

GET SMART

Star lord, or space cadet? The master-mind of Galactic Command Online, Dr. Derek Smart, shares his secrets...

Derek Smart's climb through the video game development sector has been a slow and methodical one. A magnet for controversy thanks to his eagerness to engage in forum debates, and his more recent adventures in litigation, Smart has been inspired to drive ever forward by his fond memories of the early space combat classics such as Elite and Star Raiders. From the very beginning, Smart has strived to create works that are true spiritual successors to these cosmic legends.

"I started out developing space combat games in the late eighties. Back then, I had no industry experience whatsoever, nor the ability to bring my ideas to fruition. It wasn't until the mid-to-late nineties that I finally was able to bring my first game – Battlecruiser 3000AD – to retail through Take Two, after going through a couple of previous publishers."

While the results have certainly been mixed, he can't be faulted for lack of ambition.

"It has been an uphill climb and battle to implement all my ideas due to the shifting technologies, markets etc. Over the years, though the focus remained on the core principles of the space combat genre, I continued to advance the all-encompassing nature of my games by adding various elements which would further enhance the experience. These include the ability to land on any planet in first-person mode with full FPS and vehicular combat, better engine enhancements, and so on."

Smart has seen many the industry go through many changes since he first started out, and describes its booming profitability as a double-edged sword – and its rapid

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evolution as divisive.

"The industry is now a fragmented mess. In fact, a lot of the guys from the old days are no longer in this field at all, having moved on to other careers. Once the industry started to focus on money, rather than creativity, it continued further downhill from there."

WHO Derek Smart
WHERE 3000AD, Inc.
WHY Battlecruiser series, Universal Combat, Galactic Command

On a positive note, Smart is generally pleased with the calibre of the Gen-Y devs he's now working with, and refuses to write them off as the bunch of slackers that the serious business columnists are wont to call them.

"Gaming is a multi-billion dollar industry and those 'serious business columnists' don't know squat. There are a lot of hard-working individuals still toiling away each day. In truth, there are a lot more distractions today as there are opportunities but by the same token, all it takes is one failed product for a studio to go out of business. A lot of studios and publishers, big and small, have folded due to the current caustic and fragmented nature of the business and those still following the traditional model are clinging on for dear life."

"Due to the fact that development is so much easier to get into today due to the numerous tools and engine suites available, there are a lot more enthusiasts in the biz today than there were twenty years ago when I first started out. This is both good and bad because at the end of the day, there are a lot more crap games out there than there are good ones and that tends to cause a lot of noise and further fragment the industry in general."

The biggest shock of the interview came when we asked Smart about government assistance for game developers – the kind that has seen Canada overtake Great

Britain as the world's third biggest game producer. His opinion, we learned, is out of step with just about every other game developer on the planet.

"Well, I don't believe that the government should have any hand in boosting game development, apart from providing the same sort of opportunities and assistance that

they provide to other industries."

As a handful of other indies have pointed out, including Positech's Cliff 'Cliffski' Harris, 'help' from the government is often more trouble than it's worth.

"Any form of government involvement in anything comes with a lot of red tape and tons of strings attached. In my opinion, tax breaks, SMB loans etc are a good start but let's be honest, who cares about tax breaks for the entertainment industry when there are other far more beneficial programs that are worthy of the time and money? For one thing, the entertainment industry is highly volatile and no matter how much help the government gives, over ninety percent will fail. So why bother wasting the money? I'd rather see it go toward worthy causes such as AIDS programs, aid to third world countries, cancer research and possibly the search for ET thrown in for good measure."

It could be argued that Canada sets a dangerous precedent, for without those tax breaks, Naughty Bear might never have been made — and it certainly wouldn't be getting a sequel...

Smart is on record as not being the world's biggest fan of Steam, given the fact that Valve's digital download service has, thus far, declined to carry any of his products. While he praised the liberating effect that such web portals have on independent developers, he stressed that these services can have their down sides, too.

"Digital distribution is the wave of the future. It cuts out the middle man: the publisher, long the bane of many a developer. But Steam is just another publisher and they have their own rules. So it's not like everyone can get on Steam. That's pretty much the same way that not everyone can get a publisher to fund, sell and promote their game at retail."

"So, the most important aspect of digital distribution is your ability to go direct because getting on third-party publisher services such as Steam, Direct2Drive,



Apple's AppStore, all come with strings. Sure you can develop your game and sell it direct, but without being on a top tier digital distribution service, your game will lack the exposure – and thus the revenue – that one would be seeking."

Noting that even console games have now jumped on the digital distribution bandwagon, Smart believes this is clear evidence that this sales vector presents 'a clear and present danger' to the traditional business of retail games publishing.

"It reminds me of how, seemingly overnight, a little known upstart at the time, Netflix, in one fell swoop literally killed traditional movie rentals at places like Blockbuster and other outlets; most of which are either bankrupt or already out of business. Most of the publishers who were unprepared for the digital distribution revolution are either out of business, hanging on for dear life or scrambling to get on the digital bandwagon."

Considering the degree of evolution and change Smart has seen in the 20+ years he's been in gaming, we were surprised by his thoughts on the changes that lie ahead – the way he sees it, the next decade will be an era not of growth, but of consolidation.

"To be perfectly honest, I don't see PC gaming evolving much beyond where we are today. I think that we've peaked and the widespread popularity of games on other platforms has pretty much sealed the deal. Sure the PC is going to remain at the forefront of innovation for some time to come, but in terms of evolution, I don't see much happening going forward."

"The gaming industry will continue to be fragmented and the addition of game

streaming services like Gaikai and OnLive is going to further contribute to that."

Smart is opinionated and outspoken, but above all, unapologetic. No matter what others say about him, he has never strayed from his path of making obtuse space combat games, and he probably never will. Though, for sake of argument, we just had to ask: If a major web portal approached him to, say, do a 'match 3' Battlecruiser game, would he do it?

"Not bloody likely. But hey, for the right price, anything can be bought." JAMES COTTEE PC

