



Dan Pinchbeck: on Everybody's Gone to the Rapture

Podcast Transcript

VO: In 2006 Dan Pinchbeck received a speculative research grant from the AHRC to research the concept of narrative in video games. But instead of publishing an academic paper: he made a game.

Dear Esther, was an unprecedented success, winning awards for story telling and visual art, and receiving accolades from reviewers worldwide.

Dear Esther was also a runaway commercial success, recouping its development costs within just six hours of going on sale in February 2012.

Dan Pinchbeck takes up the story...

DP: The idea behind it was to extend the research which I'd been doing, which was looking at collating quite a lot of information about first person games that were out there, and from that we started identifying design gaps and places where there looked like there was really interesting content, really interesting design ideas, but they were so high risk they were very unlikely to be explored by industry, so we saw the real strength of academia of course is that it doesn't really matter if a project kind of fails in some way provided it generates some kind of interesting data and that was our cornerstone.

So we made three, what are called mods, which are freely distributed plugins to existing commercial games and we targeted different subjects with those and we made these little games, and then we released them, dumped them onto the internet for players to get for free, and the really important part of it was that we didn't wrap it in the language of research so we just said here's these gaming experiences you come back and tell us what you think about them and we didn't actively go to people we just put them in places that had very active forum communities with the idea that we would just track people's responses and it would be very ecologically valid and everything else, and one of the projects was Dear Esther which was specifically looking at the question of - there was a lot of debate about the relative importance between story and gameplay and whether story was gameplay and could you - story was always seen as very disposable to gameplay, and so we really wanted to take it the other way and say, well, what happens if we dispose of gameplay and just have a gaming experience which is pure story and nothing else: will that work? And we didn't expect it to, we thought probably we'd get a few hundred downloads and people might probably send us some rude emails but the way in which they criticised it would tell us more about what players really thought about it, and actually it kind of exploded and within a year it had nearly 100,000 downloads which is extraordinary for a mod anyway and it had already picked up an award.

And around this point we started working with another artist who was a commercial game artist who really fell for the mod, really liked what we were doing with it but thought it could have a more professional polish and so we started working on a commercial version which was done through the university at that point and we hit a point where we started getting near to distribution and we

realised there were major issues with very hard to resolve contradictions between the university charters and the liability clauses that distributors have, so the university, in what I thought was a very progressive decision, understood it was better to release the IP for the game, have it come to market and get the associated benefits from that, than cling onto an IP which you'd never really be able to exploit properly.

So we ended up forming the studio and taking the game to market ourselves and it did extraordinarily well, I mean it's up to now just over 850,000 units which is an extraordinary figure and it just showed that this research question we started of with, of going but if you take risks, but if you explore stuff, in an academic context that industry might not be able to explore because of the kind of pressures they're under, it's not just being an intellectual success, actually we can change the industry with these things and it's amazing because it just come back to that initial kind of argument that we wanted to make that academia doesn't have to follow industry, it can actively lead as well and that comes from the AHRC looking at - I look back at that grant and think this was a huge risk, it was such a high risk grant and they took the risk and it's brilliant that it's come out this way really.

VO: Dear Esther was the launch-pad for Dan's career in the notoriously tough 'gaming industry' and it helped him establish The Chinese Room brand, Dan's award winning games development studio.

Dan is now regarded as one of the first individuals to bring academics together with the gaming industry and he's passionate about the opportunities these dynamic relationships can harness.

DP: The Chinese Room originally, it was just a brand - you know, we had to come up with a name for a team for when we were releasing stuff and we used it there.

Again the university were incredibly generous in a way - they just let us up and leave with the brand, and it obviously allowed us to develop the business with a decreased risk but it also meant that the University got that huge associated benefit of actually being hardwired into the centre of a commercial development.

One of my PhD students acted as one of the lead designers on the game as well, so that means we have a PhD coming out which is about the process of writing a high profile game which I think is probably going to be a first, and research questions he had within that PhD are built into the design of the levels of the game so everybody who is playing the game is generating data for a PhD at the same time and that's a really fascinating model, that's really interesting; I hope we are going to continue that.

The way it works is that if a game is selling well you tend to get reward payments from the funders and so we have an income stream coming back out of this commercial game plugging directly into that process of actually doing that industry-based research.

So one of the things which I'm really interested in is that, provided you can continue to be successful commercially, actually you're creating a sustainable funding stream for future research in that area as well, and again when you go back to industry and say that, you can say we're not going to come to you for money any more, we're not looking for one of those relationships, we're already generating

everything we need, we want to have a much more peer-to-peer dialogue in a language they speak, it's a really powerful thing.

VO: Looking ahead, the future's bright for Dan.

His latest game has again been developed with an investment by the Arts and Humanities Research Council .

Dan's original and pioneering take on bringing together video games and academia has seen him catapulted to the forefront of the gaming industry, with gamers excitedly anticipating the launch of "Everybody's Gone to the Rapture", The Chinese Room's latest foray into the first-person video games market...

DP: When we knew what we actually wanted to make, we went through this process again, we want to look at the commercial angle and actually we want to try and take this out to a publisher rather than self funding it which would be a new direction to push that research question and Sony Santa Monica, a wing of Sony America that had been... we'd kind of met them a few times because they had been responsible for making some very innovative commercial content and games like "The Unfinished Swan" and "Journey" and we kind of, when we knew we were going to have to start talking to a publisher, and we did, we'd already had quite a few approaches, because of "Dear Esther's" success, we really wanted to look at who we felt was most closely aligned to that kind of idea that we had, that felt like a really nice stable flow through from the initial AHRC project right through to commercial and launches, and really we threw all of our eggs into one basket and dropped them an email and flew out to see them and just put it on the table and said we think there's a really close alignment between what we want to do and the kind of things you've been doing and fortunately they agreed and so we are now third party developers for them.

VO: And that relationship with Sony America is also paying dividends for The Chinese Room as "Everybody's Gone to the Rapture" moves towards the next generation of gaming consoles.

DP: We'd anticipated it would be a PC kind of game on the basis we didn't really have the money to do anything else, and then we reached a point when we realised we didn't have the money or the expertise - because it's a big title for us, we went from being three people to fifteen people, so between the fact we wanted that expertise and needed it, we knew that we were going to have to push it out to a publisher and when we started speaking to Sony, and they came straight back and said, well, how do you feel about PlayStation 4, we jumped at it really because it's an amazing piece of hardware.

So in terms of the type of thing we did there's never actually been a better time to kind of get, no matter how left field, innovative games, to make them and get them out there because you're no longer in a situation where they're just going to have to be tucked away in a corner of the internet, there is a genuine opportunity to get a kind of console position and stuff like that, which is enormously important for academia because actually suddenly there's an ability to have an inroad into that platform that just simply could not exist without this hardware a little while ago.

So I think, in some ways, we kind of talk about this, we've got ourselves into a position where there's actually very, very little excuse for academics that are interested in questions about games not to be exploring those practically, because there is a market, there is an audience, and that means there is a capacity, which I'm really passionate about, that if you can find a way to get that idea and to realise it as project it means you start developing sustainable funding streams, which means you're actually freeing up Research Council money into really important projects that can't generate that kind of stuff and that means stuff that was previously niche, or difficult to find, things like healthcare, social change actually start getting funds that they desperately need.

So the onus is on us I think, as academics and individuals, to really look to those opportunities, and say how can we get ourselves to a point where we can embed research and business really closely together and what we found I think, no matter how it goes for anyone else, I think what we - the thing I'm most proud of, that we've proved, it doesn't involve compromise, you don't have to compromise your research integrity or anything else in order to do that.