A Lifetime in Gaming: An Interview with Russell Kay

by *Audrey Christophory*

Few people in the games industry can boast the experience of Russell Kay. Since his beginnings as a creator of Lemmings, *Russell has worked on such projects as* Harry Potter: Quidditch World Cup *and* F1 Career Challenge. *Russell founded Visual Science, a game development company, and is Visiting Professor of Computer Games Technology at the University of Abertay Dundee. Most recently, Russell moved to new challenges at Realtime Worlds. I met up with him recently to ask about the business of game design.*

Russell, what exactly do you do? Over the past 13 years I have done a bit of everything—from programming games on my own to managing large teams to managing a large company, so I am a bit of a jack-of-all-trades. But by profession, I am a programmer and most recently I have been leading a technical team, looking after the architecture of both our tools and technology.

How did you get into game design? I started out in games while attending a local computer club. A group of us within the club were really interested in what made these game things work, so we started taking them to bits and seeing what made them tick. We realized that we could make them ourselves—they were not that difficult after all—so we all fell into the business after that. In fact, the whole games cluster in Dundee can trace their roots back to that same club in the late '80s.

What did you study in school? I studied Computer Science at Dundee University. After I completed that, I started a PhD at Herriot Watt University but was still writing computer games while studying. I eventually gave that up because writing computer games became more lucrative.

What was your all-time favorite project? Difficult one, this. Each project is good in different ways—some you learn more, some the team just clicks together and everyone gets on, some you learn how not to do things. I think two stand out in my memory in particular. The original *Lemmings* team was great to work with. The team that did *F1 2000* on the PlayStation for Electronic Arts were particularly good.

What is your dream project? One with no publisher interference and the ability (and finance) to do the project as it should be done.

Where do you see the industry going? I think that the current business model is killing the industry, slowly, from the inside out. The current value chain does not reward those who actually create the game. I believe that network delivery and removal of the middlemen from the industry will change the balance of power and reward those that work the hardest to make the games—the developers.

What is the best thing about working in the gaming industry? The breadth of talent and the people within it.

What is the worst thing about working in the gaming industry? The lack of reward. This is a hits-driven business. Good games fail because they are not seen by the public, while mediocre games reap benefits because of marketing power.

What do you wish people knew before they entered the industry? The secret in this industry is working as a team, so it is not just important to have ability in your chosen sphere, it is important to work with other people well and to get the best out of your teammates. Be encouraging and helpful, give constructive criticism and be willing to take things on the chin. We're not all perfect.

What can would-be designers forget about what they learned in school? Forget nothing, but be flexible. The main lessons to take away from school are the abilities to study and learn on your own. In this industry you will need those skills in abundance. Everything moves so quickly that almost everything you were taught at school will have moved on&#8212in the specifics anyway, but the fundamental building blocks will be the same. It is not important to know all the ins and outs of particular APIs, but it is important to know how to build APIs, what makes a good one and what makes a bad one.