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# Professional Game Artists: An investigation into the primary considerations that impact upon their work, and the effects upon their creative practice

## Ken Fee

When considering what motivates an artist, it is easy to presume that their goal is to create something personal and unique. The work of millions of artists around the world may in truth be egoistic in nature; concerned only fleetingly with the appreciation of others. This would describe most amateur artists, who simply enjoy spending time away from the pressures and demands of everyday life within an intimately personal space.

Away from this recreational pursuit, other artists pursue more socially orientated goals. They are not necessarily seeking adulation - in fact they may prefer anonymity (consider the popular street artist 'Banksy') - but in some manner the recognition of others remains intrinsic to their artistic process. As distinct to egoistical artists, they may change their work in response to the audience – but still these choices remain under the artist's control. A different form of creative animal altogether is the 'Professional' artist.

The label may suggest a higher level of ability or passion, but this is not necessarily the case. Rather, the key implication is that financial recognition plays a fundamental role within their practice. This in turn implies a reliance on others' approval of their work - and once the approval of others holds dominion over a work's perceived value, the artistic freedom is inherently compromised. Steve Morrison, Art Director at Kobojo studios considers:

I've done so much artwork that I can't stand [to look at]...for someone who has no concept of what is good. You realise it's not what you like that matters...it's not the style you like...you may not like it or feel it's good enough...but for some reason they latch onto that one. You just try and do the best you can. It's not enjoyable or fulfilling. It becomes a pay check at the end of the month (Morrison interview).

## The Games Industry

For many who grew up playing games, their dream is to make games themselves, and the technology is now readily available for them to do so. In addition game clubs, societies, jams and competitions all serve to foster and support a keen and thriving amateur community of enthusiasts. However the Games 'Industry' – the domain of *professional* game artists – is something else entirely. It evolved from bedroom studios comprised of very young and predominantly male programmers, whose entrepreneurial skills would at best be described as

naïve, to become the world's largest entertainment industry. Darren Baines started work at DMA Design in the early 1990s, and his summation of the early days is that "it was just fun. The industry was young and the environment light, naive and creative. It was an extension of college life for many years... but not anymore" (Baines interview).

Few professional developers seem in any doubt that the prime motivation within the industry is economic and while there are always exceptions – it is still possible for relatively small and innovative teams to make a mark – these are few and far between. Naturally enough, it follows that financial pressure pervades practically all areas of professional development, and the consequences on creative freedom are marked. As the industry becomes increasingly risk averse, a concern is that the sense of innovation that attracted so many fascinating characters and projects to games development all those years ago has waned significantly, to be replaced by soulless assembly lines.

In addition to this sense of sterility, the glut of 'free to play' models means that the public are becoming more and more reticent to the thought of actually *buying* games. Mark Ertle is CEO of Cobra Mobile, a very successful mobile game developer with world leading franchise titles within their portfolio. In a discussion with students at Abertay University in 2014 he recognised that:

The conversion rate from free demos of games to full purchase is incredibly low... 3-7% is amazing...0.5-3% is average. It is absolutely brutal. The developer then gets no money whatsoever - none - for their work, and if you ask for perhaps just 69 pence or a couple of pounds from the public after they have enjoyed quite a few hours of free gameplay, the reaction can be 'fuck off!' (Ertle interview)

In actuality, the challenge of simply getting your game noticed in the first place is becoming just as difficult as convincing players to part with their money to actually play it. Richard Lemarchand of Naughty Dog studios – possibly the premier development studio for console games in 2014 – commented that:

Basically it comes down to this...the rise of Mobile AAA studios with vast resources at their disposal for marketing make it near impossible to get any real traction on new IP's. Your discoverability is next to zero unless you have a rather large marketing budget...Now as traditional large scale companies tend to be somewhat risk adverse, aiming more for tried and tested games which ensure a return as long as they have enough marketing e.g. COD, Candy Crush, Clash of Clans, and the like (Lemarchand).

There are apparent exceptions such as Minecraft and Angry Birds - both recent and innovative financial successes – but these must be understood for what they are. These titles were small, independent and passion driven projects which happened to capture the imagination of the public. Neither company responsible for these titles have seen similar success before or since. These games were the magic escaping the bottle, the elusive bolt of lightning. However, once they became public hits, the large companies moved to acquire them in order to reinvigorate their own stagnating portfolios. Minecraft for instance is now owned by Microsoft, but they played no part whatsoever in the games development or success. It is widely expected – however fairly – that creativity will now start to dwindle as they seek to make back their two billion dollar purchase cost. In the context of this article, of equal concern is how the original developers maintain their passion for their work, if they have quite literally sold control?

## **Games Development**

The games development process itself is no better defined than the industry it serves, but is invariably a very complex collaborative and interdisciplinary exercise. The actual demands and influences placed upon developers can be broken down into five broad categories, which should be considered in turn:

1. Demographics

Originally the domain of a very small and select audience, the player demographic for games is now global and crosses all boundaries of creed, race and gender. While such social acceptance of games has removed much of the stigma once attached to developing them, it has not necessarily increased public awareness of the time, effort or cost required to make them.

Additionally, this broadening audience means that the demands placed upon developers become ever more complex, and all the while the behaviours or expectations of the ‘average’ player continually evolve. In the current ‘digital renaissance’ for instance, the majority of players seem far less willing to use their own imagination beyond what is on the screen. The majority focus on more superficial and instant ‘spoon fed’ gratification – a trend embodied in the explosion of ‘casual games’. In contrast, the earliest audiences for many computer games warmly embraced text or icon based systems, seeing them more as a catalyst for their own creative interpretation rather than the complete solution. While games such as Pong and Space War were graphically simplistic affairs, ancillary creative play saw players often use their own imagination to

visualise what that cube or block actually represented, and even build those games into a narrative sequence of play.

## 2. Technologies

Moore's law highlights why the exponential growth in game technologies is possible, and as each technology develops, new opportunities present themselves. Unfortunately, the market will quickly lose patience with developers if they do not appear to immediately demonstrate their use of them – but with no appreciation for how difficult or otherwise that may actually be to do.

In this context, it requires a great amount of diligence on the part of an artist to develop and maintain skills in any particular area, when the technology behind it is ever shifting. Anxiety can easily grow that the current project an artist is working on – which may last years – is leaving their skills gap further and further behind cutting edge industry developments. Patrick McGovern has twenty two years of experience in the industry and numerous development titles in his portfolio, yet he is very aware of the potential consequences of the projects he has worked on:

I feel quite out of touch with a lot of the new stuff actually. The work I've done has not needed me to learn new packages or pick up new techniques – I've been pretty lucky like that – but that means that if I wanted to move on and get a job at one of the big studios, which is where a lot of folk I know now work...well, I wouldn't have the skillset ready (McGovern interview).

## 3. Collaboration

Games development requires practitioners of multiple disciplines to work together seamlessly. Inevitably, each of these disciplines has its own specific focus, and relationships can become strained – but no developer will avoid compromise if they truly wish to be successful.

However, within the collaborative process some disciplines can work in relative privacy (it is hard for other disciplines to comment on code), but artists will find their work to be a source of commentary for everyone who walks past their desk. The effect on morale and team dynamics can become marked. In this sense, a

thick skin is crucial for any artist who works in such an environment, not for those who expect to show their work only when they feel it is 'ready'. Steve Hodgson, a former artist at DMA and now senior artist at EEGEO is of the opinion that "it can be a complete pain. You can laugh it off but it can certainly annoy, it can get very frustrating and annoying when you're just trying to get on with your work and someone walking past will just feel the need to give some 'advice'" (Hodgson interview).

#### 4. Commercial

Artistic or creative prowess will rarely triumph over business concerns. The market and contractual terms will dictate many elements, from how a game appears and sounds to how it plays and the technology it will be deployed to. In addition, new markets – or the closure of old ones – may suddenly require drastic changes with the development, from something as apparently benign as language translation for menus, to more substantial elements to ensure compliance with cultural or religious obligations.

In terms of movies or even television show licenses, which may appear to offer sound potential for transmedia development, the reality is often very different. Games development can take years, but typically will not be commissioned until mere months before a show's release – with the end game invariably seeming a poor reflection of its counterpart and furthermore if the show itself is a failure, the game's reputation will suffer as a result. In other areas of crossover the challenges can be just as marked. The singer Beyoncé is currently being sued for allegedly pulling out of a games development without warning, leaving millions of dollars wasted and dozens of developers out of work and while sports names such as Tiger Woods used to guarantee a certain level of public support for games they were associated with, if they fall from grace the impact on the development team and their work can be catastrophic.

#### 5. Creativity and Expression

In all but the smallest projects and teams, an individual developer's creative fingerprint will be masked by the collaborative and commercial nature of the work. In a career which should last many years, it is very unlikely that every project a developer works on - or possibly even *any* –

will actually align with an artist's personal area of interest. Matt Zanetti of Guerrilla Tea considers his own circumstances in this regard when commenting that "I trained as an architect, so probably environment art is what I am most interested in doing. I think in the last four years...I've made just one environment...one...in one week...the vast majority of time, you're just doing what needs done – whatever that is".

In this context the developer's own satisfaction with their work is unimportant. In an amateur setting personal satisfaction and fulfilment may be key, but in the professional world, little else matters beyond client satisfaction. Even when clients seem satisfied and direction is established, projects will inevitably shift focus from their initial aspirations. The cause may be revised client demands, scheduling, budgets, staff skill, technology, or just bad luck will all play their part, and there have been nothing an individual developer or discipline could have done to prevent or protect against these pressures. It is common that work may need redone or even be dropped altogether, and this can be especially challenging to accept when such decisions or revisions are done by others, without the involvement (or even the knowledge) of the original author.

### **Game Artists: The Impacts on Creative Practice**

It is now possible, having considered the definition of a professional artist, the games industry, and the games development process itself, to consolidate the discussion into a number of key impacts on a professional game artist's creative practice. Veteran game artist John Harrison expressed the sentiment to students in a visit to Abertay University:

Who am I, as a creative – where is my signature, my voice? I am not in control of the look, the feel or the purpose behind the art...I have to build my work to be perfectly in keeping the other styles and decisions - that I have played no part in making...so, creatively, how can I express myself? (Harrison interview)

#### **1. Creative Ownership**

In Game artwork, the artist is never the sole author. In truth this may be said of many artists. Very few sculptors actually source and refine their own clay, any more than watercolour artists make their own pigments or paper. Invariably, either consciously or unconsciously, most modern artists collaborate with others in their work process; it is the ways an artist employs such non bespoke elements that evoke their individuality.

For game artists, not only *must* they use others' products to make their art – computers, digital tablets and pens, and software – but their work is also translated through a variety of filters before anyone else will even see it. These filters may take the form of a game engine, a renderer, a TV screen or a headset – and these continue to evolve. The game artist's work can never be created or viewed in isolation from others' hands, nor can it even be seen or appreciated without that artist collaborating successfully with other disciplines and numerous external constraints.

## 2. The Project Focus

In games development artistic anonymity is often the key – being able to adapt to the overall project style is the requirement and while art usually plays a key role, of equal importance are controllers, audio, gameplay mechanics and level design (amongst many others). It can be compared to a volatile and unstable house of cards, where a single poorly judged decision will bring the whole structure crashing down. For artists this means that directions passed to them must be followed *exactly* in terms of all manner of considerations – with any frustration or attempt to deviate from them being regarded with the most critical eye. The focus of the project is not their muse, but the part they play in a bigger picture:

For us as artists, the art is the selling point...but at the end of the day the game is the purpose...so art, design and code are level pegging. Programmers get a say in terms of what they can't do...communication flow is direct, with tool requirements. We have had to make compromises...it can be a bit of a shock for those coming from other areas...what's all this technical stuff...I just draw things (Morrison interview).

## 3. The Fixed Purpose

In other areas of artistic practice, it is often a source of pride for an artist that their work is open to interpretation and can illicit an individual response from a viewer. However, Game art seeks specifically to *manipulate* players – from subtly directing them in their actions, to making them care about the consequences. It follows that any surrender of psychological or emotional control of the audience is usually to be avoided and that the art should not be open to any peculiarly

individual interpretation. In fact within many areas of development the artist is actually tasked with very specific goals indeed, such as communicating an interface design without any ambiguity - and this may involve the artist in all manner of HCI principles that may be completely removed from their normal art practices.

#### 4. The Interactive Artefact

Game artwork has to be designed and created with interaction in mind - where the interaction is designed and typically executed by others – and the consequences upon creative practice lie at the root of what it means to be a *games* artist. While illustrators, puppeteers, photographers, sculptors and animators will have a profusion of considerations factored into their work, skilled games artists need to consider many of these too, while at the same time working within their own unique technical and aesthetic protocols. Without such a broad and comprehensive awareness of their craft, it is no more reasonable to expect an artist to succeed in game development than it would be to expect a person who merely has an *eidetic recall of a dictionary to be a bestselling author*.

#### 5. Self-satisfaction is not the goal

Artwork created for games is designed to communicate the idea of some other party – for instance the game’s designers, directors or clients. As such, artistic ego must be absent from the process entirely. Morrison comments that “I realised a long time ago that my production work could and often does leave me creatively cold but satisfaction can be gleamed if it fits someone else's expectations” (Morrison interview).

#### 6. Multiple Styles

In the case of other professional artists, they may demonstrate a few different styles in order to appeal to different markets – especially if they are freelancers, free to pick and choose their clients. However, a studio game artist is employed to realise a project, the choice of which is at the discretion of their employer. As such, the style they must work to may vary wildly from project to project and the artist will have no control over this whatsoever. For some this can be a very attractive element of the industry - Alex Ronald works in both games and comics, and considers that “an element of job satisfaction is that you are always needing

to change in style and improve your approach, so it can always feel fresh, you continually want to outdo your previous work” (Roland interview).

However for those who can only work to a single style, a career in game art - or at least one that means being employed full time within a studio - may be very short indeed. The greatest fallacy widely heard today is when students or prospective artists specify that they are purely ‘2D’ or ‘3D’ - typically referring to their own limits in ability rather than those required of professionals, for whom these terms simply refer to toolsets or development pipelines they must use on any particular project.

#### 7. Evolving technologies

The technologies utilised in games are ever changing and each will have an impact on the creative practices of the artist (and indeed of every discipline concerned with the game’s development). These may be positive, with the continual opportunity to develop new methods and techniques, but equally may be a source of frustration as artists must constantly keep abreast of these developments. It comes as a surprise to many aspiring game artists that 3D scanning replaces modellers, or that animators now find motion capture technology and animation libraries may relegate them to ‘clean up’ artists. The creation of textures and materials, previously requiring great skill on the part of the artist, will now many larger studios “will use procedural code to capture and apply stunning effects without the need for any artist input whatsoever” (Goodswen interview).

#### 8. The Games industry is simply a collection of unstable individual companies.

The industry is a chaotic place, a result of exponential expansion built upon amateur origins and then compounded by the commercially driven nature of the products. There are no official qualifications, controlling bodies, or processes to follow in terms of how games are made or staffed – even the actual names given to roles have no fixed definitions. This makes career development and progression far more difficult than in other creative industries, with no inherent sense of seniority or growth. As an industry which thrives on irregular working hours and the constant acquisition of new knowledge, in many ways the career is

more suited to younger staff, before family commitments and age make skills development and instability impractical. Baines agrees, commenting that “now as I have family my priorities are ensuring they are well cared for and any changes in my career path are well considered and not too selfish. I still enjoy games and nothing has been tarnished in that respect, however I prefer to play with my daughter” (Baines interview).

### **Game artists: The Survival of Creative Practice**

Clearly then, the games industry – and games development – is an incredibly dynamic and challenging environment in which to work. It is now possible to make artefacts which sit comfortably within any discussion regarding visual aesthetics - as evidenced by titles such as Thatgamecompany’s ‘Journey’ or Moon Studio’s ‘Ori and the Blind Forest’. Yet while it is entirely possible to derive great satisfaction from involvement with a particular title or project – especially if it is renowned – external expectations and perspectives often seem to underestimate the inherent challenges.

Recent graduates from Abertay University such as Mike Cummings at Traveller’s Tales get to work on Games, TV animations and Movie projects due to the nature of licence they are attached to (Lego) – and “he enjoys each area tremendously” (Cummings interview). Stewart Graham of Tag Games reports that he derives most satisfaction from “the buzz of showing people what you did or hearing they play with your work results in their spare time...the respect you get....”You worked on X,Y and Z!?!?!?” (Graham interview). The question is though, what happens to Mike’s creative drive if he is *still* making just Lego titles in twenty years’ time (as that is all Traveller’s Tales do), and what if the public adulation stops – if the released titles are poor and no longer a source of admiration?

In reflecting upon the author’s own experiences and those still working within the industry, there are several recommendations which seem to be commonly viewed as sensible measures to take in order to protect against ‘burn out’. While not every artist may be interested in – or able to pursue – every recommendation, they do seem sensible aspirations:

1. Develop an Identity beyond your employer

Games artists should actively pursue outlets for their own interests and creative passions. While employed at Crytek Studios, Chris Goodswen is well known within the larger art community through his alter ego ‘Tincow’. Under that

pseudonym he can work without limitations or constraints, developing skills and networking in a manner that would be impossible through his employer.

Ian McQue, formerly an Art Director at Rockstar North, recalled in an interview with the author in May 2014 that “the best advice I was ever given was...that I had to do my own work on the side. Best advice ever” (McQue interview).

Morrison also recognises the importance of other spheres of practice, away from one’s employer”, I’ve had to make my fun outside work and produce game art that will probably never see the light of day in a game purely for my own satisfaction...it keeps the fire alive” (Morrison interview).

## 2. Stay flexible and open to new opportunities

It is unwise for a games artist to resist new developments or avenues. McQue’s initial response to the advice described above (which was actually from the author), was far less positive. He went on to recall that “at the time I hated you for it though. I fucking hated you. I was an artist, and everything I did should have been fulfilling and awesome. I had a very young and arrogant perspective back then...it was all about the ‘art’” (McQue interview).

Some artists from the early days of games simply drifted away because as computer fidelity increased, the limits in their own abilities were highlighted and they did nothing to adapt them (the ‘comfort zone’ is a terrible place for any professional). It is one thing to be able to make a sprite with 16 by 16 pixels, but unfortunately that does not necessarily follow that you can make a lifelike model of a character for PS4. Morrison comments that “I suppose I’ve found that the biggest impact (on longevity) tends to be how flexible you have to be to maintain a consistent career. I have to be able to shift quickly into new ways of development or sometimes drive development based on previous experience” (Morrison interview).

## 3. Enjoy the task at hand

An amateur artist can survive when their best work is personally motivated, but a professional must produce flawless work no matter what level of engagement they feel behind the scenes. The challenge is to identify where the actual creative

satisfaction comes from, if not from the subject matter. In the words of Morrison, “ it’s not rewarding at all [the art], but if the reviewers say it looks like what they wanted, the actual satisfaction from hitting that on the head...doing what you were asked to do” (Morrison interview). Hodgson expands on this, adding that “I get up to all sort of work I wouldn’t do by choice, but I can do it all – whatever they ask – and that’s very satisfying. They keep trying to give me people to help, but I enjoy doing all the separate elements myself” (Hodgson interview).

#### 4. Work efficiently; plan your time and techniques

Mark Traynor of Warracle reflects this in his own practice, observing that:

Time is money, and creativity takes time...usually a lot of time! Therefore, more time eats up more money and the money is dictated by budgets. Deadlines, tech restrictions, budgets, they all effect the time given to a particular project. As you continue to work and grow within a creative industry, you begin to adjust your focus more on what is important to help yourself grow and the company / studio you work for...how can you do it quickly and more efficiently... If a time saving measure is there, we will use it (Traynor interview).

However, it is still important to remember within this context that, as Gareth Hector of Axis animation puts it:

Technology has not made the need for artists to retain a core skill set in the traditional medium of art, redundant. As a concept artist I still need to make choices regarding composition, lighting, colours, form etc. Technology is unable to tell me what looks good and what doesn't...the ‘make it good’ button does not exist! (Hector interview)

#### 5. Be a ‘People person’, a team player.

In the early days of games development there were many staff who displayed what would today be termed ‘eccentric personality traits’, along with any manner of social issues. Such traits tended to be the consequences of the driven, fixated and proudly rebellious nature of the ‘geek’ subculture which gave birth to many of the early game development teams. These are no longer acceptable.

Indeed, Abertay University's Master of Professional Practice in Games Development – now a highly successful and well respected programme within the industry – was designed in part to address a common request from industry regarding new graduates, eloquently voiced by Denki CEO Colin Anderson in a programme design meeting. When asked what the single most important change in graduate behaviours the new programme should seek to address would be, he responded, “that you stop sending us assholes” (Anderson).

Indeed, there are many talented developers who have become essentially unemployable through years of poor or ill-informed behaviour to team mates or peers. Frank Arnot is CEO of Stormcloud Games, with some 20 years of industry experience. In his words, “I'd much rather spend my day with someone who is good at their job and I get along with well, than with the world's best developer who is a nightmare to have in the office” (Arnot interview).

## 6. Lose the ego

The arrogance of youth is a well-recognised term, and is no different here. Jeff Cairns, formerly Art Director at Realtime Worlds in Dundee, reported that “while Art Director, I actually spent all my time in disciplinary meetings. Every new artist had to show off and prove they were the best....they had no respect for anyone else, it was all about them and their ego” (Cairns interview).

The quieter artists, those that calmly get on with the work and happily help others, are perhaps the equivalent of the old gunslingers in cowboy movies. They are confident. They have nothing left to prove. They are professional. The ones that actually cause most concern are the ‘young bucks’, who arrive with no respect for their peers – and are just looking for a quick way to make a name for themselves. Once an artist becomes willing to accept the advice, support and direction of others it becomes far more of a satisfying collaborative effort. Every discipline within development requires specialist knowledge and expertise – respect these peers, and learn from them.

There is much to enjoy in working with peers in the creation of a game, and if not so concerned with being the focus of attention, a far calmer and more conducive working pattern is the result.

## Conclusion

The intention of this article is not to suggest that games art is beset by insurmountable challenges and unimaginable difficulties, but rather to promote discussion that may begin to help 'humanise' the process of games development itself, away from the whimsical or escapist nature of the final artefacts themselves.

In a recent consultancy role, the author was asked by a leading international game school to list the four most important elements they should promote within their students, to best ensure success within industry. He identified the most critical as 'Passion', and the least important as 'Technical Aptitude' (with 'Communication' and 'Creativity' tying for second place). This seemed to somewhat alarm the school in question, for whom a technical emphasis was far more straightforward. The author's rationale was simple, that while a developer must display a high level of aptitude in *all* these areas – their passion is what fuels them and drives the ceaseless desire to learn and grow. It is this very quality that must then be protected and nurtured as the day to day realities of commercial practice begin to close around them, and threaten to smother the enthusiasm that once burned so brightly.

It is the author's hope that his continuing research will be of interest to those who share his assertion that creative people are the ones responsible developing games that best capture the medium's full potential – not the mere technologies they employ – and that the better appreciated these individuals are and the pressures they face, the more sustainable their expertise will become.

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