

Game On

An interview with Seamus Blackley

CHRIS DAVISON

Seamus Blackley is head of the Games Department at Creative Artists Agency (CAA), where his role is to define and execute CAA's global strategy for representing many of the world's most respected and successful game creators. Under Blackley's leadership, the Games Department specializes in securing and negotiating game production deals with publishers, financiers, film and television studios, and networks, as well as building and advising development companies to give game designers greater creative and financial control. I interviewed Seamus in December 2007 to discuss physics, social networking, in-game advertising and convergence.

Q: Can you tell us about your background? What made you want to work in entertainment?

- My background is actually in music and physics. My degree is in high energy physics and I guess I've always wanted to work in entertainment because games are entertainment and I've always wanted to make games. Games were the natural combination for me between my love of technology and science. The fact that I love to paint and draw and make music - there's this wonderful convergence of creativity of all these things coming together and their natural expression in games, that's what's so compelling about it.

Q: What was your biggest challenge while you were developing the XBOX?

- The biggest challenge was that Microsoft is not an entertainment company, Microsoft is a platform company, a technology company. You can think of many things that Microsoft is but entertainment is not really the first thing that comes to mind. I was dealing with the mindset of Microsoft executives who were really excited about the prospects of a project but not familiar with the gaming business in terms of gaming customers or providing a service for a lot of the features they were selling to the customer. The purpose is to deliver entertainment value but a device cannot sell just on its features, it has to sell on the promise of delivering the experience. This different mindset was also an advantage in the sense that it let Microsoft enter the space in a way that was unique and cool and fresh.

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Q: MySpace and Facebook are hot but isn't video gaming also a form of social networking?

- I heard an editorial today on NPR in which the guy stated that social networking was less of a definition and more of a feature. Gamers have always done that sort of social networking and it's interesting to see sort of the general population start to emulate gamers a little bit. There was a social networking site for gamers called Flektor. They wanted to see if they could use game technology practices and be successful in that space, and they were - they sold it for more than 20 million bucks to MySpace. Social networking is one of those things like motion capture or other game technologies that are discovered by the outside world, who thinks that they're new and fresh. After listening to that NPR editorial today I would agree to some extent that social networking sites are like features searching for their platform. I don't think there will be anything five years from now, any service or software available that doesn't have social networking components. The punchline to this joke is that the average person is a gamer now. The only people who don't understand that I think are for some reason the people who run the media, who generate the public perception in the United States that there are gamers and then there are other people. If you go to Best Buy or Target or if you go online then games are totally pervasive and totally integrated into everyone's lives so this artificial delineation of who is a gamer and who is not is going to start to become more ludicrous with time.

Q: Do you think that a large media company will buy EA or another top game maker?

- It's hard to say. I'd like to think that EA will end up buying a large media company, because from my standpoint, I look at games as being a really effective medium and in our experience at CAA we've had tremendous success and created some really neat things by combining creative people from games, from movies and from music. The fields just sort of naturally collaborate with one another to create new types of entertainment. The wonderful thing about games is that they combine every aspect of traditional entertainment into one sort of whole interactive experience, it's a working thesis that we have been pushing to continue to support, nurture and grow creative opportunities for game designers. These people who work in this medium are the ones who can take entertainment forward. They can take the ideas of participating entertainment forward into whatever it is they're going to become next and it is tremendously exciting. I would really hate to see the potential of that in any way be subjugated to a linear media company. Frankly, the people who run the studios would probably agree, such as in Warner Brothers or Fox or Universal where they're all really pushing interactive divisions, where they are financing games and starting to talk about building games at the same time as movies. It's just a short throw from there to a world in which the CEOs understand that they should be financing games in the same way that they are financing movies and picking creative people to do that in the same way they pick creative people to do movies. If you talk to the average guy walking into Best Buy, he's not seeing a huge amount of difference between buying a movie and buying a game at the end of the day. It's that audience demand that drives convergence, no high-minded concept in some executive's fabulously well-trained brain is going to drive convergence, what will drive convergence is the fact that people walking into the Best Buy pay their salary and they expect to be entertained in increasingly facile ways. If you look at trends in the industry through that filter I think you'll start to see a lot of things make sense. It's all driven by the fact that consumers know what's up.

Q: In terms of video games, what has been your biggest seller ever and what made it a hit?

- It's either Halo or Guitar Hero, and the simple truth of the matter is that what makes a hit is that they blow the audience away. It's a game that does something that makes you feel special, makes you feel awesome and takes you somewhere magical to let you do something incredible. That ability to transport the audience to that spot is exactly what is special about game designers, which is why we love them and why we support them. It's totally analogous to movies and the ability to tell a story, the ability of somebody to design a world that's designed for game playing that communicates to the audience and is meaningful to the audience. A game in many ways is a story that you tell yourself. It's very powerful, because it's very intimate and that at the end of the day is the reason that there's so much concern about the content of games because people rightly understand how powerful the experience can be and how personal it is. Rather than seeing it as a liability I see that as a great strength of games and the concerns over game content are similar to a lot of the concerns about rock 'n roll or television or the telephone back when. It's a generational gap, if you told people in the 1950s that the President of the United States would one day have a rock band and he would play with his rock band during his inauguration, they would've never believed you but it happened in the 1990s.

Q: What might the next level or form of gaming look like?

- I think that the next level and form of gaming is one in which the art of game design becomes paramount, and the most important aspect of how people choose what to buy. It's always been the case that the media believe games will sell better based on technology. They're often surprised when things like The Sims or Guitar Hero come along because they're quite low-tech. Although the amount technology and skill and craftsmanship and creativity involved in making something like Guitar Hero is quite extraordinary since the game is built by a group of 30 or 40 M.I.T. PhD's and the game is quite a simple thing, an elegant thing because of their skill. People wrongly assume that there's some sort of technological reason that some games sell better than other games, and you have to look no further than the aisle of a retailer today. All the games on the next-gen systems look beautiful, they look the same but people buy them because of the content, because of the quality of the experience that they provide. So I feel pretty strongly, as do most people who are in the game business today, that increasing the quality and innovation of the content for the audience is key.

Q: What do you, Ophir and Jenna do on a daily basis?

- The way the CAA works, which is pretty unique, which is what drew me to the place is that it's a very collaborative culture in the sense that if you need help in understanding something about a movie deal or something about how writers work or how a certain kind of deal might be put together, you can call people from many different parts of the same company and have a very diverse team. What we do on a daily basis is no different from what any other agent does if they work with writers or movie directors or actors. We represent very high-end game designers who are incredibly successful and very creative. Our focus is on helping them to create their dreams, to work with a team to find ways for them to create the projects that they want to create and to do so in a way that represents great business. Our focus is on developing new creative franchise ideas and offering them to game publishers and financiers and distributors as a great business opportunity. Something that will make money for everyone,

something that will allow everyone to create their dream to find ways to create the projects that they want to create and to do so in ways that are on their terms while also structuring good deals. Solid business around new ideas.

Q: What are the prospects for mobile gaming?

- Prospects for mobile gaming go back to Sumner Redstone's quote that Content Is King. When you see high-quality games, high-quality game experiences then that device will become successful. Nintendo DS has incredible high quality games that are really good and so it has sold very well. When people complain about the mobile game business or they wonder what's going to happen with casual games, what they have to do is look at the quality of the content and know where to focus. It's beyond graphics, it's true that mobile graphics are not great but I mean, there are numerous examples of games that look terrible but have done incredibly well since there's something about the game that gamers find beautiful. It's not about the visual fidelity but rather about the quality of the experience. The special thing about the Nintendo DS is that Nintendo took a lot of care to create a situation in which a lot of game developers could put a lot of care into making very high quality games which the audience has responded to. It's frustrating when people talk about mobile games not taking off because the technology is not there yet when the fact of the matter is that mobile games don't take off because they suck. When the games are unsatisfying, the idea that someone would buy something just because it runs well on a platform even though it's not entertaining at all is just ludicrous. It's what happens when people attempt to analyze games in terms of the technology business and not the entertainment business. When you think gaming as an entertainment business then all these trends make sense.

Q: What are your thoughts on virtual worlds such as Second Life?

- Second Life is confusing to me since they have excellent PR and yet when I go there is never anyone around. When I go to corporate sponsored events I never see anyone around either. I kind of wonder what's going on, I wonder where the entertainment value is - there's social networking and then there's entertainment. It's entertaining to decorate your MySpace page in the same way as it's entertaining to decorate your house for Christmas. It's cool and fun everybody does it and it's interesting but it's not the same sort of directed entertainment like a movie or a video game in the sense that you have an entertainer actively entertaining the audience, actively providing a creative experience and involving the audience for entertainment. Virtual worlds exist in a separate sort of a place in the sense that they're sort of the next step of social networking. The next step of the chat room sort of thing, which is really interesting but is not the same kind of directed entertainment experience that you know that games or movies or television are.

Q: What are the prospects for in-game or in-world advertising and product placement?

- Advertising in passive media like television is a totally different proposition than advertising in active media like games. There are only a very few games that admit brand integration- if you look at games from Halo to World of Warcraft to Grand Theft Auto it's difficult to imagine for various reasons. With all those games, how could brand placement or product placement advertising be integrated into the game play? Advertising works in television because you pause the entertainment then show an ad that doesn't really fit in the context of the entertainment but in gaming it's different. The conceit of in-game advertising is that games are somehow not a valid form of media or

expression like television, so therefore it's okay to go ahead and put discordant images out of context as advertising in a game. I see resistance against that not only from the game design community but amongst gamers as well so it'll be interesting to see how it washes out, to see if a natural way can be found to integrate advertising effectively into the sort of everyday gaming experience. Aside from a few cases in which the reality of a present-day game is increased by having users use brand objects from that game, objects that realistically would have been in that game anyway, it's hard to make a case for anything else. It would be weird and awkward and terrible to have some products in some settings. The question always arises, like when we're talking to Coca-Cola to find what will be the right way to integrate them into a game. The answer is not to try to put a Coke can in every game, since that's not respectful of games or gamers. The answer is to focus on the lifestyle of gamers, to integrate the brands and products in ways that enhance gamers' experiences and therefore build positive brand images. Until more advertising executives are gamers, until gamers become more senior in the ad-buying companies you're not going to see people refining these practices and finding a balance that respects the gamers and the games. What we've seen so far are the early days, with some failures and areas for improvement.

Q: What sorts of integration between games, TV and film do you see going forward?

- I see the creative people from video games, TV and films working together collaboratively on bigger and more interesting projects. The only type of convergence that matters is the convergence that is directed toward entertaining the audience better. As creative people learn each other's crafts and work together to create better experiences we'll see what audiences want, what they expect to change. The future is one in which the creative people who drive all these media continue to inspire each other to try and do new things and collaborate and teach each other how to better master each new digital frontier.