

The Senescence of Creativity: How Market Forces are Killing Digital Games

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Abstract

This paper examines the recent wave of repetitive, derivative commercial off-the-shelf games as a phenomenon posing dangerous implications for the health and viability of the video games industry, foreshadowing particularly a major crash or paradigm shift in the near future. Implicated in these predictions are the games industry's ignorance of player wants, needs, and individualities, the dangerous economic precedent of the generation of derivative works, and the evidence of gamer dissatisfaction through free and open gaming communities. The paper poses solutions in the form of player-centred game development and participatory design, arguing that facets of each may be the measures needed to allow the games industry to emerge from the aforementioned slump.

Author Keywords

Innovation; creativity; slump; video games industry; game production; games studies; theory; opinion

Introduction

In the decades since digital games first arrived in the home, the creative process by which games come into existence has undergone a significant paradigm shift. As technology, platforms, graphics and sound have become more advanced, barriers to entry have been created, both legal and financial. Gone are the days of the Atari 2600, during which any lone designer could develop and publish a game with relative ease. Today, licenses and copyrighted engines are generally required to develop for home consoles. With those licenses come financial and logistic hurdles for aspiring game designers.

The lack of originality in games is well observed among those who play them; one need look only so far as the repeating series of slightly altered “license” games released each year, some examples include the *FiFA* series', or *Madden* series. Other game cloning is more insidious; while many games do not directly purport to be remakes or changed versions of their predecessors, an examination of the underlying mechanics reveals many similarities. This could be said about *Grand Theft Auto III* and the torrent of games like it, such as *Saints Row*, *Crackdown*, *Mafia*, *The Getaway*, and so on. This trend is unsurprising. As Elliot (2008) notes, well-known game designer David Jones of Realtime Worlds has stated in an interview that his company would have trouble producing a successful online game for less than fifty million US dollars. Spiralling production costs and the aforementioned engine and license restrictions create

an interesting conundrum. While new ideas and creativity might pull games out of a slump characterized by derivative titles, these are risky ideas. With costs to produce headlining games having risen from approximately one-hundred thousand US dollars in 1982, to over thirty million dollars today, according to Takatsuki (2007), risk is not something many designers are willing to take. One poorly received project would likely result in the extinction of the companies in question

This paper examines the stagnation of creativity within the games industry, arguing that both this trend of aggregation and cloning of games, as well as the development shift away from risky new ideas due to the capital required to design a modern game, represents a serious threat of industry stagnation. In turn, this presents potentially disastrous consequences for the future of games as a medium. This paper also argues several solutions present in independent game development and participatory design.

Why is this happening?

PC gaming is becoming relegated to Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO) gaming only, delivered by industry giants like Blizzard Entertainment. Moreover, industry initiates, including Chris Taylor of Gas Powered, have said that “PC Gaming as we know it is dead” (Gamasutra, 2008). Designers seeking to reach the largest audience possible are entering a market in a dangerous economic position. In a market that is owned and dominated largely by three major companies, Microsoft, Sony, and Nintendo, all of whom have a proprietary console system, these three giants have the market power to set the “rules of development”, in the process creating something characteristic of an economic oligopoly. Many of the descriptions of this undesirable economic phenomenon illustrate the games industry: barriers to entry. Those barriers can be financial, logistic, price leadership, and strong non-price competition (Bumas 1999) , as characterized by the roughly standard purchase price for new console games. In fact, some modern economics texts use the video game industry as an exemplar of a stable oligopoly (Forgang and Einolf, 2007). This market restriction is ignored by many analyst involved in investigating the cries for originality from gamers. Bateman (2003) asserts that:

“Periodic outbreaks of originality, and the corresponding extinction of certain game genres, are useful to drive the form forward, but the conservative intervals between these events are what serve to sustain the market. Refinement of design is as valuable a process as raw originality. Sequels serve an important role in the development of games, and one quite separate from the occasional ground-breaking games that reconfigure the chreodes [a term the author uses, in this case it is synonymous with 'niches'] in a part of the landscape of games.”

(Bateman, 2003, p. 38)

Bateman justifies the niche-filling behaviour of game companies, and legitimizes the practise of sequelling, both of which are otherwise innocuous concepts. However, Bateman’s argument is flawed, as he fails to recognize both the limitations and restrictions placed on those outside of the market oligopoly to either produce creative works, or refine existing ones. Certainly, those

individuals who do not have the financial power to purchase an existing license cannot exercise “refinement of design”.

In producing derivative sequels and game clones, individual market entities with the power and capital to innovate often engage in economic rent-seeking behaviour. In this context, rent is defined as “[...]higher profit or income than would occur under normal market conditions” (McConnell, Brue, and Campbell 2004, p. 341). By capitalizing on franchises from successful movies, television shows, and sports, and creating derivative game clones and sequels, powerful game publishers collect a form of “economic rent” from games sales to an audience that they have created using their own market power. Major game producers already powerful enough to afford licensing and franchise rights can draw incredible profits from derivative works. For example, *Spider-Man 3* from Activision, licensed from the movie of the same name, saw considerable sales (1UP.com), even in the face of mediocre reviews. The *Spider-Man 3* game received an average review of 60% (MetaCritic.com) along with scathing criticism, evidenced by quotes such as: “with underwhelming visuals, control issues and a problematic camera this game is a disappointment, even for true believers” (Gametrailers.com).

Because game companies are bound by the need to remain profitable, it is unlikely that successful game studios are going to stray far out of the “safety zone” of established game franchises and creative niches. Della Rocca (2005) notes that it is unlikely for original titles to become successful when compared to franchised titles, offering the following conceptual charts for both original and franchised titles, respectively:

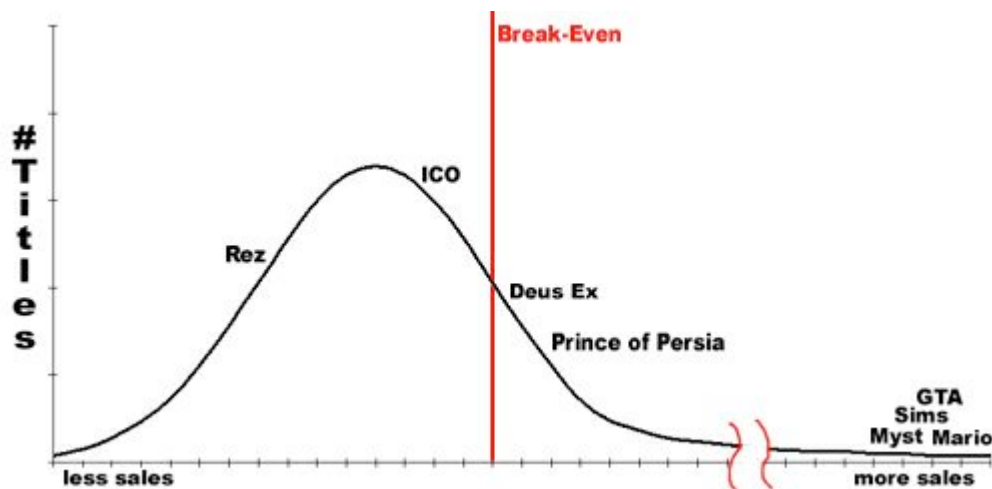


Figure 1--Image from IGDA.org
http://www.igda.org/articles/dellarocca_ipsnatchers.php

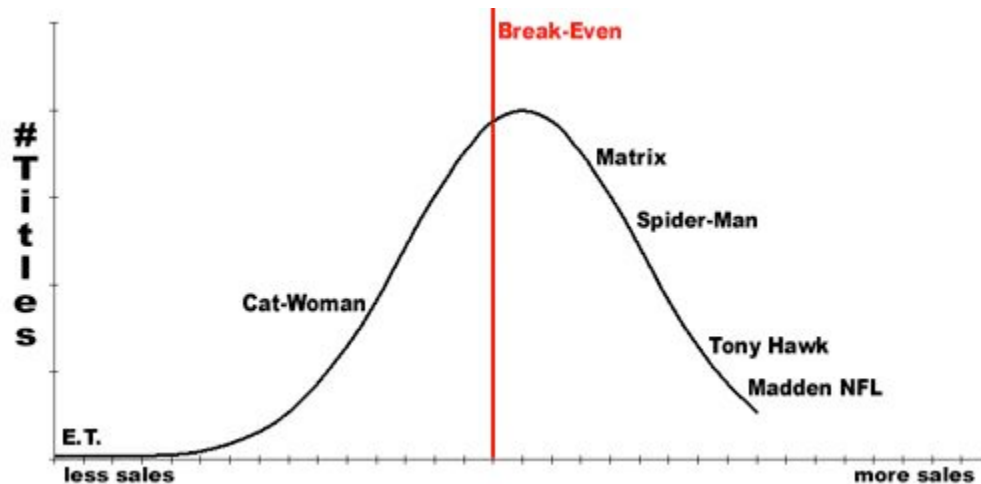


Figure 2-Image from IGDA.org
http://www.igda.org/articles/dellarocca_ipsnatchers.php

For members of the ruling oligopoly of the video game industry, Della Rocca's graphs present a justification to develop titles that do not stray from established franchises or niches. Della Rocca wisely points out, however, that the games spawned from originality have carried the video game industry for the last 20 years. Indeed many of the derivative works seen today are still working from the same mechanics developed in those original games. As Della Rocca (2005) asserts:

“So, it seems like publishers are justified in turning to licenses to increase the appeal and profitability of the games they release. But is this really the case? Once again, taking a historical perspective, it is games based on original IP that are the top selling games, and the game [sic] that are most critically acclaimed. [...] Arguably, it is original IP [intellectual property] (or at least franchises based on original IP) that has generated much of the economic value, notoriety and fun for the game industry.”

(Della Rocca, 2005, p. 18)

It becomes easy to see why games publishers stick to what sells. Even if the potential for massive sales does exist within original ideas, a more reliable tactic is to re-label what has sold before until people finally stop buying it. According to Della Rocca (2005), “to summarize the decision, risk-averse publishing execs looking to keep their jobs and not lose their company money will more than likely go with projects that leverage licensed IP, providing a much better chance of at least breaking even” (p.23).

One further constraint on the development of original titles is the concept of genre, which both paralyses independent designers, as well as shapes the games developed by the major players in the industry's oligopoly. It is relevant to note that genres of video games exist only once an original game creates them. For example, one could argue that the stealth genre of video game did not truly exist until the creation of *Metal Gear* for the Nintendo Entertainment System. In this way, original titles serve to shape the market. This could be said of games such as *Splinter Cell* and its sequels, as well as many other stealth games. Most are descendants of the original *Metal Gear*. Certainly, *Resident Evil* spawned a slew of imitating horror games in the late nineties and early thousands.

What we have seen from very successful and iconic games is an arising nomenclature of game genres, with many review sites, authors, and gamers themselves now typifying games as FPS (first person shooter), Action, Action RPG (role-playing game), RTS (realtime strategy), and so on. When we consider for a moment that these conceptions of genre were shaped, and indeed came into existence because of games like *Faceball*, *Metroid*, *The Legend of Zelda*, and *Warcraft: Orcs and Humans* respectively, one wonders: Before such genres existed, with what strategies did the designers of these titles approach the creation of their games? King (1994) asserts that a notion of genre “[...] limits the kinds of ideas with which authors can examine and communicate” (p. 147). While King is referring to the literary notion of genre in his reference to authors, the same can be said of video game designers. Both financiers and executives of major games publishers are inclined to work within established genres to minimize risk. Furthermore, the notion of what constitutes a “valid” genre of game limits game designers’ creativity and ability to innovate.

The Dangers of Derivation

Including Bateman (2003), writers often justify the practise of sequel and derivative game generation as a conservative business move during a non-innovative cycle of an industry's lifespan. I argue that this shift represents one of the most serious threats both to the creation of digital games, as well as to the games industry at large. Derivative video games fail to respect the most important and central point of games design; the players. In the game industry, players are being ‘short-changed’. As a new generation of non-creative, hyper-derivative games alienates their curiosity for games as a medium, these derivative games equally ignore the personal aspects of humanity that each player brings to the game. Derivative games also bombard players with a slew of advertisements and product placements. I argue that this is particularly injurious to digital games. Based on economic precedent, I argue that the current practise of derivation will eventually become financially nonviable, as found when examining a history of games produced in originality or derivation, and creating a proportional comparison between video game antiquity of years ago and today. Finally, I argue that the emergence of free and open communities of games and gamers are illustrative of gamers' displeasure with the current market-driven mass production of games. Player-driven, empowered free gaming communities illustrate the failure of the games industry to produce new content, and offer an alarming foreshadowing of the major crash or shift to come.

On Players

Historically, games of any kind, but video games in particular have been predicated on the participation of players. As Wolf (2007) shows us, even games as early as *Eliza*, a primitive implementation of Alan Turing's *Imitation Game* pioneered in the fifties, relied entirely on the presence of a human player (31-32). This is perhaps one of the key differences between video games and all other forms of media. Ignoring philosophical considerations, a film still plays in an empty theatre, and a book can sit on a dusty shelf, but a video game left to idle at the “press start” screen never progresses, save to a pre-programmed demonstration to entice players to approach. Wolf (2001) has articulated this absolute reliance on human players:

“[...]most of all, the interactive experience of playing a video game is even more of a “cooperation between artists and audiences” [than film], who go beyond “celebrating collective values” by applying those values to the activity found in the gameplay” (p. 113).

In this context, lengthy discussion of why games and players are intrinsically related is both out of scope and unnecessary.

Why then do we see games publishers continuing to abuse their player base? In an interview, the CEO of Obsidian Games Feargus Urquhart stated that the beginning of the end of offline role-playing games could be attributed to the lack of creativity in them in the face of prolific MMOs (CVG 2007). Urquhart says “it used to be fine to make an RPG that was just wandering around and hacking things up with the player having very little effect on the world around them. Why play that game now if you could just play an MMO?” (p. 2). This alienation of player wants is a serious problem, but not nearly as serious as the lack of player representation within games.

In its short history, the games industry is notorious for propagating largely male, white, non-disabled, heterosexual characters. Moreover, it would seem that the video games industry is convinced that gamers outside of the eighteen to twenty-four year old white male demographic do not exist. Everett and Watkins (2007) point out that , in particular, African American characters are nearly invisible in modern video games, and are often represented with flagrant racial stereotypes. Glaubke et al (2001) found that games often tend to enforce racial and gender stereotypes.

Gender stereotyping and the absence of female characters are equally present. One need look no farther than *Duke Nukem*, or *DOA: Beach Volleyball* to find overt sexism and blatant objectification of women. This is not a recent sin, as the games industry has been under-representing women for decades. Smith (2006) reported that “Braun and Giroux (1989) found that almost 60% of arcade games featured males whereas roughly 2% featured females. Similar disparity was observed with male and female voices in games (~20% vs. 2% respectively). Dietz’s (1998. 66) results revealed that 41% of the video games she sampled did not portray any females. Yet attempts to rectify or investigate gender issues in video games have proved to be somewhat misguided, as Jenson and DeCastell (2005) report:

“There is a tendency in the literature on girls/women and computer game playing to construct their gaming choices and play styles as distinctly, and essentially “female,” characterizing those who choose to play as “liking collaboration,” “non-violent” and “easy” computer games [...] Its [sic] worth noticing that the stranglehold these kinds of stereotypical and essentializing identifications and characterizations have had and continue to have on received wisdom, both popular and academic about gender and play interests, styles and preferences by no means originates with video game playing, but is indigenous to the culture of computing more generally, and that this gendered computer culture always already mediates girls’ interactions with those technologies, among which game playing is only the most recent subject of attention.”

(Jenson & de Castell, 2005, p. 2)

Another set of underrepresented and disadvantaged groups in video games are the elderly and the

physically challenged. Morris (2006) reported that the video game industry ignores the elderly as consumers, with representations of them being relegated largely to stereotypical crones. Studies involving video games and the elderly have mostly been limited to clinical studies of the effects of games “on” elderly individuals (McGuire 1984, Goldstein et al 1997). With the exception of Ubisoft's new game *Handigo* (<http://www.handigosolidaires.com/en/>), disabled and handicapped individuals have never been represented in video games, and even now these individuals continue to see no representation in commercial off-the-shelf games. Thus, the key message here is that the characters represented in digital games are not accurately representative of the body of individuals who play digital games.

Represented or not, another potential problem for all these players is the proliferation of advertising. It was not uncommon in the early years of games to see publishers releasing games strictly for the purpose of advertising: *Kool-Aid Man* for Atari 2600; *Cool Spot*, a 7-UP video game for Sega Genesis; and *Chester Cheetah: Too Cool to Fool* for the Super Nintendo were all marketed for this purpose. Modern in-game advertising has taken a different approach. While it would be uncommon today to see Xbox 360 or Playstation 3 games designed strictly around a brand label, likely due to the same prohibitive production costs that impede independent developers, that same mechanism of profit-seeking has given rise to many games replete with in-game product placement and digital advertisements. Examples abound, such as *Need for Speed Underground*, *Splinter Cell*, and *Run Like Hell (RLH)*, with perhaps the best known example of soft drink product placement being in *Bawls: Guarana*. Bogost (2007) illustrates the absurdity of many in-game product placements:

“In-game advertising networks' intention to advance advertising, and not videogames, is underscored by the absurdity of many of their case studies. Commercial videogames are caught in a genre rut, with a large majority of games set in futuristic or militaristic settings, sporting combat as a major theme. [...] Placements include a billboard for the film *Batman Begins* shown alongside a surgically implanted assassin in the game *Anarchy Online*, a Coca-Cola fountain machine flanked by a gun-ready gasmask-wearing character in the tactical shooter *SWAT 4*, and Sam Fisher, the player-character in the stealth-action game *Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory*, crouched clandestine in front of a Diet Sprite vending machine. [...] The incongruence of placed ads doesn't seem to faze the in-game ad network providers. The very idea that a furtive spy would stop for a Diet Sprite, or that a cyborg assassin from 30,000 years in the future might enjoy a present-day matinee does not strike these advertisers as absurd.”

(Bogost, 2007, p. 166)

As Bogost also argues, game advertisers have been trying for a long time to justify the inclusion of ads in games. The advertisers claim that players agree with advertisements in games because the advertisements increase the realism of the simulation. University of Wisconsin-Madison's Joystick 101.org critics agree with this claim, as long as the advertisements are endemic, and “natural to play”. An examples of advertisements that fit this description might include car advertisements in *Forza Motorsports*. However, Crespo (2007) notes that “when an ad is placed inappropriately or out of place the gamer will immediately recognise this and reject it and the game” (p. 4). Some in-game advertising companies have started to recognize gamers' general

distaste for in-game advertising and one of the pioneers of in-game advertising, Wild Tangent recently switched away from this business model. As Androvich (2008) argues, “it is a huge mistake to ever interrupt a game while somebody is playing it” (p. 3). Still, many in-game advertisement companies (most notably Massive, Inc.) cling to this in-game advertising model. This serves to solidify the future of commercial games as a media replete with largely irrelevant advertising, as typified by rampant and intrusive *Red Bull* advertising in *Judge Dredd: Dredd vs. Death*. Gamers' opinions and tastes are reduced to largely irrelevant coincidences at best, with companies like IGA Worldwide stating that a “top selling video game can generate 1 billion eyeball hours” (IGA Worldwide website, <http://www.igaworldwide.com/?playShowreel=1>). An increasing number of games that are derivative are being released, with little care taken to improve the underlying mechanics. Despite these criticisms and with many major industry players like Wild Tangent pulling out of the model of invasive, penetrative in-game advertising, many games are still replete with these kinds of nonsensical commercial interruptions. One notable recent example: a campaign ad for Senator Barack Obama's run for election as president of the United States hangs over players heads in *Burnout Paradise* (Xbox 360) as they race.

In recent years, the needs and wants of players are seldom taken into account by the games industry, even in the face of scholarly investigation and publication of many of the issues raised. The games released in 2008 are no closer to accurately representing players of digital games. Save perhaps *Castlevania: Order of Ecclesia* for the Nintendo DS, the 2008 selection of games was devoid of non-hypersexualized female protagonists and exhibited a continuing absence of characters that were representative of physically disabled or elderly individuals.

On Economics

The games industry has known that, historically, derivative sequels net fewer profits when compared with their original counterparts. The lone exception to this is possibly those sequels whose story is told in sections, such as *Final Fantasy* or *Halo*. *Bombberman: Zero* is perhaps the most notorious failed sequel in recent memory, bearing little to no resemblance to its predecessor, and being criticized for broken controls. Richtel (2005) reported that Electronic Arts lost money in the first quarter of 2005, by relying heavily on sequels:

“Increasingly, industry analysts and game reviewers are wondering if the company's dependence on sequels is a sign that it is losing its creative edge. [...] By year's end, Electronic Arts plans to release 26 new games, all but one of them a sequel, including the 16th version of N.H.L. Hockey, the 11th of the racing game *Need for Speed* and the 13th of the P.G.A. Tour golf game. The company also relies heavily on creating games based on movies like the James Bond and Lord of the Rings series, rather than developing original brands.”

(Richtel, 2005, p. 5-6)

Even in 2005, there was a belief in the industry that resorting to sequels indicated a stagnation in creativity in the games industry. This perception remains in the industry today. As Jenkins (2008) noted, upon Activision's merger with Blizzard Entertainment, Activision scrapped a number of projects due to their lack of “sequel potential”. He quotes CEO Bobby Kotick of

Activision:

“With respect to the franchises that don’t have the potential to be exploited every year across every platform, with clear sequel potential that can meet our objectives of, over time, becoming \$100 million-plus franchises, that’s a strategy that has worked very well for us [...]”

(Kotick in Jenkins, 2008, p. 4)

The last major slump and near death of the video games industry was over two decades ago. It was caused by a variety of factors, not the least of which was a plethora of consoles and games. It was also because most of the games produced at the time were of comparatively low quality. (The Dot Eaters, p3) Conversely, the next video game slump and eventual crash promises to be less diversely rooted. It will likely be characterized by the financial woes resulting from a plethora of game sequels reaching either the end of their storylines (such as *Halo 3*) or the end of the profitability of their franchise. One notable example for the latter is the next-generation *Sonic the Hedgehog* games, which have been poorly received globally and which represent a major shift from their previous successes in older versions.

Because game sequels do eventually become unprofitable, even the most successful and popular franchises can “run out of steam” and cause game companies to stop producing new franchise titles. A few examples of this include the *Metal Gear* series by Hideo Kojima, which has reached its apex and will likely stop releasing games. Older favourites like *Shining Force* have seen no new releases, and even the massively popular *Megaman* games have been losing momentum in recent years. Eventually, when companies cease to be able to draw profit from these established franchises, the only option for the continued life of the industry will rest in original and new games. However, it is important to note that all of the aforementioned original franchises came to life in a time when creativity was not stifled by market oligopoly and crushing startup costs.

While it has not happened yet, those franchises that have continued to generate sequel after sequel may eventually find the practice of sequel creation and marketing unprofitable. The market will have a major problem at that point. As the gaming industry has created a market atmosphere that is not conducive to new innovative and creative works, it is probable that any call for original titles will largely go unanswered. In recent years, the emergence of marketable rivals to any of the established franchises has been sparse and will likely continue. Kotick (2008) notes this trend:

“You still need to have production of new original intellectual property, but you need to do it very, very selectively. And if you look at the number of new, original intellectual properties successfully launched in the market each year over the last five or ten years, it’s a small, single-digit number”

(Kotick, in Jenkins, 2008, p.10)

Kotick is entirely correct in observing the relative absence of the emergence of new franchises. He notes that this absence means that it will be difficult to avert the impending crisis of creativity by developing selective new titles and franchises among the sustaining force of the

older, already established franchises.

New and original intellectual properties are appearing less frequently, and franchises are slowly becoming less profitable. These major issues, coupled with the industry's continuing alienation of the player audience at large, its barriers to creativity, and the conservative climate of the video game industry as it stands, all foreshadow the gaming industry's economic collapse. Evidence of this is conceptually and financially present already. Unprecedented slumps are happening all over the world. Haskins (2008) reports that the video game industry's "overall sales growth was held to single digits for the first time since 2006" (p. 2). Haskins quotes an industry analyst as saying "there 'really [was] nothing that interesting moving sales" (p. 6), and that "the platforms are all aging, and the exciting one, the Wii, is both constrained and doesn't really have that many games other than the ones it ships with that people seem to want to buy" (p. 7). Reuters (2008) also reporting that Japan's game market shrunk a massive "21.3 percent in the April to September fiscal first half" (p. 1). While it can be said that other factors, notably the current global financial situation, attributed to these shrinkages, it is important to note that industry analysts have characterized this shrink as resulting from a stagnation of creativity – there is nothing interesting available to generate sales.

On Player Generated Gaming

Something interesting has arisen in recent years. Various internet-based communities of gamers and game designers have emerged and this means that independent and non-commercial game design is an interesting field to study. It is an area of the gaming industry that is liberated from the constraints of the large market forces considered in this paper. Independent and non-commercial games developers are free to examine and explore creative and original ideas with impunity. Though it could be argued that some of the driving motive behind designing independent games is to eventually become a professional games designers, some spillover from the commercial games industry is likely, and perhaps even inevitable. Nevertheless, much work has been focused on the nature of independent and non-commercial games communities, and many interesting, original and even controversial works have emerged from them. In his examination of "Tkoolers", a Japanese sub-culture of independent game designers employing *RPG Tkool* which is an RPG development suite from EnterBrain, Ito (2007) argues that:

"Since amateur designers do not have to please everyone, they can compose a story according to their interest, expressing their own concerns. Some deal with social issues in contemporary Japan. Since amateurs are occupationally diverse [...], their games incorporate these various perspectives and tastes. For example, the presence of female amateur designers is conspicuous because they often produce very original games. One example is an RPG called "Pureia-chan no yuki (The Courage of Preia)," which takes the form of an orthodox fantasy RPG, but actually deals with the issue of sexism."

(Ito, 2007, p. 139)

Contrary to what has been discussed herein previously, it is worth noting that many of the role-

playing games investigated by Ito are headed by female protagonists. This is but one possibility of the freedom of independent and non-commercial games' stand, contrary to the commercial off-the-shelf games industry. Would an RPG starring a female protagonist and focused on sexism, be a smash seller? This question will likely go unanswered for the time being. As Jenson and deCastell have pointed out, the role of female gamers is largely relegated to prescribed notions of play enforced upon them.

Another practise heavily exercised among both individual gamers dissatisfied with particular aspects of a game and amongst communities of game players is “modding.” Modding is the practise of altering or adding game code to improve, expand, or otherwise change game functionalities and mechanics. Some of the most well known include “Garry's Mod”, (www.garrysmod.com), which allows players to add and modify art assets in Half-Life 2 and other games, for the purposes of Machinima generation, altering game assets, or just for the fun of generation itself. Other mods increase usability or functionality, like the many interface modifications for Blizzard's World of Warcraft, or SafetyNet for *The Elder Scrolls:Oblivion*¹. *SafetyNet* implements an improved auto-save feature in *The Elder Scrolls: Oblivion*. As an added piece of functionality within the game, SafetyNet is a player-created adjustment that responds to players' about frustrations about lost progress due to their inability to trigger a game save, either because of their own neglect or the game mechanic's oversight.

In the face of the senescence of creativity of the video games industry, modding has become an important part of value and fun generation for gamers. Kucklich (2005) has noted that:

“[...] smaller developers and publishers have either been taken over by large corporations such as Electronic Arts and Ubisoft, or pushed out of the market altogether. But even for the big players, profit margins are so slim that they rely increasingly on licenses and sequels to ensure profitability (see Kline et al., 2003). However, this risk-averseness is counter-balanced by the growing number of players who are not content just to consume games, but prefer to create their own games using the tools provided by the games' manufacturers, or, in the absence of these, creating their own tools and utilities. Computer game modification, or "modding", is an important part of gaming culture as well as an increasingly important source of value for the games industry”

(Kucklich, 2005, pgs. 2-3)

Modding has become a legitimate, studied activity – some scholars even using it in education (El-Nasr and Smith, 2006), and modding is an excellent demonstration of players' willingness to generate content, both as a means of error-correction and as kind of value generation. A small number of very unique games rely partially (*Spore*), or entirely (*Little Big Planet*) on user-generated content.

With both independent and non-commercial game design and modding both generating content from player audiences, correcting errors, and otherwise refining gameplay, it is clear that players have an idea of what constitutes fun, “good” games, and “good” game content. However, leaving it up to players alone to move the game industry ahead represents a massive failure of the games industry to respond to the needs of its capital audience. Using plays as an opposing example to games, insomuch as a playgoer cannot pause the action and give action direction to players,

rewrite scripts, add props, and so on, the playwright has an onus of responsive communication with his or her audience to cater to the needs of playgoers. A playwright not sensitive to the needs of his or her audience might risk alienating them and becoming unprofitable – possibly also excommunicated, arrested, or worse as was much of the history of the playwright. This is true of most creative commercial work. Artists and designers who ignore the needs and wants of their prime audiences do not stand to prosper, and this is what is most curious and unique about the gaming industry. Video games are perhaps the only medium that has so successfully ignored its supportive base of consumers with relative impunity at least to date. This impunity, however, may yet be coming to an end. The industry's lack of response to its primary consumers, its lack of appropriate representation of gamer populations, and its tempting over-reliance on risk-avoidant behaviour through derivative sequelling is generating significant groundswell as has been illustrated throughout this paper.

Overview

As I have tried to show here, there are a variety of problems facing the digital games industry as the result of the relative senescence of the emergence of creative, original titles in recent years. Gamers have been coming up with creative ways to drag value out of titles, through modding and skinning, as well as through the practice of metagaming (fan fiction works, discussion boards, fora, and the like). While many new role-playing games give the option to characterize an avatar as male or female, and to choose from a variety of races (most recently in games like *Fallout 3*), other games are still vastly neglecting the natural affordances of human and cultural variation present in the gaming community. Advergaming remains pervasive despite numerous industry players and analysts growing convinced that in-game advertisements are detrimental to the gameplay experience, and that they are not well received by game players. Finally, industry analysts have illustrated that the lack of creative, original intellectual properties is leading to a lull in the sale of games. Having examined the causes of this problem, and the extent to which it poses dangerous consequences for the games industry, the following section will examine a few of the possible solutions to avert the foreshadowed crash.

Solutions

While the state of the market I have illustrated may paint a conceptual stalemate, I would argue that not all is lost. While highlighting many industry issues throughout this paper, I have also touched on a few potential solutions to the current stagnation of creativity and its resulting potential decline of the video game industry. I argue that modding communities, independent and amateur game development communities, and participatory and inclusive game design present opportunities for industry-level games publishers to remedy some of the issues facing the games industry.

Modding Communities, Emergent Games

Some of the more popular and visible mods have become commercial successes in their own right. The popular Garry's Mod mentioned earlier is now being sold for \$4.99 US as an add-on for games based on Valve's *Source* game engine . Perhaps the most iconic instance of a mod becoming its own game is *Counter-Strike*, one of the most popular online first-person shooter games to date, and its offspring *CS:Source*, built on an updated engine. In this particular case *the*, two developers of the *CS:Source* mod worked extensively on modifying the original Valve game *Half-Life* and resulted in their work being taken up by Valve. This allowed the makers of *CS:Source* to avoid many of the hurdles keeping independent developers and those seeking to create original content out of the games industry, namely: having ready produced a successful game; gaining capital; maintaining ownership rights to a license; and using a powerful engine. While Valve did eventually release a sequel and expansion packs to *Half-Life*, it also turned its focus to individual developers and modders who used the underlying engine to create their own original works. Valve has since become famous for this strategy, sponsoring the development of *Team Fortress*, and the immensely popular *Team Fortress 2*, which is a satirical, light-hearted first person shooter that stands at odds with the “power gamer” atmosphere presented by many other online FPS games. In another Valve example, they acquired *Portal*, which originated as a freeware online game designed by independent developers. *Portal* is an innovative game that defies classification. Playing *Portal* requires navigating a series of worldly puzzles using a complex teleporting portal gun. Valve hired the original development team of *Portal* and gave them access to Valve's engines and capital, which resulted in an incredibly original and massively well-received game. Though many of Valve's games have been ported to gaming consoles, it is worth noting that Valve continues to deal primarily in PC games. This is contrary to the shifting trend mentioned earlier, away from non-MMO PC games and toward console games.

I mention Valve at length here as an exemplar of the kinds of behaviours that could alleviate the gaming industry's creeping creative stagnation. While Valve has created or acquired original products, such as the previously mentioned *Portal*, it continues to do so through collaboration with gamers and modders. Despite these alternative games and mods' otherwise “risky” nature, in that they do not represent established intellectual properties, nor do they act as sequels to pre-existing franchises, Valve's products have been well-received and generally successful. In fact, many of Valve's games released through this strategy have prompted sequels, with *CS: Source*, *Team Fortress 2*, and numerous puzzles and expansion packs for *Portal*, *Portal: Still Alive* being the most notable: Many of the maps for the latter title were collaboratively developed in its player community.

Valve and its *Steam* delivery system and community mechanism represent one of the most innovative game companies with industry status today. Through *Steam*, Valve offers game downloads that travel with the player's account, not requiring them to purchase additional keys or licenses, -they showcase independent games and encourage game sharing within the bounds of intellectual property rights and licensing-and they create communities of gamers through collaborative development and modding of their products. This business approach stands as a viable future direction for the gaming industry, serving as an example of the ways to empower players and generate considerable revenue of both PC games and console games through player-directed and moderated development. Valve sets an important precedent that perhaps creative, original intellectual property is not as risky as it seems.

Independent, Amateur, and Freeware Game Development

Having already discussed *Portal*, I wish to continue to use it as a kind of example for the future of the industry. Games that originate as non-profit, player-centred exercises are unique in that they are player designed, are improved based on players requests and wants, are generally created by one developer, and are effectively judged and scored by the same mechanism. In this way, the development, testing, revision and patching, criticism and critique, and indeed even the design of the games is wholly undertaken by a community of players. While this is a less common occurrence than that of mods becoming full games, due to the fact that mods generally receive the attention of the game company whose product it works within, there are still a few notable examples. InXile entertainment has purchased the rights to *Line Rider*, and published a game called *Line Rider 2: Unbound* for the Nintendo DS. *Line Rider* originated as an internet game developed by one individual and played exclusively through Macromedia's Flash technology. Due to its massive popularity, it was picked up and developed into a commercial game. *Audiosurf* is another well-known example of a single independent developer's work being picked up and published to commercial success (this one again acquired by Valve). Another platform allowing independently designed and non-commercial freeware games to come to vogue is the console delivered internet, due largely to the success of the Xbox Live Marketplace, as well as the PS3's Playstation Store. Games created by individual developers and receiving vast amounts of attention have been picked up and sold via these platforms (*fIOW*, for example). Other developers are able to minimize startup and proliferation costs by marketing their games via Xbox Live Marketplace and Playstation Store. Japan based Q-Games has pioneered a successful iconic title of their own: Despite being a very original title, their *PixelJunk* game has received widely favourable reviews.

Through examining games that have already become popular through internet propagation, and consulting independent gaming communities such as www.tigsources.com, games publishers can acquire original intellectual properties at little cost to themselves, because much of the development has already been done via player-centred communities. Furthermore, through the direct to console internet delivery platform presented by the Xbox Live Marketplace, Playstation Store, and Wii Shop Channel, independent developers are being given a pathway for developing console games directly, possibly leading to the proliferation of original intellectual properties and reducing the barriers to entry.

Participatory and Player-Centred Design

Perhaps one of the most well-investigated methods of game development in recent memory is participatory and player-centred game design, which seeks to gather the needs, wants, and opinions of a wide player-base during the game design process. This is at odds with many currently employed patterns of game design, in which games are generally not seen by players until the beta stages. Ermi and Mayra (2005) state that:

“Involving players more in the design processes of games is also important for the

future of the games industry and for the diversity of game cultures in general. One of the crucial critiques of the current state of game development is the apparent lack of originality in design solutions: games are designed to appeal to a rather narrow, already existing player demographic”

(Ermi & Mayra, 2005, p. 2)

Ermi and Mayra show the neglect of the player as part of the design of commercial games, stating that:

“[a]s long as the design of new games is based on the traditional model of individual game author or small team designing games based on their personal likings and vision, rather than on understanding derived from their potential new audiences, this is unlikely to change”

(Ermi & Mayra, 2005, p. 2)

Graft (2007) has quoted famed game designer Will Wright as saying that “whenever we take control away from the player at all, we are throwing away the most important thing about games” (p. 4) and “technology has become 'player-centred, not broadcast-centred” (p. 6). Sweetser and Johnson (2004) state that “acquiring the player's perspective on game design issues is crucial in enhancing the gaming experience, by understanding, and ultimately meeting, the desires and expectations of the player” (p. 1), which is something the process of player-centred design or participatory design aims to achieve. By including various player participants during the game design process in a variety of capacities, through the use of techniques such as focus groups, web questionnaires and group interviews (Ermi & Mayer, 2005), some developers are hoping to gather the opinions of a wider audience while developing their games. A full description and examination of the effectiveness of methods of participatory and player-centred designs is beyond the scope of this paper, but what is salient from these works is the notion of a paradigm shift from designer-centred content towards player-centred content. Though the games industry has been implicated repeatedly for failing to represent the wants and needs of a wide variety of players, there is an emerging trend towards participatory design, via a wide variety of audiences and a broad player demographic. It is hoped that this will help to remedy this unfortunate industry failing.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have examined the currently occurring senescence of creativity in the video games industry. I have explored a variety of aspects of this trend, including unpleasant market conditions, the profit-seeking behaviour of powerful games publishers, and the staggering startup costs for those game developers who seek to market an original game. I have established that this trend represents a serious threat for the video game industry, and I have argued that allow this trend to continue bodes poorly for the health of the industry. I have discussed the industry's alienation of an extremely large audience of players, because of its habits of maintaining a narrow focus, neglecting player wants and needs, and marketing derivative works until they are no longer profitable while simultaneously preventing original works from proliferating. I have also demonstrated the potential for the games industry to emerge from this stagnation through the adoption of a variety of measures, including

collaboration with players and developers through player and modding communities. I have also argued that direct-to-console internet delivery systems, including the Playstation Store, Xbox Live Marketplace and Wii Shop Channel all present a viable option for those individuals seeking to put out original game properties, as the nature of those systems lessen many of the barriers to entry. Finally and most importantly, I have argued that a paradigm shift from market and publisher-centred design to player and consumer-centred design is necessary to ensure the continued life of the video games industry. Through these measures, game designers may be able to move away from franchising as economic necessity, and back to creative and original intellectual properties, the arguable *sine qua non* of the digital games industry.

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