The real world context: The changing Australian games industry

The Australian games industry during the 80s and 90s was typified by small teams and some very successful games. The late 90s saw a growth of studio numbers and activity.

In 2005 there were 10 studios. By 2007 there were 45. The majority employed under 10 people. However 9 out of 10 depended on export or international connections or ownership.

The late 90s and the GFC saw a number of the larger studios close and the opening of new opportunities in the mobile and casual areas and the rise of the small indie developer: the return of the small agile team. We also see a change in the understanding of what a “game” can be.

The 48 hour game making challenge

Let us search, instead, for an epistemology of practice implicit in the artistic, intuitive processes which some practitioners do bring to situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflict. (Schön, 1983, p40)

The Game On program and the 48 hour game making challenge was born out of the idea of creative community; finding, networking, supporting and inspiring the people behind the face of an industry, those in the midst of the machine and those intending to join. In recent times the Australian games industry finds itself at a pivotal point, one which offers an important opportunity to nurture new emerging forms of game making, where the old industry models have proven to be unsustainable and indeed, inappropriate. The 48hr challenge generates passion and creativity in design and process, providing a crucible of engagement where we see the social and the technological aspects, new working models of the design and creation process at work.

The challenge is in finding a means to visualise the elements in order to make sense of our insights and experiences.

The 48hr ingredients: a large space, working against the clock, game developers, technology and passion.

The project

On the face of it, the 48 hour challenge is simple: we provide a space and infrastructure (from basic food to internet access) and our teams arrive with their computers, to be ‘locked in’ for 48 hours over a single weekend and make a game according to the parameters we set for the challenge. When it is all over, we invite local industry professionals to come and judge the entries, the teams invite their friends and families and we have a BBQ and play the games. In 2011 we had 21 (120 odd individuals) teams and they made 21 playable games. We have two leagues in the challenge: an indie league made up of tertiary students and non games professionals, and a pro-league made up of members of the Australian games industry, who do this for a living. Every year the event is heavily documented and recorded via social networking (facebook, blogs, twitter, phone tracking).

The raw data collected has given us opportunity to start a commentary on the “something special” happening in the 48hr.

Illuminating the 48hr:

We have always felt that “something very special” was happening in the 48hr and other similar game jams. This “something” is more than the intensity and challenge of the experience, although this certainly has appeal for the participants. We had an intuition that these intense 48 hour game jams exposed something pertinent to the changing shape of the Australian games industry where we see the demise of the late 20th century large studio - the “Night Elf” model and the growth of the small independent model. There are a large number of wider economic and cultural factors around this evolution but our interest is specifically in the change from “industry” to “creative industry” and the growth of games as a cultural media and art practice. If we are correct in our intuition, then illuminating this something also has important ramifications for those courses which teach game and interaction design and development.

Rather than undertake a formal ethno-methodological approach, we decided to track as many of the actors in the event as possible. We documented the experience (Keith Nowak’s beautiful B&W photography), the individual and their technology (IOGraph mouse tracking), the teams as a group (Time lapse photography) and movement tracking throughout the whole space (Blue tooth phone tracking).

Visualising the actors: People, process and technology

An event like the 48hr forces participants’ attention onto the process as much as the outcome. As one professional taking part in a challenge for the first time observed: there are three paths in the genesis from idea to finished work: the path that focuses on mechanics, the path that focuses on team structure and roles, and the path that focuses on the idea; the spirit – and the more successful teams put the spirit of the work first and foremost. The spirit drives the adaptation, it becomes improvisation. As Schön says: “Improvisation consists on varying, combining and recombining a set of figures within the schema which bounds and gives coherence to the performance.” (1983, p55).

Mapping the actors: the creative teams, process and technology

The time lapse photography of the teams in action is perhaps the most revealing. An expectation, on our part, was that this would be boring, a bird’s eye view of a group of people sitting working (and sleeping) at their computers for 48hrs. However, what the tracking reveals is continuous movement between the actors; the individuals seem to literally dance from their own chairs to look at another's work and back again, (both within their own team and across teams) – a very social and collegiate affair. The resultant images give credence to Schön’s notion of improvisation but the actors in this display are Latour’s, as we can actually watch the perpetual interplay between the individuals and the technology that provides their workspace in the space of the challenge itself.

References


Images in Australian industry courtesy sourced on Wikipedia as low resolution fair use copies for educational purposes