

100% Australian 100% Independent

XBOX PLAYSTATION NINTENDO PC MOBILE

# HYPERR



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

## MONSTER HUNTER 3 ULTIMATE

GOTTA KILL 'EM ALL

EXCLUSIVE  
REVIEW

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 DESIGNER  
TO MAKE YOU LOOK  
DEEPER AT GAME



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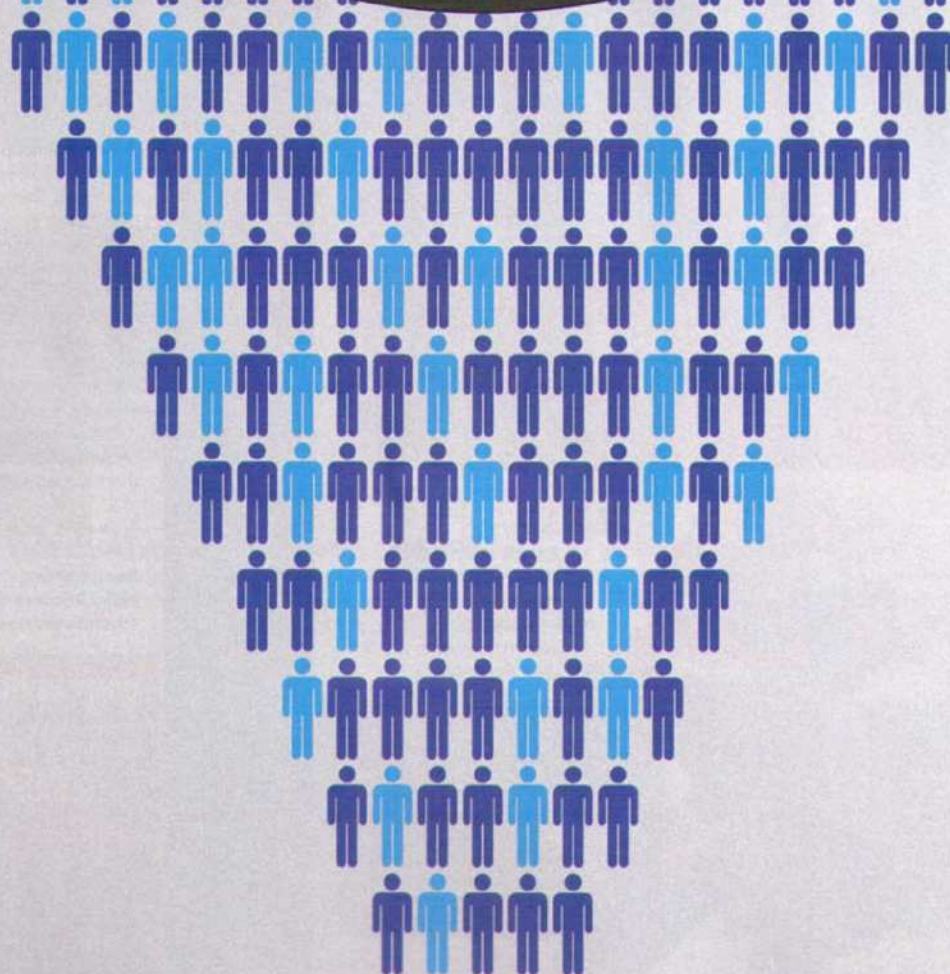
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LAST OF US  
GOD OF WAR  
CRYSIS 3

» START

# 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.

**FORUMBATTLER 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 game's 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



## KNOW YOUR ROOTS

How people communicated before Twitter and Facebook

**Usenet:** Conceived in 1979 and established in 1980 User Networks (Usenet) is the grandfather of the modern day forum. It is made up of Newsgroups where users can post messages of their own. Usenet also did not have a centralised server, meaning server around the world would update each other making all content available to all users.

**BBS:** Though the history of the Bulletin Board System (BBS) stretches back to the 1970s it was not made popular until the 1990s. Users could dial in with their modem to a BBS system, meaning you were connected to one at a time, unlike the Internet of today where you can move between forums with ease.

**Forums:** The modern day forum had started in the mid-90s when the World Wide Web (W3) took off, enabling users to move freely about the online world and move beyond the text-only domains of Usenet and BBS. Today it is the bastion of the very best and the very worst of the Internet.



[left] Battlecruiser 3000AD. The game that both kickstarted Derek Smart's career in video games and fueled the fires of one of the largest online flame wars ever

A screenshot from Derek Smart's upcoming online shooter Line of Defense



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 presences 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 got 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 Oddysee and Abe's Exoddus for the PlayStation as well as Munch's Oddysee 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

#### YOU HAVE TO EMBRACE THIS NEW SOCIAL STUFF

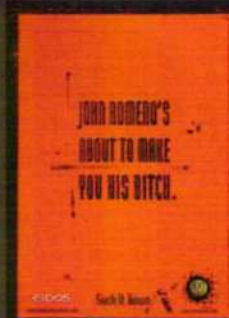
rolling out of the gate and stay in the race, that we just had less fear of speaking out, and I think that tended to stand out in times of controversy."

But before Lanning could get to this position he had to play ball and he reminds people to always be mindful of who is signing your pay cheques.

"I think it's very intimidating to speak out and particularly if you're financially dependent," said Lanning. "If you're dependent, it's just suicidal to speak out. But quite frankly, if you are dependent, it's just not a smart business practice to bite the hand that feeds you. It's also not making you a

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."





The infamous Daikatan 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 apologise for it. You know, when the ad was first presented to me, I knew it was risky, 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 Lorne Lanning.



"Have you seen the ad that Take 2 actually wanted to run for Battlecruiser where it had model Jo Guest sitting on a barstool with a copy of the game between her legs and the text saying 'she really wants it'? I killed that ad and I heard it ran in a limited edition and I called up Take 2 and said 'you guys have to pull it', and back then I was young, foolish and completely over-the-top when it comes to getting pissed about things like that, but they pulled it."

- Derek Smart



"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 also 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 has engages the Oddworld fans 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 their 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 doling 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 \$1million a month," said Lanning. "And that's a lot of pressure to live with. So developers who don't deliver

500M

1B

#### SOCIALISING ON A GLOBAL SCALE

While social media is the catch-all title given to many different websites and services generally speaking Facebook and Twitter are the top of the pile. And with good reason - in March 2012 Twitter had amassed 500 million users while Facebook is expected to hit one billion participants in 2013.



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," said Lanning. "And that message has to be consistent or you'll confuse

[above] EA are currently using social media in an attempt to placate angry Sim City players.

42 Entertainment pushed what was possible with online marketing with the I Love Bees alternative reality game campaign for the Halo 2 launch.



## A GAME OF NUMBERS

Which developer has the highest score

**RANDY PITCHFORD**,  
president of Gearbox  
Software

@DuvalMagic

**222,269**  
followers

**CLIFF BLESZINSKI**,  
co-creator of Unreal and  
Gears of War  
@therealcliffyb

**183,153**  
followers

**JOHN CARMACK**,  
co-founder and technical  
director of id Software  
@ID\_AA\_Carmack

**78,589**  
followers

**KEN LEVINE**,  
creative director and co-  
founder of Irrational Games  
@IGLevine

**50,980**  
followers

**DAVID JAFFE**,  
creator of God of War and  
Twisted Metal  
@davidscottjaffe

**28,477**  
followers

**HIDEO KOJIMA**,  
mastermind of  
Metal Gear Solid  
@Hideo\_Kojima\_EN

**179,469**  
followers (English)

@Kojima\_Hideo

**188,849**  
followers (Japanese)

**TIM SCHAFER**,  
founder of Double Fine  
@TimOfLegend

**113,331**  
followers

**PETER MOLYNEUX**,  
game designer at 22Cans,  
creator of Fable and  
Populous

@pmolyneux

**64,069**  
followers

**FAKE PETER MOLYNEUX**,  
light-hearted parody of the  
real man

@petermolydeux

**59,761**  
followers



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 as 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 stories 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? ☺