European Children's Film Association
Association Européenne du Cinéma pour l'Enfance et la Jeunesse

ECFA-Projects – Children's Film Festivals – Survey

TO GAME OR NOT TO GAME?

A survey by Adam Graham on the inclusion of gaming in modern children and young people's film festivals

To game or not to game? Could this be a question for children and young people's film festivals in the future? Digital technology is advancing at such a rate that computer, video or the more relevant term of console gaming is much more than something that can entertain a child for brief time at home. The billion dollar industry that is gaming is at the forefront of digital technology development and has more in common with the film industry than it ever has before. With blockbusters such as Avatar building its success on its development of 3D and digital technology and being recognised at the highest level with 9 Oscar nominations it is impossible to deny that the line between video games and film is getting increasingly thin.

This article is not intended to be for or against the inclusion of gaming into film festivals programmes but to bring about the idea to the forefront of people's minds and stir debate amongst each other.

Film Festivals are primarily set up to promote and encourage the use, enjoyment and cultural experiences of the moving image and, hopefully, support other artistic forms that compliment film. Most festivals include literature, graphic novels and music as part of their programmes; during my years managing a children and young people's film festival we actively developed the relationship and importance of reading and literacy within our programmes. Surely, console games must be considered 'moving images' and with many films being made wholly on blue/green screen, using motion capture and shot on digital cameras the only difference could be said to be that the viewer or audience actually interacts with the game and not with the films overall outcome of the narrative.

The inclusion of gaming within a film festival's programme is not a new initiative, the 2008 Sundance Film Festival featured a panel discussion on how technology, including gaming, has changed our society. The game *Dead Space* released an animated film as a prequel to the game which showed at numerous international festivals and was marketed as an addition to the game and not as a stand-alone film. Warner Bros created a downloadable video game to act as a prequel to the film *Watchmen* (a film born from a graphic novel) which included an entirely new storyline in anticipation of the movie's release. These are all examples of how gaming is bridging the gap between audience interaction with film.

I was lucky enough to interview Mark Sample, Game Director at Ubisoft Reflections who commented that '*I think it would be great for gaming to be included in programmes of international film festivals, especially for young people. The more that games crossover into these areas and show that this creative field is something to be taken notice of the better. Games, whether entertainment or educational based are still seen by many as gimmicky areas that should not be taken seriously as a creative field which is extremely frustrating to the games developers as it is an art in itself'.* I also thought it was important to get the gaming industry perspective on the film industry; '*Does the gaming industry aspire to be connected to the film industry and ultimately work with this industry? Yes, the games industry is already working with the film industry and the connection is growing stronger by the day. Most recently Ubisoft have worked closely with James Cameron's Avatar movie and created a game based on the franchise. Both the game and movie were released at the same time and enjoyed the shared marketing. Also, Ubisoft's own game Prince of Persia is a game that's currently being made into a movie using input from the development team on how the game's universe and character should work within the movie'.*

For those who are not aware of just how big an industry, culture and lifestyle gaming has become in our modern society The ESA (Entertainment Software Association) statistics for 2009 show that 68% of households in America play video games and 42% own a gaming console. The statistics do, however, show that the average age of a gamer in America is 35 and only 25% of players are aged under 18. So it seems, in America, that gaming is an adult pastime and not something children play instead of doing their schoolwork! Nielsen video game data shows that Video Gamers are playing more this summer than last. The total video game console usage minutes in June 2009 went up 21% from the previous June. The average console gamer played 768 minutes on consoles during this year's June

reporting month.

There is a good market for the under 18 age range to be tapped into and the Nintendo Wii has moved into that market by selling their newest console as a family entertainment system. It has not been branded as something that your child goes off to play alone but a new form of interactive entertainment for all the family. A gaming experience that is more interactive than anything we have seen before with controls linked directly to body movement and action.

It is interaction that draws the line between the gaming world and the world of film. This year see's the release of a game that could wipe out this line and change the forum of gaming and the film industry as we know it. Quantic Dream have created the game *Heavy Rain* which they have dubbed an 'interactive drama'. It is the explicit intention to make the line between film and video games invisible as the narrative takes precedence over everything else; this is not a game where you collect magic bananas or shoot lasers. It is essentially a nine hour film that changes depending on the decisions you make or your proficiency in motor skills. Vgchartz.com says 'Heavy Rain has not redefined the way games are played, or started a revolution for the industry which all developers will now follow. It has, however, successfully blurred the lines between games and movies a little by offering an extremely cinematic experience'. It may not change the game industry but could it change the film festival industry?

Although *Heavy Rain* is an adult game imagine the possibilities of your festival programmes including fully interactive storytelling experiences for children, a learning tool for schools and families; a medium where children can not only see the consequences of actions, like in the movies, but use their actions and decisions to learn from. As film is increasingly becoming a tool for education on an academic, social and cultural level and it seems that gaming can take this one step further in order to involve the viewer more without losing artistic merit.

With international multiplayer gaming through the internet and Bluetooth headset connections being all the more commonplace in the gaming world, people no longer need to be in the same room in order to play the same game as their peers. It is now easily possible to play with and against people in your region, country and throughout the world, creating a sociable platform, team ethics and coordination. This could present a revolutionary opportunity for festivals to truly work together by linking game play in real time and literally creating a 'network'. Imagine having young people from Germany at the Goldener Spatz festival interacting through a gaming narrative with young people in Norway at the Kristiansand festival! The technology is there it just needs to be explored and embraced to make it work. It is the technical side of gaming that presents us with a wall to climb. We work in film exhibition, what do we know about gaming technology, systems, portals, consoles and any other technical term, process or connection? This is something time, patience and active involvement can only make clear, I am sure the same fears and questions were asked by cinemas all over the world when the concept of digital, high definition and 3D projection were talked about and introduced. An open mind and involvement of the professionals within the gaming industry could redefine our perception of what a film festival represents.

What does a film festival gain form including gaming into their programmes? Advantages and disadvantages are plentiful and something I would like to lead on in the future through informing, debating and demystifying gaming but it must be said that the inclusion of gaming can only diversify your audience, vary your programmes and show young people that the 21st century holds some of the most exciting advances in technology and the media. But what about the celebration of film, the art of story-telling, cinematography, acting and of course the cost I hear you say? That, again, can only be for future discussion!

Personally I have been a strong advocate for film to be included within the UK schools national curriculum as an essential learning tool, a medium for breaking social and cultural boundaries and emphasising the importance of media literacy within schools and young people's lives. Gaming can and, I believe, is just as important a medium as film with an unquestionable amount of advantages for teaching and learning. It is not uncommon for people to think that gaming is just playing around and something that children do when they should be doing something else. But the fundamentals of how to play a game are exactly what we teach children in their developing years. Problem solving, motor skills (hand and eye coordination), teamwork, character development, understanding narrative and ultimately learning from your mistakes; if at first you don't succeed try again! This can develop interest in to the technical side of the games industry, IT, engineering and many other careers that we also promote as being part of the film industry.

Finally, I hope this article has given light to an art form that may not have been previously considered as part of a film festival programme and that it has created debate for you and your colleagues. I firmly hope to continue the development of gaming within our industry following on from this article and bring together the people involved in both industries to ensure the prospective development for all of us in the years to come.

Adam Graham

Interview with Mark Sample

Name: Mark Sample

Job Title: Game Director

Company: Ubisoft Reflections

Does the gaming industry aspire to be connected to the film industry and ultimately work with this industry?

Yes, the games industry is already working with the film industry and the connection is growing stronger by the day. Most recently Ubisoft have worked closely with James Cameron's Avatar movie and created a game based on the franchise. Both the game and movie were released at the same time and enjoyed the shared marketing.

Also, Ubisoft's own game Prince of Persia is a game that's currently being made into a movie using input from the development team on how the game's universe and character should work within the movie.

Would it be advantageous for gaming to be included within the programmes of international film festivals and especially for young people? Has this already happened, such as Dead Space's prequel film as a promotional tool?

I think it would be great for gaming to be included in programmes of international film festivals, especially for young people. The more that games crossover into these areas and show that this creative field is something to be taken notice of the better. Games, whether entertainment or educational based are still seen by many as gimmicky areas that should not be taken seriously as a creative field which is extremely frustrating to the games developers as it is an art in itself.

Ubisoft now make movies to tie in with their upcoming games to strengthen this crossover of media: Here's a link to the Assassins Creed 2 Movie.

So yes, this is already happening and will continue to grow.

The much anticipated Heavy Rain has been reviewed as more of a film based gaming experience than the traditional games and looks to be quite a success. Does this show a move towards an even more film based narrative structure for gaming or is it just an example of the massive variety of gaming styles available for the consumer?

Games are always trying to tie narrative with gameplay as seamlessly as possible to create a more immersive experience. Heavy rain is the latest game to push a film game based experience as far as they can with current technology. What tends to happen in these games is the story and character excel, but, by creating tight rigid play scenes gameplay can and tends to suffer - Clunky controls and repetitive sequences. Heavy rain is a unique example of this type of gameplay. I think we'll continue to see a wide variety of game styles that continually evolve. I think the market of games will always have a varied mix of styles and this can only be a good thing.

Is it important for gaming to be used as an educational tool as well as for entertainment?

It depends on the market really, sometimes people want to learn, sometimes they want to play - combining both is always difficult. However, all the best games that achieve legendary status have good learning principles in them at the core. If the player stops learning during a game then boredom sets in and people stop playing. Educational games have their place and can combine education and entertainment. At the moment educational games tend to have lower production values and innovation which stop them reaching the heights of blockbuster console games.

Do you see a future in gaming on an educational level?

This is a difficult question. In all honesty I don't see educational games reaching the heights of standard console games seen on the market today. Maybe in time the market will change and educational games will become more prominent. Most people buy or play games to escape, have fun and pass time. The urge to learn is not as strong to the majority of people

who play games as blowing up a tank, driving round a race track or jumping on mushrooms.

There are websites using flash games that are changing how educational games are played and perceived, by giving them a high level of quality and depth of play. If developers continue to push this area and show how much fun can be had from educational gaming then this trend can only accelerate over time.

Adam Graham

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