of designers) to build maps and script NPCs. These people did this to GREAT success!

But, as the industry evolved, we began to lean more heavily on new “designers” to develop the actual plans for the game itself and to describe the game we planned to build. They were also tasked with making design calls on how much of the computer’s limited resources should be spent on the competing fields of art, sound and interaction. This difficult trade-off is generally best handled by someone who knows the difficulties of coding and art creation issues, and that is more often someone who has programmed and drawn art than it is someone who has not.

Sadly for people who really are passionate about designing the next great game, “game design” remains a hard skill to learn. A lot of indie developers right now who are “triple threats” of artist, programmer and designer, will likely rise to the occasion. They will have a good understanding of ALL the issues. Designers, who never coded and never drew art, have a far harder path ahead of them. After all, we are making “computer games,” and a deep knowledge of the computer is mighty helpful.

Artists can take classes and create portfolios of their work and an employer knows they can do the work. A programmer can take classes and produce code samples to prove the same. For designers, there are now at least a few good schools like the Guildhall at SMU, that turn out quality designers. Yet these quality designers remain a rare breed. Sadly, I really do think that most people who get into design roles on a team have no more skills at design than the programmers and artists. They may not be worse, but they rarely have better training than the others to tackle the hardest job of all, determining what game is going to be built.

Perhaps my statement that has been quoted so often in recent days could have been presented in a more eloquent fashion. But I stand by the point I was making, that game design is the hardest profession in our business to understand and to learn.

And I certainly am not trying to put my own career on some sort of game design high ground. While I have hit occasional home runs, I have made plenty of unforced errors. I was not attempting to prop myself up with these comments, but rather lament my need...our industry’s need for proper training in the most important skill required to make a good game. I never had any formal training either; I have just had more time to learn from my mistakes than most. If what comes from all this is a frank discussion and lively debate on how to best address this issue, then hopefully I’ve accomplished something.

Thanks for your time,

Richard “Lord British” Garriott