

## Live Long and Prosper

In the Darwinian theory of the gaming industry, it might be a dog eat dog world; but who says you can't teach an old dog new tricks?

It might be the second; it might be the third; heck, it might even be the tenth, but odds are, the game you're lining up to buy next isn't the first in its series. The gaming world has gone mad with the creation and continuation of franchises; from Final Fantasy XIV to twenty-four years of Street Fighter, the oldies-but-goldies keep on kicking and everyone involved keeps lapping them up. Given the fact that, as James Stevenson [Senior Community Manager at Insomniac Games] points out, 'Games are expensive and require a lot of resources and time to make,' once any developer strikes gold they're bound to keep on digging, and the fans seem to share their enthusiasm. As Geraint Evans [Marketing and PR manager at Arc System Works Europe] explains, 'If we said we weren't going to make any more BlazBlue or Guilty Gear games, our fans would be upset.' Even the games themselves, by virtue of their very nature, often seem to demand frequent updates if only to remain current. 'With new cars and tracks coming out all the time, it makes sense to have iterations of DiRT to bring out new content,' says Paul Coleman [Senior Producer on DiRT 3]. Indeed, such is their demand that the creation of a leading franchise has become the gap separating the top echelon of developers from the rest.

The fame and respect granted by a leading franchise casts the developer deep into the hearts of gamers, making their games hot property and greatly helping to shift copies not only of the franchise in question, but of other games the developer releases too. 'We have a strong heritage and people know that a Codemasters' racing game will be good... Does that influence sales of other games? By reputation, I think yes, it does,' says Coleman. One can easily imagine how beneficial and reassuring this bolstering of sales is to newer developers who are still fighting to establish themselves and solidify their image. 'It's vital to us to have recognisable franchises under our belts,' says Evans. 'We want the Guilty Gear and BlazBlue names to be synonymous with superb 2D fighting experiences; if the names of those titles are more recognisable, it will be easier for us to access new audiences.'

Clearly, there is a great deal to be gained in developing a leading franchise. Doing so, however, is far from easy. When making a single blockbuster requires both commercial and creative genius, how on Earth can a developer hope to find the longevity, passion and adaptability to create a successful and enduring franchise, which may require iterations in the double digits and years if not decades of commitment?

The best franchises are born of inspirational design decisions that fill a need in the market at just the right time. 'The original Colin McRae Rally hit the market at a time when players were clamouring for that type of game,' says Coleman. 'Sega Rally had exposed gamers to rally games; Colin McRae was a huge star; rally was very exciting and the game was simple but gave the image of a true rally drive.' Not only did Colin McRae Rally sell 2.79 million copies worldwide but, as with many of the brightest of franchise beginnings, it created a template of a game that for years only required the most minimal of changes to keep it at the top. 'The first games in the Colin McRae franchise just changed the cars and tracks,' Coleman recalls. Many other leading franchises have fared likewise: Street Fighter has remained virtually unchanged for twenty years; Guitar Hero got through numerous iterations by only changing the tracks; LEGO have sold the same gimmick over and over by changing the movie their game is centred around. Even if a developer was lucky enough to experience these days on easy street, however, they will not last forever; the always aggressive market inevitably catches up and the developer is forced to play a new hand and make a design

decision that could either rebuild their throne or see it turn to dust. It is the developer's ability to rise to the challenge at these times that provides the life blood of a franchise, and it is a challenge all long standing franchises must face.

For Codemaster's, this challenge was brought about from external factors. As Coleman recalls, 'Sales on Colin McRae Rally tailed off when Colin McRae became less famous and rally became less popular. There was a definite concern when changing from Colin McRae to Dirt that it might lead to a break in sales because people wouldn't recognise the brand.' Contrasting to this, Arc System Works' challenge was brought about when they attempted to increase their market share after working on the ultra hardcore Guilty Gear. 'We wanted to make a fighting game with significant depth, but one that was fresh too and more approachable,' says Evans. 'As a result, we worked very hard on the story, the universe and the characters, as well as the fighting systems themselves. We also worked hard on the drive system, which gives BlazBlue its diverse character range.' As for the wacky duo Ratchet & Clank, the originality of the original bought Insomniac breathing room and, for the most part, Insomniac managed to stay ahead of the game by being creative with each release. Stevenson lists some of the best design decisions Insomniac have made: 'With Going Commando we added weapon experience / levelling; with Up Your Arsenal we added online multiplayer and battlegrounds; Deadlocked was about co-op and online multiplayer and A Crack In Time explored the origins and brought space exploration and more refined Clank gameplay.'

So far, BlazBlue, Ratchet & Clank and DiRT have all pulled through, but many other franchises have fallen by the wayside in what is gaming's version of Darwinian theory; an evolutionary process in which developers must keep up with the continually changing times or face extinction. As Evans says, 'To endure, a franchise must continue to entertain, to push its genre forward and offer genuinely new experiences.' Yet every time a franchise aims to reinvent itself, it must inevitably take a risk that could alienate it, disillusion fans and, ultimately, cause the death of the franchise.

Aware of the scale of risks involved with their design choices, developers seek out every source of wisdom they can find; amongst them, perhaps the most valuable, are the reactions and comments of the gamers themselves. 'We have taken a step back and listened to what the community want,' says Coleman. 'Because we designed DiRT 3 for the gamers, it is a much more pleasurable experience. There's lots of new content that people really wanted this times around.' The same is true for Insomniac; 'All 4 One is our answer to the tons of demands for a co-op Ratchet & Clank,' says Stevenson, whilst Evans adds, 'At Arc System Works, we play the games we make extensively, long after they're finished; we continue to go to the arcades and talk to our fans.' Through such research and community involvement, the developer can greatly increase their chances of making the right design choices, hence protecting their franchise through the commercial war. Nevertheless, the amount of risk involved with every iteration means no game is likely to last forever.

Whilst a whole horde of external threats loom over every gaming franchise—from sales to changing market trends to other, competing franchises—many of the biggest dangers exist within the developer themselves. Not only are many franchises bled dry for monetary rewards—'There's a danger with creating sequels for sequels' sake,' says Evans—but the simple fact of the matter is that, after so many years, developers simply run out of ideas and enthusiasm. As Evans explains, 'If you lose passion for a series, if you make something hurriedly without much thought for any new ideas, then inevitably it won't function as well as a piece of entertainment; that's when things begin to collapse.' This is one reason why the team of employees working on a game is often chopped and changed. As Stevenson states, 'The staff turn around makes sure the game is current and relevant. When staff move on, we make sure to bring in someone new and interesting who has a passion for an element of the game and can bring something new to it.' Nevertheless, with the sheer level

of demand created by the current market, it's easy to see how developers often run out of steam.

This tiring of the team—alongside considerations of business structure and resource allocation—is partly responsible for the rise in popularity of outsourcing. By employing the aid of an external team, the developer gains much more flexibility, both in terms of business strategies and creativity. Evans gives one example: 'For Arcana Heart 3 [for which Examu outsourced work to Arc System Works] we used our experience with BlazBlue to help work on rendering and optimising the graphics engine for use on console and to create the Arcana Heart 3 online engine.' Thankfully enough for any beat-'em-up fan, Arc System Works appears to have been a wise choice of developer to outsource to—'We've known Examu for a very long time and both developers have a passion for hardcore 2D fighting games with interesting fighting systems, so it's easy for us to work together,' says Evans. Despite these potential benefits, however, one cannot ignore the inherent danger of handing creative work over to another team, a threat that has already left fans of Bionic Commando and Socom: Confrontation, amongst others, with nightmares. As Evans explains, 'If you outsource a sequel to a different team, you can lose the flavour of the original game.' Coleman agrees, 'It's important to keep the creative control where the brand and license are at their core. As soon as you give it to someone else, they put their own stamp on it and it dilutes the franchise and can spoil the game and ruin fans' perception; from there, it's impossible to get fans back. It's at your own peril if you go off and let someone run with your IP.'

In truth, so long as it is used wisely, outsourcing can yield positive returns and is not necessarily riskier than any other option a developer may make in striving to keep a franchise alive. Inevitably, tough choices have to be made somewhere down the line and, in such an aggressive market, no game is truly safe; even Solid Snake himself cannot fight death forever; there's always a Raiden waiting in the wings. One bad slip from a developer or a single bad period of sales can easily put the nail in the coffin of even the strongest of franchises. As Coleman states, 'It would be easy to say we're going to go on and make the new DiRT, but we have to see how the people react to this one and try to cater our next game to their wishes and desires.' Yet don't despair, for Evans reassures, 'If you make a product that is fun, has depth and plenty of appeal to a range of audiences, there's no reason a franchise cannot continue to run.'

## **BOX-OUT**

### **The Developers on their Own Games**

We all know our own feelings about our favourite games franchises, but just how do the developers themselves feel?

**Stevenson:** Ratchet & Clank and Resistance *are* Insomniac over the last five years. They are every game we've released. We are immersed in these universes. People come to Insomniac because they want to work on Ratchet & Clank. We love the Lombax and we love making games for him.

**Coleman:** I came to Codemasters to start on Colin McRae and I still have a passion for the game; I still want to drive it forward and make sure it's number one.

**Evans:** We're dedicated to our games 100% because they are the games that we ourselves want to play. We take great pleasure in the unique fighting game experiences

and seeing the fighting game community grow. We have a deep passion for the craft of 2D visuals and want to continue to push this area. Energy and enthusiasm is one thing we definitely do not lack here at Arc System Works!

## **Captions**

**GOW:** One of the most impressive originals ever, as soon as God of War was released it was clear SCE had a killer franchise on their hands.

**Rising:** It's the biggest risk Kojima Productions have taken with the Metal Gear Solid franchise and it could potentially be fatal. Then again, it could launch us through another ten years of stellar action. Time will tell.

**AE:** The Street Fighter franchise was seemingly dead for ten years after Street Fighter 3: Third Strike. Given how busy they are in the beat-em-up genre at present, one has to question if Capcom are trying to catch up on lost time.

**All 4 One:** With All 4 One, Insomniac's priority is to meet Ratchet & Clank fans' requests for cooperative gameplay.

**Gymkhana:** One of the most important new additions to DiRT 3 is the Gymkhana mode, which allows you to get off the track and into the arena as you perform freestyle tricks.

**Box:** There's a reason why the developer's name is on the box. The reputation a leading franchise garners the developers gives them a favourable market position and greatly helps sales of all future releases.

**DmC:** Capcom took one heck of a risk in outsourcing Devil May Cry to Ninja Theory. Will the change of direction payoff?

**Confrontation:** Those against outsourcing may well sight SOCOM: Confrontations as the reason why. As soon as a franchise is handed over to a different team, it faces the risk of becoming irretrievably ruined.