



"MAT BRADLEY-TSCHIRGI EXPLORES BOTH GAMING'S
PAST AND, MORE IMPORTANTLY, ITS FUTURE."
- FLINT DILLE, WRITER/GAME DESIGNER

SIMPLY THE BEST

INTERVIEWS WITH VIDEO GAME
DESIGNERS, COMPOSERS
AND SCOFFLAWS

BY MAT BRADLEY-TSCHIRGI

Simply the Best: Interviews with Video Game Designers, Composers and Scofflaws.

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INTRODUCTION

Back when I was wrapping up my BFA in Game Design & Interactivity from the Savannah College of Art & Design, I decided to start conducting interviews for the indie pop culture site E-Boredom founded by my friend Zack Huffman and me. What started as a lark grew into over two dozen interviews with such video game luminaries as Yoshitaka Amano (Final Fantasy), Feargus Urquhart (Fallout 2), and Al Lowe (Leisure Suit Larry). The film director interview books from the early 2000s going through their works one movie at a time were a big inspiration for these interviews in the first place (Lynch on Lynch, Scorsese on Scorsese, Gilliam on Gilliam, etc.).

These interviews were conducted from 2004-2005. It was a lot easier to pitch artists to do interviews back then because there was less competition and less social media. This era of video game history was on the cusp of a major transition. Standard definition full-frame televisions would give way to high definition widescreen TVs. Pricy home theater systems were replaced with compact sound bars that could simulate discrete surround sound at a fraction of the

space and cost. A far superior video game experience for the average home consumer was just around the corner. It was the end of one era, and the beginning of the next.

I have revised the original text for clarity as well as implementing a heap of grammar and spelling fixes. Interviews are presented in alphabetical order by last name of the interview subject; in cases where they do not have a last name, I go by the first letter of their first name. All of the interviews were conducted via email or AOL Instant Messenger except for Inon Zur, which was conducted via phone.

It has been an absolute pleasure polishing up these interviews for your current enjoyment. To paraphrase the late Douglas Adams, "share and enjoy."

Mat Bradley-Tschirgi

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ERNEST ADAMS

Ernest Adams' book *Break Into the Game Industry* is full of advice for various career paths, including what college courses to take for different fields. It's a unique resource for aspiring computer artists or game designers wishing to enter the industry.

Adams also leads workshops around the world on game mechanics and game design. He also consults for various companies, assisting them in the design phases. In this interview, we discussed the lack of games marketed to females to the touchy issue of abandonware.

E-BOREDOM: What is the most immersive game you've played?

ERNEST ADAMS: I've recently come to the conclusion that there are three types of immersion (and maybe more): tactical, strategic, and narrative.

Tactical immersion is the second-by-second experience of play, and is deepest in really fast action games. Being immersed tactically is what people call being in the zone or in the groove in action games. The most immersive tactical game I've played was Tetris, which can't be beaten for simple elegance of design; it is the purest action game I know of, and I consider it to be a work of art. Another name for the zone that I've seen used is the Tetris Trance. Second to it would be Interstate '76, which I thought was a blast... An action game that even I could play!

Strategic immersion is the player's involvement in working out a path to victory. I'm not terribly good at turn-based strategy games like chess because I don't have that facility to look ahead for several moves. I think the most strategically immersed I've ever been was while playing the BASIC game Super Star Trek, an unlicensed text-only Star Trek simulator popular in the 70s and 80s. I played it a lot in college and got really good at it. In terms of modern games, it would have to be Dungeon Keeper which always had something interesting going on. I also really enjoyed an odd little game called Strange Adventures in Infinite Space by Digital Eel.

Narrative immersion is getting involved with the storyline, and for that, it's imperative that you have good characters and narration. Without a doubt, the most narratively immersed I've ever been was playing Planescape: Torment. However, I also have to add that I was once quite startled playing the original text Adventure (Colossal Cave) very late at night by myself when suddenly it printed on the screen, "You hear footsteps in the darkness behind you." I

must have been really into it, because this seriously creeped me out. I started typing really fast trying to run away from them!

E-BOREDOM: What was the first computer game you played where you felt an emotional attachment to one of the characters?

ERNEST ADAMS: I've been playing computer games since 1970, so you're asking me to go a long way back! The earliest adventure games didn't give the avatar any character to speak of, so they don't really count. People always talk about Floyd the robot in Planetfall, but I have to admit that I've never played it. I guess the earliest character that I can remember thinking of as emotionally appealing was Bobbin Threadbare from LucasArts' graphic adventure Loom. Bobbin was brave, loyal, resourceful, and witty without being a smart-aleck. In addition to being visually gorgeous for its time, the game was suffused with a wistful sadness as he searched in vain for his mother. You can't beat a musical score written by Tchaikovsky to set an emotional tone.

More recently, I developed a sort of fatherly affection for April Ryan, the naïve young protagonist in The Longest Journey. April is about half my age, so I can't really think of her as my avatar. That was an unexpected feeling, to realize that my relationship to her was not one of identification, nor even friendship, but paternal protectiveness.

By far the most interesting and engaging characters I've ever experienced in a computer game were in Planescape: Torment. Annah demonstrated such loyalty to my avatar, that I played that game with a specific goal of keeping her friendship regardless of what else it cost. At the same time, some of the other characters in my party were extremely weird and often downright dangerous. Like most brilliantly innovative games, Planescape didn't get nearly the recognition it deserved.

E-BOREDOM: On your site, you mention that "the writing in most computer games is terrible." What is the worst example of writing you have encountered in a computer game?

ERNEST ADAMS: The worst writing I have ever encountered in any game, bar none, was in Resident Evil. And the acting was even worse than the writing. It was so bad, in fact, that I had to quit after the second or third room... I simply couldn't stand to listen to it any longer! By that time, I hated the protagonists so much I was rooting for the monsters.

E-BOREDOM: You often argue that more games should be made for the female market. Why is this demographic being ignored and what sort of games do you think would appeal more to women?

ERNEST ADAMS: The person who should really answer this question is Sheri Graner-Ray, lead game designer at Sony Online Entertainment and the author of Gender-Inclusive Game Design. However, I'll give you my top-line thoughts anyway. The demographic is being ignored because of market inertia. Publisher marketing departments don't know how to market to women. They don't want to take the trouble to learn because the vast majority of game developers are male. Developers have always had a bad habit of making games for themselves, and so long as they continue to do that, their customers will necessarily resemble them: young adult males. This will improve if we can begin to attract more women into development. The purchasing ratio for The Sims was reportedly 50-50 male and female; to no one's surprise, the ratio on the development team was 50-50 as well.

As for making games that appeal to women, it is NOT true that we need to make a line of "pink" games. That was tried during the abortive "games-for-girls" effort in the late 1990s. For the most part, the results were embarrassingly bad: poor value for the money when they weren't actively insulting to girls' intelligence. Rather, what we need to do is make slight adjustments to existing genres. Research shows that women don't like to be thrown in at the deep end; they prefer to know what is expected of them before they begin a task. This means decent instructions and tutorials, not the learn-by-dying approach that is so common in games today. It also means avatars who aren't boy teen masturbation fantasies. When a game's avatar is a sexpot in a chainmail bikini, it screams "Not for women!" to anyone who sees it.

We don't have to abandon female heroines (both women AND men like playing them), just make them reasonably realistic.

On the whole, women like decent storylines and game mechanics that reward intelligence. They find brute-force and trial-and-error approaches a boring waste of time, and they aren't motivated by the prospect of getting their initials on the brag board. Make games for smart people, and you'll attract more women.

E-BOREDOM: What are some good examples of video games where violence isn't necessary to complete the game and how is gameplay different with a non-violent objective?

ERNEST ADAMS: First, I think it's worth distinguishing between "violence" and "conflict." Chess has conflict, but you wouldn't really call taking an opponent's piece "violent." Of course, in Battle Chess a gratuitous element of violence is overlaid in order to add visual interest to the game, but serious chess players would consider Battle Chess to be a joke. I don't think wargames played with cardboard counters are "violent" either. So, it's perfectly possible to have a game about a violent subject which doesn't actually pander to the juvenile player's desire for blood and guts.

However, there are many, many games in which violence plays no role at all. All the sports games except for boxing and wrestling are effectively non-violent. Driving and many flying games are non-violent. Construction and

management simulators of various sorts (Sim City, Capitalism, Roller Coaster Tycoon) are all non-violent. Puzzle games like The Incredible Machine, and many adventure games are non-violent. Most MMORPGs can be played in a non-violent fashion, although they reward violence more highly than other kinds of behavior. Even Sonic the Hedgehog was non-violent since you were actually breaking open robots to release your friends trapped inside.

In fact, I would say that the majority of gameplay types do not have a violent objective; it just so happens that the violent games get the most press, the biggest ads, and the most complaints in Congress. It tends to induce a little less adrenaline, perhaps, since we're programmed to respond viscerally to blood and gore. It can still be exciting, though. Ask any player who's at 4th and 2 in the Super Bowl, four points down and one second left on the clock.

Games without conflict are intrinsically different from those that include conflict, whether violent or not. They offer different challenges: exploration, economic management, maintaining social relationships, puzzle-solving, and races against time. Then there's the elements of construction in games like Theme Park and self-expression in RPGs, both of which are often overlooked as a part of the way we entertain people. I've heard of people spending hours tuning and tweaking their character before they even start into an RPG. This is part of the reason that dying in an RPG or MMORPG is so painful! You've invested time, energy, and, above all, creativity in your avatar. If you're going to get killed all the time, you might as well play with a generic character so it doesn't hurt so much.

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