Interview with Warren Spector

Conducted by Carl Therrien

Carl Therrien: In 2007, the Library of Congress made a significant move to integrate video games in their collection. Through a project set forth by Henry Lowood, ten video games were selected to be part of the "game canon." New games are now added to the collection more systematically; game publishers have to give a copy of the game to the Library of Congress to complete the copyright process.

If you had to go through this type of process, what selection criteria would you push forward? Is there a place for underdogs and lesser-known games in such a process?

Warren Spector: I'm thrilled that the institution is taking an interest in videogames. In the long run, I think everyone, both in the industry and at the Library itself, will see the importance of this recognition.

Having said that, if I were on the committee, the first thing I'd push for is a very clear definition of what the Library hoped to achieve with the growing collection. The list of games you select would vary greatly depending on the definition you select.

To get an idea what I'm talking about, play the "desert island" game. You're stuck on a desert island and can only take ten games with you – what are they? To answer the question, you have to decide what criteria you want to use.

- ▶ Do you take your ten favourite games (i.e., the ones you liked best when you first played them)?

- ▶ Do you take the ten games you could play forever (i.e., the ones that provide a new or enjoyable experience each time you play)?

- ▶ Do you take the ten games that had the most influence on the development of the medium (i.e., the ones that changed the way other developers worked or the kinds of games they made or changed the expectations of players)?

Now, as far as underdogs go, honestly, I don't think there's room for underappreciated art games or serious games no one's ever heard of. Someday? Absolutely. But right now, at the very beginning of the process of preservation and celebration, you have to go with the big guns, I think.

CT: Providing access to all the software preserved at the Library of Congress and other institutions supposes a lot of efforts and resources. The acquisition, installation and maintenance of all the relevant platforms involves very specific knowledge, especially when it comes to early personal computers. In many cases, users would require assistance in order to experience the software. Do you think it is the responsibility of public institutions to provide such an extensive access to the original objects?

WS: I don't think it's at all critical that the public at large have total access to games and materials. That's a nice goal, but not a necessary one. It's also likely impossible to achieve.

What IS critical is that materials – games, hardware, production materials, marketing materials… all of it – be preserved and made accessible to historians and critics who will, someday, tell the story of how we got from wherever we are to wherever we're going to be. We are too close to the material to know what will and will not be important, so must preserve all that we can.

Public access is important, but preservation even in the absence of such broad access is critical. It's not as if just anyone can walk into a research institution and put his or her hands on history. No reason for us to be different – either in terms of access or in terms of treasuring the artefacts of the past.

CT: The video game industry right now is risky business, with a vast majority of games not recouping the initial investment. At the same time, institutions such as museums and universities are under financial stress. In this context, where do you think the resources necessary for game preservation should come from?

WS: Wow, I wish I knew! So far, it seems as if a lot of the money is coming from angel investors – people in and out of the game business or the game playing community who care enough to donate money, materials and time. For now, as you say, funding is a problem everywhere. All we can do is keep beating the bushes to flush out potential investors.

Frankly, one of my biggest frustrations is how anti-philanthropic many moneyed developers are. There's money for flashy cars and mansions but not for charity – or, in our case, games preservation. That's just sad.

CT: Do you see the "monetization of retro gaming" through official channels (i.e. buying virtual copies of older games on digital distribution platforms) as a viable solution to these financial problems?

WS: I don't see any possibility of large scale retro game monetization… no… For starters, I doubt there's a big enough audience to provide enough money to provide sufficient funding to solve financial problems.

Having said that, I don't think the dollars and cents of retro-monetization strategies are the real problem. The real problem is that the publishers who own trademarks and copyright will never let it happen. You'd think they wouldn't care about properties and games they haven't exploited in years, but you'd be wrong. My experience of trying to resurrect old properties can be summed up in a single sentence. No publisher has ever said it explicitly, but their message is

clear – "If I own it, it has value." They act as if that were gospel and won't let loose of much, even in the service of a good cause.

Of course, that's just been my experience and my observation. I could be wrong. I hope I'm wrong. But, regardless, the critical element in monetizing preservation by making old games available depends on finding the rights holders (often more difficult than you might expect) and then convincing them to let loose of things they don't want to risk losing.

CT: Technologies die, corporations too. Most of the video game hardware and storage media will become "broken beyond repair", and unlikely to be remanufactured in their original form in the future. What are your thoughts on emulation? Do you consider the translation of classics on newer platforms, with different audiovisual technologies and interfaces, a travesty of the original experience? Considering the great disparity of these technologies to begin with, in the world of personal computers at the very least, do you think such attachment to the original experience is illusory in itself?

WS: There are really a few questions here. Before I get to them, let me agree with your "broken beyond repair" comment. Hardware and media deteriorate and the ability to repair it becomes more and more difficult with the passage of time. Emulation seems like a great answer. I'm a huge supporter. But I'm also a fan and a history buff, not a rights holder who sees emulation as just a way to compromise and, possibly, lose the rights to properties the courts perceive as insufficiently protected. Emulation should be a bigger part of the preservation equation, but I fear it won't be.

Now, to your second question – translation of classics to new platforms – there are two ways to approach that option. As a player, if not as a purist or historian, I'm a fan of both.

First, there's the option of recreating the look, sounds and feel of the original. That's terrific. It's hard to imagine why anyone wouldn't want to do that (other than the publishers again, not to sound like a broken record).

Second, there's the idea of updating old games – updating graphics, sound, UI. As a player, I love this, too. It doesn't seem like much of a preservation solution, but it's a ton of fun when you get your hands on an old favourite and see it dressed in modern garb.

CT: You've spoken fondly of the Disney archives and the creative opportunities it opened for your team at Junction Point working on *Epic Mickey*. You have clearly expressed the benefits of such in-house company archives. Why do you think other studios are, for the most part, still oblivious to such benefits? The unstable nature of the industry also seems responsible for the destruction of relevant material (Vivendi didn't care for the Sierra archives when they acquired the studio, for instance). How could we incite the industry to realize the commercial value – let alone the cultural value! – of preserving its own legacy? And beyond in-house archives, do you think it is possible that more relevant artefacts (design documents, source code) would be given to preservation institutions in such a secretive and competitive creative culture?

WS: I'm pretty comfortable saying the Disney Archives – the most remarkable collection of its kind that I know of – exists only because Walt Disney himself wanted to preserve his, and his company's history. I've spent most of my life fighting the urge to give in to the "great man" theory of history, but in this case, I think it's the right answer. Whether from ego or pragmatism, Walt saw the value in preserving history, so history was preserved. I'm certain there was more to the story than that, but, you know, when the legend becomes the fact, print the legend and all…

Why don't we see similar things happening in video games? I guess you could say we don't have any great men. I don't really believe that, of course, but we do have a lot of people and companies that are so narrowly focused on what comes next, in a medium where everything changes every five years or so, thanks to hardware advances no other medium has had to deal with, they don't think about history much. In that way, they… we… are not so different from most of the non-Disney folks in Hollywood. Sure, David O. Selznick and

Gloria Swanson were packrats, but folks like John Ford and others didn't see any value in the ephemera associated with their work. They tossed it.

Frankly, I think it's going to take a lot of work and an ongoing effort to get video game companies to see the value in the past, to see that the expense associated with preservation is a good way to spend money that could be spent on new product. I'm not sure developers and publishers will ever see the value of internal archives. And I'm not sure it's sensible to encourage them to do so – we want access to materials – limited access as I already said, and if the developers and publishers are in control of historical materials we'll have to deal with *very* limited access. Worse, in some ways, we'll have to deal with inconsistent preservation approaches. And can you imagine the chaos of each company cataloguing materials in whatever manner they choose? It'd be crazy.

The real answer, I think, is to bug the developers and publishers to endow regional centers of preservation and to donate materials. In that way, materials could be catalogued and preserved in a consistent manner. Man, am I a dreamer! Pardon me while I put my cynical mask back on.

CT: As a producer for many major projects at Origin Systems and Ion Storm, you had the opportunity to overview all the aspects involved in the existence of a video game: technological research and development, game design, marketing strategies, etc. From your experience, what documents / artefacts generated during these processes are the most important to preserve?

WS: My varied experience notwithstanding, I think you're asking a question no one can really answer today. There's simply no way of telling what future generations of fans, scholars, historians and critics will find interesting, necessary or important. As a grad student studying the history and meaning-making strategies of television, I found the old show, *Happy Days*, the most interesting program to work with. I doubt many people would view *Happy Days* as great art. I did. My Masters Thesis was on Warner Brothers cartoons. What's important about that?

But that's all high level stuff – important, but not exactly what you were asking. You want to know what materials are most important to preserve? I'll tell you. *All* of them. If you're studying the evolution of design, you want and need design documents, emails, test data… If you're studying the marketing of games, you need box designs, ad mock-ups, maybe even t-shirts (or Oswald the Lucky Rabbit ears!)… If you're studying the business of games, you want budgets, schedules and so on. And if you're studying the work of a single developer, you might want his or her report cards and elementary school drawings!

There is no such thing as the "most important" thing to preserve. Preserve as much of it as possible, I say.

CT: Can you give us a concrete example of documents used in the production of some of the major games you worked on that would have been especially relevant to preserve and study?

WS: You're really not going to let me off the hook on this "most important thing to preserve" thing, are you? Okay, I'll answer, but bear in mind that all you're getting here is what I think is most interesting… right now… given my biases and interests.

That having been said, I always think it's interesting (and fun) to look not just at a single concept or design document, but at a series of them, over time. Seeing how a game evolves over time is fascinating. Frankly, it's fascinating even when you're in the middle of the development process that forces an evolution of ideas. How do you adjust to budget changes, release date changes, team capabilities and interests without losing the spark, the core idea that made you want to make a game in the first place?

Specifically, from my own work, I guess I'd pick *Deus Ex*. That game changed in pretty much every detail over time, thanks to team input, engine constraints, team interests, trying things that ended up not working… But for all the changes, the finished game reflected with almost uncanny precision the original vision of a game I imagined five years before we shipped. To get the

full picture, you'd need to access schedules, recruiting paperwork, emails, concept art and builds. But you could at least get a tiny, view-through-a-crack-in-the-wall view of how the process of change affected *Deus Ex* by looking at the dozens of design document drafts.

CT: In another life, you have studied to become a film critic and have taught classes on cinema. Cinema studies have developed critical and theoretical readings of the medium's history, as we can see in the academic works of Noel Burch, Tom Gunning, Youssef Ishagpour and André Gaudreault among many others. Similar work is emerging when it comes to the history of games. For instance, *Digital Play* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003) puts emphasis on the concept of "militarized masculinity"; Tristan Donovan's *Replay* (Yellow Ant, 2010) tries to delineate aesthetic schools such as the French touch and English surrealism. What do you think of such readings of history?

WS: I think we're still very much in the early days of games criticism. We live in a world of reviews, purely functional and aimed at enthusiasts, and, at the same time, in a world of hardcore, academic, no-one-but-academics-can-understand-or-care work.

What we're lacking is a more mainstream, accessible body of critical thought about games. For my money, we need a lot less Noel Burch, Peter Wollen and Christian Metz and a lot more Andrew Sarris, Robert Warshow, James Agee, Manny Farber and David Thomson.

Academics tend to talk only to each other, in language that seems wilfully designed to obfuscate and keep normal people out. Reviewers tend to talk only to fans and, again, keep normal people out. That leaves an obvious, gaping hole in our critical corpus – serious, popular criticism, accessible to those normal folks everyone currently engaged in the study of games seems intent on pushing away.

Where's our damn Andrew Sarris!

175

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CT: Technological innovation and industrial landmarks often act as period markers in video game history books. Information on platforms, game engines, major game studios and industrial structure has been documented through journalistic accounts and offer a reassuring "fact-based" vision of history. The progressive technical mastery and industrial growth seem to naturally invite us to build overarching glorifying narratives. Yet the culture of play goes beyond the technological and industrial aspects. Do you perceive major turning points in the evolution of this culture throughout the development of video games? Should we rather speak of overlapping paradigms in game design and game playing, which becomes more or less preeminent at various moments in history and locations around the world?

WS: First, I'd argue we haven't done a great, or at least comprehensive, job of capturing the history of video games – that "fact-based" vision you talk about. Obviously, we've done a better job of that than we have of critical analysis of how games make meaning, what sorts of meaning they can and do make, how meaning and meaning-making conventions have changed over time and how the culture of games and game players has changed. There's a ton of work to be done in those areas.

I think it's fine to think in terms of overlapping paradigms in design and play – it's overly simplistic to assume that media grow, change and mature in discrete, linear chunks. However, just beginning to think about the critical and historical changes in games culture, broadly speaking, is a good and necessary thing. If someone wants to think about discrete eras, design paradigms and player profiles, I'm fine with that. We just need to start thinking about the games medium as something more than a way for kids to waste time that could be better spent reading about or living life (as if books are better than games in some cosmic sense and games aren't a part of life!)

CT: You have contributed to the creation of games that are known to push the boundaries and merge mechanics from different genres (such as *Wing Commander*, *Ultima Underworld*, *System Shock, Deus Ex*). Recently, academic books focussing on genres have emerged (*Horror Video Games*, McFarland,

2009; *Guns, Grenades, and Grunts: First-Person Shooter Games*, Continuum Publishing, 2012). Considering the fluidity of exchanges and unstable nature of genres, do you think it is problematic to approach video game history through the study of smaller corpus defined by genre?

WS: I've thought about genre in games so much over the years it makes my head hurt! As you point out, my design approach is dominated by a self-conscious melding of "genres," but think about that for a minute.

In most (all?) other media, genres are defined by content alone. Westerns are set in the American West, feature guys on horseback chasing down other guys on horseback, guys protecting school marms, Indian attacks, cattlemen vs. farmers and so on. War films, gangster films, horror films… all are defined by their content. Even the larger categories – "musicals, "comedies," "melodramas" and the like – are content-driven, though with some formal differentiators as well.

Games clearly feature content that can be classified by their content, but I'd argue any useful definition of genre in games must put play patterns at the forefront. Certainly that's what I've always tried to do in thwarting player (and publisher!) expectations. *Deus Ex* is a genre piece to the extent that it's a near future science fiction game, but there are lots of those out there for players to enjoy. The genre-blending that, I hope, distinguishes *Deus Ex* from all those other games, is the tripartite approach to gameplay (i.e., you can play the game as a shooter, a stealth game or as a roleplaying game dominated by interaction with non-player characters).

If *Deus Ex* had combined science fiction and western content conventions, it would have been ridiculous. Game genres have to be defined by gameplay first, and only secondarily by content.

CT: What are some of the games you feel have not received the necessary attention in order to reflect on their influence in the history of the medium?

WS: Huh. Interesting question… I could rattle off a list of games I think of as "influential," but most of them have been recognized as such and given plenty of attention. Let me think about some unsung heroes…

Okay, start with a Japanese RPG – *Suikoden*. That game influenced a lot of us, in terms of how we approach player choice, the power of customization (of a home base, in the cause of *Suikoden*) and the power of changing gameplay based on what you do or don't do as you play (e.g., shifting information, quests and capabilities based on which characters you help and which you don't).

Next, I'd go with Paul Neurath's *Space Rogue*. That game combined first-person space combat simulation, orthogonal RPG play and simple arcade gameplay. That game taught many lessons to the few who paid attention upon its release.

I'm not sure it qualifies as a game that didn't receive enough attention, but I think it's interesting the way *Ico* changed the way a lot of developers thought, and think, about games. There have been "save the princess" games since the dawn of time. But *Ico* was the first to make that idea visceral and personal. The power of touch… of your character holding the virtual hand of another… the need to balance protection of a character slower and seemingly weaker than you are, with the need to explore a world and battle enemies… I mean, are you serious? The creativity required to conceive such a game is mind-blowing. And ever since, it seems like every acclaimed game features some variation of the guy-accompanied-by-girl-in-need-of-saving scenario. That screams "influence" to me.

At risk of seeming self-serving, I'd throw *Ultima Underworld* into the mix. All credit to the Blue Sky (later Looking Glass) team for creating the first real-time, 3D, fully texture-mapped, first-person game… ever. And even if you want to dispute that, it was *clearly* the first roleplaying game with that set of characteristics. In a sense, every first-person RPG that's followed owes a debt to *Underworld*. I wonder how many developers realize that. Given our lack of respect for history, would that surprise anyone?