



Serious Games – are we really a community?

I've been motivated to pen this article by a long-standing observation born from being involved with numerous initiatives, groups and associations over the last five years, from attending numerous Serious Games and related events (many of which I have spoken at) and from amassing a very large collection of reference material, articles and publications about Serious Games.

It is utterly not my intention here to re-ignite the tiresomely academic "What are Serious Games?" debate. What concerns me deeply are what appear to me, and to many people I know, deep divisions amongst the various sub-sections of this supposed 'community' in relation to 'who should be allowed in our gang/clan/Christmas card list'.

If this is indeed a *Serious* community, then why is it that the work of people like Clark Aldrich seem to achieve a fraction of the attention that other less-commercially orientated contributors achieve? Clark's blog site "*Style Guide for Serious Games & Simulations*" (<http://clarkaldrich.blogspot.com/>) and his two traditional media books are, in my humble opinion, outstanding contributions to this community.

Is this because we have a crisis of identity going on? If so should we be raising up our hands and start admitting that in actual fact we have several very different sectors co-existing in a very transient manner and that there are more differences that divide us than there are commonalities which bind us together? I hope not but clearly the very often differing needs of the (US) military, school systems, higher education, social initiatives, public sector and private sector do suggest that this space is a community busting at the seams to fracture.

My company has a clear and unequivocal focus on business education and corporate training. The very nature of the end user organisations we work for has taken PIXELearning down the Internet technology route. If you do not understand why that should be so then try deploying a diversity awareness and inclusion training game to several thousand food and drink retail outlets across the USA and see if you can use the Unreal engine as part of your development approach!

The trouble with this is, so it would seem, is that the technology decision seems to be a qualifying factor in the determination of what is or is not a Serious Game. I utterly disagree with this sweeping generalisation but have witnessed on numerous times the shunning of people, vendors and products purely on this basis. The statement; “but it is only developed in Flash” might as well be tattooed on the chests of many a ‘proper’ 3D games technologist and researcher.

Why is this problem? Well, to my mind this community will only truly begin to realise its considerable potential if we pull together. I am not naive to think that there are not considerable commercial interests at play here that serve, at times, to counter that effort but come on guys and gals, this is a very immature space; we need to get over petty semantics and move things along.

Let me ask this open question; “Do customers truly make a purchasing decision based on whether a proposed solution utilizes high fidelity, real-time 3D”? In some cases this may indeed be the case but only where that technology approach is appropriate to that customer’s needs. The key word in my question is ‘solution’. We really need to get away from dry academic definitions of the umbrella terminology and recognize that the only reason Serious Games will achieve large scale adoption is if they are proven to solve real world problems be they of a societal, educational, performance improvement or any other nature. And I am sorry, but we also need to get away from the entrenched view that a Serious Game must be ‘engaging’ especially when people take that to mean ‘fun’ or use phrases like ‘stealth learning’. The harsh reality is that this is not always the case nor indeed should it be.

I have had, on a number of occasions, our company added to the Wikipedia entry for Serious Games only to see it removed, in some cases, within a few hours. The most recent removal edit included within the explanation (opinion actually) for our removal, a reference to “2 bit companies”. Leaving aside the messed up world that is Web 2.0 sources of ‘reputable’ information without sound editorial control, my initial reaction is relate to the early years of the entertainment games space where most developers would hardly have been characterised as, for example, ‘major players.’ I’d happily wager that my company has achieved revenues that exceed 90% of the players in this space so am I to believe that commercial success – along with sound governance and business processes - is not a key determining factor in what defines what is or is not a ‘real’ company?

I am not writing this article to justify our inclusion in a Wikipedia entry - there are far more serious issues to concern ourselves with here – rather I am trying to force an open debate about whether this really is the tightly knit community which we like to think it is or should we openly admit that it is the nature of our customer groups (or funding sources) which define several quite different sectors? That is certainly the view of the eLearning Guild, a highly respected (and very large) community of eLearning professionals which, earlier in 2007, published a very well-researched report into how the corporate space responded to the term Serious Games and concluded that the term ‘Immersive Learning

Simulations' was far more appropriate for describing how game and simulation techniques can bring tremendous benefits to corporate training.

It is my earnest view that technology choices are not the defining factor in this debate. Teachers use chalk, ink pens, white board markers and interactive white boards but they are still teaching irrespective of the 'technology' they choose to adopt. If 'Serious Games' is in fact the best umbrella term for this space then surely 'qualification for entry' is based on the following criteria:

“Does the nature of the application draw upon strong game design principles, simulation design competencies and a capability, derived from the worlds of training, education, marketing, advocacy etc, to meld these to solve real world problems where 'entertainment' is not the primary goal?”

If we are honest with ourselves and put our preconceptions aside for a moment we all know very many companies, products and services which defiantly fit into this criteria but which do not use 'game technology'. Similarly it is also pretty easy to identify those so-called applications (or, more often than not, content) which is/are being sold as such but which are in fact solidly based in more traditional edutainment, eLearning or CBT approaches.

So my challenge to you, Mr Wikipedia watcher and, indeed, this entire community is this; put aside your negative preconceptions, knock that chip of your shoulder and go do something more productive instead. If we don't act like a community and focus on building it out then the Wikipedia entry for Serious Games in 2010 will probably read something like:

“Serious Games, 1999-2007; a short-lived uncomfortable coexistence of hard core computer gamers, 5 star generals, social activists, training professionals and academics which was characterised by short term thinking, manifest in-fighting, territory grabbing and overzealous hype that promised so much and delivered so little.”

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