100% Australian 100% Independent

HYPER

TOMB RAIDER
GOD OF WAR: ASCENSION
FINAL FANTASY XIV
SLY COOPER: THIEVES IN TIME
THE LAST OF US
CASTLEVANIA: MIRROR OF FATE
DARKSTALKERS
CRYISIS 3

EXCLUSIVE REVIEW

MONSTER HUNTER 3 ULTIMATE
GOTTA KILL ‘EM ALL

READER'S GAME OF THE YEAR
REVEALED: YOUR FAVOURITE GAMES OF 2012

BIOSHOCK INFINITE
WE REVIEW THE NEXT CITY OF THE FUTURE

METAGAME
A DEEPER LOOK AT THE GAME DESIGN TO MAKE YOU LOOK DEEPER AT GAME
behind the curtain

ANDREW WHITEHEAD investigates how developers and studios use social media to interact directly with gamers

the internet
With the proliferation of the Internet, both gamers and developers can engage with each other with unprecedented freedom. From the small Usenet crowd in the 80s and BBSs in the 90s to the more popular forums of the 2000s and the world-changing social media sites, like Twitter and Facebook, there have always been groups of people who just want to get together and talk about games. And in more recent times the ability to share a quick thought or start an in-depth blog couldn't be simpler.

But in an industry as big as video games, freedom of expression can come with a hefty price tag - one that a lot of developers who want to keep working in this business can't afford to pay. That said, failing to engage an audience on their level could ultimately be the downfall of video game publishers and creators alike.

As the philosopher, lyrical genius and actor/rapper Pitbull once said, "To understand the future we have to go back in time". So when talking about social media, video games and developers engaging directly with gamers, you cannot avoid talking about one man in particular.

FORUMBATTLE 1996AD >> Most widely known for his space simulator, Battlecruiser 3000AD, Derek Smart rose to prominence after British computer gaming magazine Strategy Plus featured a write-up on his game in 1992. During the games lengthy development process, Smart was a regular on Usenet (the grandfather of the modern day forum) and would often defend his game to its vocal critics, to the point of starting what is now referred to as the largest flame war of its time.

The catalyst for all of this was the launch of Battlecruiser 3000AD in 1996 by Take-Two Interactive. The game was sold unfinished and buggy. This started a fight between Smart and gamers online, who felt burnt by its obvious flaws, as well as a legal battle with Take-Two that would eventually end in an out of court settlement.

"Even though a lot of people were pissed that the game shipped by Take-Two was incomplete," said Smart about the development of Battlecruiser 3000AD, "and they were well within their rights to be pissed and as a gamer I understand that, but there were those who were just piling on, and there were those in the media who were promoting that pile on. And once that flowed to the Internet and BBSs it took a life of its own, and because I was new to the whole thing, I wasn't really exposed to the whole gaming scene. I was young and foolish enough to respond. Because it was the first time anyone was stupid enough to defend themselves vigorously a lot of people took it as an opportunity to just pile on, and the more they piled on the worse it got and I just stood my ground."

And stand his ground is exactly what Smart did. Not walking away from the fight, he used the settlement money from his Take-Two lawsuit to finish the game he started through a series of patches.

"After the whole Take-Two thing blew up and I worked on the game as best as I could for that generation of technology," said Smart, "and released it for free just as a way of apologising for the mishap, regardless of whose fault it was. I could have just walked away and I got beat up anyway and took the blame until the world started realising 'hey this is what happened', but back in those days, and hey even today, it's almost totally unheard of for a developer to go toe-to-toe with a publisher and publicly voice how they've been wronged."

The road to redemption hasn't been easy for Smart, and for many gamers it won't ever be long enough. To this day he is a divisive man who has garnered his fair share of critics thanks to his once aggressive online presence. But as Smart is quick to point out, his time as a hot-headed developer has past and he's learnt a lot of lesson as he approaches 50.

"I've kind of mellowed, age tends to do that to you as you start to grow common sense," explained Smart, "but in the past you'd go into a forum and there'd be some discussion and anybody thinks they have enough common sense or thick skin would be able to ignore certain things. But the thing is people who say 'turn the other cheek' haven't been slapped hard enough is what I say. Sometimes you look at things and think 'I'll let it slide but sometimes just for the hell of it you say 'you know what, it's a slow day' or 'I'm having a bitchy morning and why the hell not?' that's what usually happens. Sometimes you choose to ignore it; sometimes you choose not to ignore it."

Times have changed since the heyday of Usenet and of forums being the dominant form of public communication. They do still serve their purpose, but social media is now the place to be seen and heard by developers and
publishers. And when Smart feels that it is time once again to step forward and see what the world has to say about his new game, Line of Defense, you can be sure he’ll make his presence known.

"I still engage people and I will do it a lot more when Line of Defense comes out," said Smart, "as I did in 2009 when my last game came out, everything is cyclical and I’m not that young gun who will be 'here, there and everywhere', I’m less stupid I guess."

"I am still on the forums, Facebook and my website and places like that. It’s just that the older I get and the wiser I became the more that it occurs to me there’s only so much I can do, I’m not that twenty-something flamboyant gamer/developer anymore."

**TAKE A WALK ON THE ODD SIDE >>** While his approach to video games is very different to a lot of his contemporaries another developer who has stood the test of time is the inimitable Lorne Lanning. After leaving the much respected animation house Rhythm & Hues Studios with Sherry McKenna the pair started the Oddworld inhabitants label responsible for the classic Abe’s Oddyssey and Abe’s Exordium for the PlayStation as well as Munch’s Oddyssey and Stranger’s Wrath on the Xbox.

It’s no surprise he has also become an outspoken critic of aspects of the video game industry he is no longer interested in working around, especially after taking Oddworld out of EA’s hands and going independent.

"Well, as anyone intimate with the industry knows," explains Lanning, "all developers have had rocky relationships with publishers, I suspect we just had a tendency to vocalise it a bit more (laughs). It’s not something I would advise as a policy for others, but we had a certain style in our narrative passion, and we stuck to our guns and Sherry McKenna is one badass negotiator who has many bags of tricks if she’s being toyed with. And we took so many risks, and it was so hard to get good partner. You should find and explore all other ways to attempt to address your issues before the public gets wind of a peep."

Working as an independent developer while maintaining ties in Silicon Valley and Hollywood has given Lanning a broad perspective on how the market must adapt to change. But as he’s quick to point out the old guard is firmly in place at a lot of the big publishers and their tough stance on things like stopping the sharing of trailers or failing to understand why people use social media is hurting them financially.

"There are a lot of people who still aren’t getting it and it’s reflected in their numbers," said Lanning. "I saw Ed [Fries, former vice president of publishing at Microsoft] being interviewed and he was saying ‘a lot of the big publishers today they don’t have the right ideas and they don’t have the right people’. And he wasn’t saying that in any derogatory way, it’s just true. There’s still a lot of dead weight that won’t adapt and think it knows best, and they’re going to go away. Adapt or die, but the game is up. You have to embrace this new social stuff because that’s where the trust is, and when you establish that trust you will have a built in audience you pre-sell to."

YOU HAVE TO EMBRACE THIS NEW SOCIAL STUFF
The infamous Dukakian ad that showed what can happen when a marketing team speaks for a developer.

**FULL PAGE BITCH SLAPPED**

"Up until that ad, I felt I had a great relationship with the gamer and the game development community and that ad changed everything. That stupid ad, I regret it and I apologize for it. You know, when the ad was first presented to me, I knew it was racy, and I didn’t want to do it. It didn’t make sense."

- John Romero in an interview with Tom’s Hardware in 2010

"You'd be surprised how much power marketing has when it comes to games. Let's put it this way, if [Romero] had said anything back then they wouldn't have run it, that's my feeling. But how many enemies would he have to make and how many people's heads would he have to jump over to get to the top to say 'hey look marketing is going to run this and I don't like it, so let's pull it'"?

- Derek Smart

(Left) Though earning critical praise, Stranger's Wrath was ultimately a commercial failure. A direct result of EA's poor marketing of the game, claims Levle Lanning.
"The greatest thing that has happened as a result of digital distribution and social media is that we are finally able to know, engage, and listen to our audience directly."

Speaking of the public, Lanning has had a few run-ins of his own with disgruntled gamers over the years. While Oddworld: Inhabitants has a good critical track record, Lanning says he's suffered his fair share of harsh words from former supporters, like when the game switch from a PlayStation to Xbox exclusive.

"I got hate mail at various times and most passionately delivered, 'I must say,' said Lanning, 'it's probably the shittiest feeling you get next to disappointing your parents or your kids thinking you're a loser. It's devastating. But you know, I must admit, it was then that I started to believe the celebrities that would say, 'I don't read my reviews.' And I was always like, 'Oh bullshit, you know you do you liar!'. But truthfully, when you find that people who once loved your work and supported you now want you crucified and are willing to pay good money to stand there just to watch the blood drip... well, I then began to understand why celebs would say that. I realised that I could not read the negativity and stay focused. It was tremendously distracting."

Despite the often harsh reality of being a public figure in video games, Lanning still engages the Oddworld fanbase and has entrusted developer Just Add Water to not only work on the recent spout of HD remakes but to move the Oddworld brand forward as they see fit while still getting constructive community feedback.

"My personal approach is to not distinguish fans from friends and I accept nearly anyone if they're willing to intelligently engage," said Lanning. "For the company, the team at Just Add Water takes a more professional approach that stays true to the brand and is actively engaging the audience for feedback, and they've been doing a great job of it. Years ago I felt I always needed an answer for marketing or PR when they would ask me for my opinion. Today I tend to say, 'ask the audience and get their feedback'. To which, I might add, has provided us with absolutely stellar results, and which the audience feels more empowered to engage as they actually see that we are in fact listening to their feedback."

**SHARING THE FUTURE >>**

With the announcement of the dedicated Share button on the PlayStation 4 controller, two things became clear - subversive marketing through social media is high on Sony's agenda and the future of video games is tied to how we interact with each other online. But gamers aren't your typical audience - they're generally opinionated, tech savvy and they know what they want.

"Gamers are not a 'fire and forget' audience," explains Smart, "you can't forget them because it's an ongoing thing. And the Internet has made marketing games an order of magnitude harder because one mistake has far reaching ramifications. And when you're dealing with gamers, especially in this day and age where every gamer has a voice via social media, it's a whole different ball game. Times have changed and sadly a lot of the media and PR people are still playing catch-up."

Times have indeed changed - the cost of making video games are more than ever, and the backlash that gamers are now capable of doing out can be equally as financially destructive for a publisher as well as a developer.

"Any development today of significant value is probably at least $1 million a month," said Lanning. "And that's a lot of pressure to live with. So developers who don't deliver..."
A GAME OF NUMBERS
Which developer has the highest score

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<th>Developer</th>
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<td>Randy Pitchford, President of Gearbox Software</td>
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<td>Hideo Kojima, Mastermind of Metal Gear Solid</td>
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(above) EA are currently using social media in an attempt to placate angry Sim City players.

what they promise I have a certain sympathy for. But it’s not the same as someone out-and-out feeding people bullshit. I think that as a developer we believe what we say at the time. And then in hindsight we say ‘how noble did they handle the disappointment’, did they just cop to it or did they just keep on trying to defend it. And what we don’t like as a culture is when people don’t cop to things.

And cop to Lanning has. He’s had his fair share of ups and downs, but the value of a dedicated leader, such as himself, is something that has helped Oddworld endure over the years.

“There’s got to be a front man, a voice that continually gets heard,” says Lanning. “And that message has to be consistent or you’ll confuse your audience and that’s what you don’t want to do. When you do that you’ll suffer the backlash of an internet connected audience who is listening and does know how to voice and opinion. Personally I think I do this way better today because I’m just a bad loser (laughs), so I’d rather be more humble and embracing feedback during the whole process.

“[It’s important] to listen and ask lots of questions about what the fans know and what insights they could be bringing without it becoming a camel, which is a horse designed by a committee.”

COMMENTS ARE CLOSED >>
Video game advertisers can try and sell us new products, PR teams can try and spin a news story to suit their agenda, the media can write reports and investigations while fellow gamers can form groups and speculate on the future of the industry. But it’s the developers who hold so much of the knowledge we crave. They’re the ones who actually know why a game turned out the way it did or how their industry is growing. And for the longest time they were the ones who were the hardest to get to.

Thankfully with the advent of the Internet and the creation of multiple social media platforms the iron curtain has dropped ever so slightly. The results may not always be pretty and there are both incredibly interesting yet fallible people on both sides of the fence, but speaking as a die-hard fan of video games - who doesn’t want to find out what goes into creating these games we know and love? «