Potsdam and Video Games, a Short but Growing History

If you asked people around the world about cultural artifacts that originated in Potsdam, New York, chances are Wes Craven's *Nightmare on Elm Street* would be the most recognized. Although the films weren't made in Potsdam, and Potsdam isn't even the setting, Mr. Craven was a former teacher in the area and wrote early horror stories here. It has been confirmed that our own Elm street, and a recently demolished fraternity house, helped inspire his most well known work. When I lived in London, UK and was moving back to Potsdam (coincidentally to an apartment on Elm Street) my British movers seemed quite entertained by the fact that the packages they were loading were heading for the infamous street.

Unlike Wes Craven's films, which are very loosely linked to our area, some influential and upcoming video games have real roots here. The most influential of these games stem from a well known international game designer who also coincidentally lived on Elm Street. Jason Rohrer's name is well known in game design and development circles. When I am talking to people unfamiliar with game development I often liken him to *The Velvet Underground,* a band that may not have been commercially successful, but instead had a massive influence on other musicians. People in our area often remember him as the guy who spent months fighting village government so he wouldn't have to mow his lawn. It was his unkempt lawn that served as the setting of his interview with Esquire magazine. (During the interview he called the police on a village employee who mowed a strip of his lawn near the road) Jason also wrote the Sudoku puzzles in *North Country This Week*, and a copy of the book he wrote with his wife about breastfeeding resides in the village library. He was much like many of the intelligent and mildly eccentric people who make Potsdam their home. Thanks to our universities, Potsdam is home to many people who have influence around the world. From ceramicists to scientists, whenever you go to the IGA in Potsdam there is a good chance the person in front of you in line is well known around the world. Although Jason and his family have since moved on, the video games he created here got the attention of some very powerful and influential people.

What is generally thought of as Jason's most well known Potsdam-era game is *Passage*. The game features a compelling message and what I consider one of the most clever uses of retro-esque pixel art in gaming. If you are a *Call of Duty* player or a *Final Fantasy* aficionado it is going to take a mental readjustment to play *Passage*. A game of *Passage* takes five minutes from beginning to end. At first glance it looks like a game for the Atari 2600. However underlying the brief gameplay and big pixels is a beautifully crafted message that makes the game art. Your character's movement through the game space represents movement through life. Certain decisions influence decisions you can make later on. For example getting 'married' in the game changes the speed and distance you move, but also stops you from passing through certain areas of the game. When I first encountered the game I was so put off by the primitive graphics I didn't even play it for the full five minutes. The last time I attended Game Developer's Conference a game developer from Lucasarts (the video game wing of George Lucas' recently sold empire) talked about *Passage* as where video games should be going in the future. Afterwards I decided to give the game more exploration, and now I show it to virtually all my classes as both a digital art form and as a life lesson. It is tough to make young people

understand how decisions they make today influence tomorrow, especially when it is tough for them to visualize tomorrow. That's what *Passage* is all about, and why anybody in our area should take a few minutes to download and explore this piece of Potsdam history.

At the other end of the video game spectrum is Retro-Affect, a video game design company created by alumni of Clarkson University's Digital Arts & Sciences program. Founders Kyle Pulver, David Carigg, and Peter Jones met at Clarkson, and their game *Snapshot* is available for the PC, Playstation 3, and most recently for the Playstation Vita (Sony's new handheld). Even more exciting is that across the United States the game is installed on Vitas in store displays, meaning nationwide exposure for a game with roots here. Unlike Jason Roher's games, *Snapshot* isn't meant for you to explore the human condition or to press the limits of what a videogame can be. *Snapshot* is meant to be fun, and fun it is. Younger developers, like the crew at Retro-Affect, are making games that are based on the gameplay styles of their childhood, but at the same time press these genres beyond what was possible in Super Nintendo days. In film terms it is like modern filmmakers returning to genres like the western, and bringing along the trappings of today's moving making. The digital distribution model that put *Snapshot* in the Playstation store and Valve's Steam system for PC means smaller startup developers have a foot in the door. I have a feeling that Retro-Affect has a strong future in games, and if you like puzzle games or have nostalgia for platform jumping games of the past, you will be pleased with *Snapshot*.

One of the big topics for business people in the video game industry is that most video games are made in Silicon Valley and in Tokyo. These happen to be two of the most expensive places on Earth to make video games. There is no reason more video games couldn't be made in St. Lawrence county, and the success of the few people who have started their video game development here should be encouragement to those who want to try.

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