

Game Designers Rant 2008

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When Eric asked me to do a rant this year, the first thing that jumped to my mind was that I should rant about creative stagnation in the game industry.

Now – **I'm a pretty angry guy**, but after thinking about it for like 5 seconds, I realized that that is such a tired and generic topic that I don't even think I could get pissed off about it. Besides, I'm not even really sure there is a general creative stagnation in the game industry.

I haven't really looked at it carefully, but it seems to me that we have **considerably broader range** than many other industries, and I bet if you broke it down and developed any even remotely acceptable standard of measurement you'd find that we are pound for pound the most creative fucking industry in the history of the world.

I remember once trying to figure out some finicky little design problem and shuffling around scratching my head for a while and then wandering over to one of the gameplay programmers and telling him what I was thinking and then asking him if he thought we could do it... he looked at me like I'd been sniffing glue and said '**dude, it's code - we can do anything**'.

So no. I don't think we suffer from creative stagnation. In fact, I think being creative is easy – having the courage to create something that challenges people – that's fucking hard.

Why don't we make games that challenge people? We make all kinds of **movies and books and paintings and songs** that challenge people. Why can't we make a game that means something? A game that matters. We wonder all the time if games are art, if computers can make you cry. Well, stop wondering. The answer is yes to both.

Here's **a game that made me cry**.

Here's **a game that means something**.

They're both art. They were both released this year. And both of them were made by independents in their spare time with an effective budget of zero.

In parallel – the game industry managed to produce a dozen or so **AAA shooters** that basically aren't about anything except **mapping one pixel over another and clicking a button**.

Why the fuck don't we learn from **these smaller games** and use the same tools and techniques as these guys to enrich our games? Why don't we take the

systems that these games use to express their meaning and plug them in to our next AAA blockbuster?

What if we had a AAA survival horror game where I had a real mechanical relationship with my virtual spouse while I was protecting him or her from the **giant radioactive monster**? What if the actions I took in the game developed my relationship with them – in a systemic way, not in a fucking cutscene – and what if my overarching motivation in this game was to comfort my spouse and the battle against the giant radioactive monster was actually **only a metaphor** for what the game was really about?

Why isn't **Call of Duty** – with all of its perfectly tuned mechanics and dynamics – actually about duty?

Or why isn't **Medal of Honor** actually about honor?

Christ, imagine what it would be worth to you if you could put honor in a box and sell it. I don't mean put honor in **Tom Cruise's smile** and let me watch it... I mean package the experience of knowing what it means and knowing what it takes to be honorable. 90% of the population of this planet has never felt that and I would bet my left arm that most of them would like to.

And god forbid players would actually have to practice it again and again if they wanted to get a **5 star honor rating on expert** - we joke all the time that if you can play "Through the Fire and the Flame" on expert you should probably be playing a real guitar - imagine if you could be awarded the Medal of Honor in a game that demanded you actually *be honorable* to do it. Boy it would sure suck to have 10 million gamers wandering around who were almost as honorable as the most honorable people in the world.

Instead we have these **30 million dollar games** with 200 people working on them for like 2 years and two thirds of them are **dead on arrival**. Meanwhile, **The Marriage** and **Passage**, which were essentially coded up on a weekend are free for download.

I think it sucks ass that two guys tinkering away in their spare time have done as much or more to advance the industry this year than the other 100,000 of us working fifty hour weeks.

Now – let me make one thing clear. I don't really consider myself to be a champion of independent or experimental games. I think it's great that we have these games, but I like making big AAA titles with 200 people. I'm not saying we should all quit our jobs and go make quirky little abstract art games. I'm not talking about **taking the action out of Halo**. I'm talking about using proven techniques for building compelling emotional investment in things that real human beings give a shit about so that Halo will reach a real audience.

I don't care what you say – **\$300,000,000 for Halo at \$50 a copy** means it's still only reaching **1/10th the audience** of the Lord of the Rings movies.

Whether we're talking about the books or the films, do you really think that what moves people in Lord of the Rings is a **dagger that glows** when Orcs are near, or a fucking **+5 rope**?

No.

What people give a shit about is that **Frodo has to trust Sam** to hold the other end of it and not drop him off a cliff and steal the Ring.

The mechanics of trust are not more difficult to model than the mechanics of rope. Yet still our games are full of **daggers** and **rings** and **cloaks** and **bows** and **staves** and **wands** and **potions** and **orbs** and **swords** and **ropes** and **armor**.

With this fucking object fetishism it's not surprising that the most meaningful relationship developed in a AAA game this year is with a fucking **cube**.

That's nothing if not creative... or maybe it's nothing and it's creative.

Because sadly – it's not creativity that stops us from reaching the next level and helping games take their place as the dominant cultural medium of the 21st Century. What we lack is not creativity. What we lack is the **courage** to back up all of our creativity by making games that challenge something in us besides our reflexes. We lack the courage to show that we care about real things. We lack the courage to be seen crying in the movie theatre when **Frodo says thank-you to Sam**. We lack the courage to risk ourselves for our art and the reality is that is the ONLY difference between being the basically juvenile medium we are, and the mature medium we will inevitably become.

Every time any one of us makes a game that fails to be about something that people give a shit about, we're letting ourselves down and dragging out the inevitable. We have the fucking pieces of the puzzle in our hands. We have the creativity. We have the money. The demand is there.

And fuck - **its code - we can do anything**.