Shaping *Ty the Tasmanian Tiger 2* for the Younger Market

By Lindsay Parmenter

Ty the Tasmanian Tiger 2: Bush Rescue is the sequel to 2002's *Ty the Tasmanian Tiger*, which was also created by Krome Studios. For those of you not familiar with the *Ty* series or Krome, we are the largest Australian game developer, whose flagship IP is a character action platformer inspired by the thought-to-be-extinct Tasmanian Tiger. In developing the *Ty* series, we felt there was an opportunity to create a quality title - and character - that would appeal to the younger gaming audience while offering enough variety and interest for the masses. We also wanted to tap into and share with the world Australia's many offerings including a beautiful and diverse environment, unique culture as well as indigenous animals.

TY the Tasmanian Tiger™ 2: ©2004 Krome Studios

Concept art of the Control Tower from *Ty 2*.

As the producer on *Ty 2*, I oversaw everything involved in the game's creation, from design to level population. Looking at the sales and feedback from the first game, it became apparent that its relative success with younger gamers would affect the direction that the sequel would take - we had a fan base to please. Additionally, we had some big internal goals and expectations to meet.

It seemed the sequel to other platform games that were released around the same time as *Ty 1* (*Jak and Daxter*, *Ratchet and Clank*) were being skewed towards a slightly older market, but we decided early on that we wanted to stay committed to the younger audience we had won over in the first game (the 6- to 12-year-old gamers). That said, we also decided that we needed to have the game "grow up" a little (as the players had grown up) with the introduction of additional age-appropriate concepts and features including more powerful enemies and level of difficulty. Everything in *Ty 2* was made with the goal of being 'family friendly fun', so parents would feel comfortable buying this title for their children.

Aiming towards a young market with family friendly content doesn't mean you have to make a game without all the exciting features adult gamers come to expect in a premium title. This time around, we were determined to include some of the ideas that didn't make it into the first game (like more giant robots and vehicle based missions), and concentrate more on the "action" elements of platformer games. In addition to these enhancements, one of the other goals that emerged during the development of *Ty 2* was the desire to change the game from having a stock-standard "hub with portals" structure to a more "sand-box" structure, where the player was able to do what they wanted, when they

wanted. This style of gameplay seems to really appeal to the young gamer demographic with their shorter attention spans and love of exploration.

Another factor taken into consideration when we began development on *Ty 2* was the forum posts made about the first game. While not the largest forum group around, the fans at [Down Under](#) are quite vocal, and we made a concerted effort to look at their wish list to see if we could oblige them. All of these points had to be combined with our vision of the Ty character - a whimsical and friendly Australian who always has enough time to help out his mates, drawing on not only what the world perceives as "Australian" but also on our distinct local culture and heroes. And we threw in more than a few Aussie jokes and slang along the way.

Making the Sequel is Twice as Much Fun

An in-game screenshot from *Ty 2*.

Making a sequel has quite a few advantages. Luckily, we knew that we were going to produce a sequel before the first title was released. In fact, we were well into *Ty 2*'s production when the original game hit the shelves. This time around, we already knew a lot about the "Ty basics" - we already liked the character's look and style, including his movement speed. We also knew how we wanted to further maximize and enhance how his boomerangs worked as weapons.

Having these core components already figured out took away quite a bit of stress and allowed us to focus on other aspects of development. Additionally, the team that worked on *Ty 2* was, for the most part, the same as those who worked on the first game. Since the majority of the coders already knew the Ty code, a lot of the "learning" period was taken out of the equation. The artists had a feel for the style of the game world, so there was less back-and-forth with the art director to get levels, props, etc. "right".

Also, the team knew the hardware more intimately - the concurrent development of *Ty 1* on all three consoles resulted in robust cross-platform knowledge that allowed us to push the technology and get a lot more out of the systems. The only difference was the addition of the GameBoy Advance version but we had set up a separate mini-team that worked in parallel with the console team, and they were able to take advantage of a lot of art assets created for the 3D game.

Throughout the development of *Ty 2*, we had a running joke that we made the first game on GameCube in about four megs of memory, as more and more memory was found "under the desk" of the GameCube engine coders. The advantages of using an in-house engine with "instant" support cannot be sufficiently expressed (though I know that the engine coders dreaded the sight of me towards the end of the project…). The engine guys did an awesome job as, despite the different amount of memory available, their work meant that we didn't need to make major compromises to get things to fit on the different platforms, which removed a significant headache that was present in *Ty 1* (having to maintain so many different data files for each platform).

As a whole, I think the Ty team gained a lot from the development of *Ty 2*. As a result, we were able to create a sequel that delivered on many things we had set forth to accomplish:

- We know even more about how to structure a game that will appeal to younger audiences.
- We've used data streaming systems now, and we know what to avoid and how to plan the level maps to make the most of the technology.
- A task notification system has been created to limit the amount of time lost through miscommunication.
- We've adopted new production practices to catch as many implementation problems as possible BEFORE a task is begun (sounds silly, but it happens too much).
- All of our tools are more robust through another year of (mis)use.
- And last, but not least, we understand the dangers of excessive coffee consumption.

Looking at the above, you might think that this means that making *Ty 2* was an easier, smoother journey than the first game. Unfortunately, due to a number of factors, this wasn't the case.

At the end of the production cycle for *Ty 1* (late 2002), having just completed the PAL version of the game, it was obvious to us that there were several technological changes required for Krome to remain competitive and to be able to produce a game that contained the elements that the kids wanted. For that reason, work commenced on the Merkury2 engine (Merkury being Krome's in-house cross-platform engine). While many systems were carried across from the first version of the engine, there were significant optimizations made, including a change from being a frame-based system to a time delta system.

This change would allow any game made with the engine to continue running at a consistent rate across different frame rates (so, for example, Ty wouldn't have a slightly different jump path between the NTSC and PAL versions of the games). While this was an important and

necessary change, it was also one that caused significant workflow interruptions - one side effect of this change was that a lot of game-side code also had to be modified, resulting in a few months of the game being broken. This meant that while the artists were working hard on new levels, they couldn't easily check their work. This removed two months of development time for the game, which was originally slated for an earlier release, leaving the team about seven months to finish the game.

Concept art of a lava spire from *Ty 2.*

During this period other work was completed that was of significant benefit to *Ty 2*. It's always been one of Krome's goals with Ty to create a game that truly represents the outback environment, with lush landscapes full of movement and noise. For this reason LETs (Living Environment Technology system) was developed. LETs is a system that procedurally places three dimensional trees, shrubs well… actually pretty much anything you want, onto a model using pre-set seeding values. These models are affected by wind, rustle when the player moves through them, etc. This was a significant improvement on the two-dimensional billboard grass that was present in *Ty 1*, and being able to place thousands of trees, shrubs, etc with minimal artist time that held up to close inspection was a HUGE timesaver, especially in the overworld that connected the different levels together.

In August of 2003, the development period for *Ty 2* was extended to October 2004, but the scope of the game also increased. At this point we decided not to have any loading screens present throughout the game. So right near the end of 2003 (after nearly a full year of development on *Ty 2*), level streaming technology was introduced into the game. This change meant that more content could fit into a level by having discrete packages of memory load in and out as required. However, the down side to this change was that the large, sweeping levels we already built were not suitable for streaming, and so began a year long scramble to edit, modify and build new, more suitable levels. To further complicate matters, as we worked towards our last milestones, more and more streaming problems emerged as our internal QA department gave the streaming system its paces. If the player ping-ponged between triggers fast enough the system could be confused and packages of memory couldn't load and initialize fast enough, so delays had to be built in. There were also problems caused by some of the boomerangs in the game that could fly into areas that weren't yet loaded.

Many of the solutions we put in place to fix these problems were less than ideal. For example, the "airlocks" - rooms the player was sealed in until the next section was loaded - found throughout the game were just small rooms with hardly any props in them and were considered by many of us to be an eyesore. But with the amount of time left in the schedule they were an unfortunate necessity. The large overworld that was built, to connect all the different levels and missions, couldn't load and initialize fast enough without major popping, so chicanes and "slow-down" areas (sand and mud) were added. Though truthfully the sand and mud made the level look more interesting - all that asphalt got a bit monotonous. We added these areas about two weeks AFTER Beta, so things really did go right down to the wire. We made our gold master date by the skin of our teeth thanks to a huge effort by both our internal QA department and the dev team… and quite a few late nights and weekend work throughout the course of the project, (as well as some hefty content removal - at least 10-15 missions and two more kart tracks). This supreme effort resulted not only with us going gold on time, but we also passed hardware approval first time eight out of eight (Sony NTSC and PAL, Microsoft NTSC and PAL, GameCube with NTSC and PAL as well as GBA America and Japan). Once again, a HUGE thanks to all those involved.
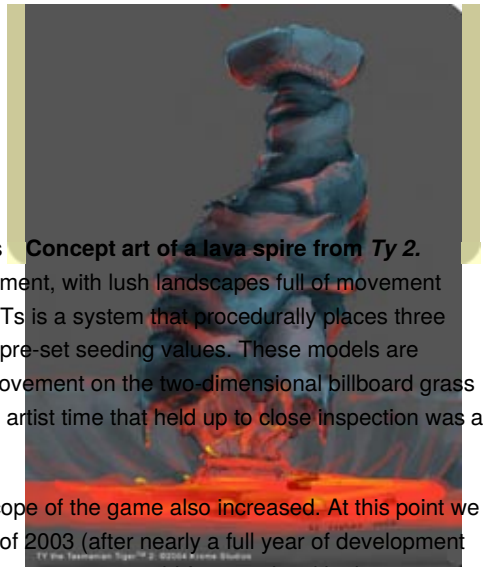
Challenges of Making a Game for Kids

Never underestimate the intelligence of your audience, especially the younger gamers. In fact, we believe they are often the toughest critics (and best allies). Though the average age is 29-years-old for your typical gamer, the kids' market is definitely different and more fickle. Kids these days are really smart and intuitive, so it takes a lot to keep them interested and entertained.

Generally, kids respond well to an action-packed experience - they become involved in the events (often yelling out encouragement to the hero in a scene, whether it is part of a movie or a game), however, it is important to remember that action does not necessarily equate to violence. Kids will respond to a frantic chase scene (think Woody and Buzz chasing after the car in *Toy Story*) so long as they care about or make a connection with the characters involved. This is what Krome did in both *Ty* games. In *Ty 2*, we made sure that there were exciting, non-violent scenes involving the main characters (the helicopter missions, the rescue missions) as well as providing combat and smashing in a friendly fashion (no blood or gibs here), to provide a balanced gameplay experience.

One of the biggest challenges of making a game that will appeal to kids is to keep in mind your target demographic. There's a difference between making a great game, in general, and making a great game for younger kids. We may be kids at heart, but we are still adults. Sure, we like giant robots, we've got Transformer action figures all over our desks and have Nerf wars through the workplace, but there aren't many of us that burst into tears when you can't jump over a fence that LOOKS like you can due to invisible collision, or get scared because the spiders are too life-like.

For that reason, we've always looked to the kids for checks and balances by conducting numerous focus test

groups to examine the suitability of the game content. We believe that focus testing is a necessary step to creating a kids game. In fact, we - along with our co-publishing partner on *Ty 1* and *Ty 2*, Electronic Arts - made sure to conduct numerous internal and external focus tests during various milestones throughout the games development.

Concept art of a big dead fish from *Ty 2*.

Facilitating a focus test may sound simple, but there are a few things that need to be remembered when the game is for a young market:

- It's important to remember to keep the questions concise and simple, otherwise you won't get an answer of any use. Also, never let the kids write the answer themselves - a moderator should listen to the kids talk about the game and write the answers down, otherwise the young children will be concentrating too much on how to write instead of what to say.
- Don't let the focus test go for too long. You'll get more information through doing many short sessions then a long session, as kids attention spans are generally short, and they won't retain any thoughts about things that annoyed them two hours earlier.
- Don't have too many kids in the same area, or too close together, or they'll all want to show each other what they're doing, and you won't end up getting any information on the things you need to get information on.
- Something that Krome has found is that the kids love seeing their names in the credits. If you're going to do this, just remember that most publishers will require a signed release form from the child's guardian to use their name. It is really annoying having to subsequently chase this information, so make sure the forms are on hand during the focus test session. Generally, this is a great way of the kids being so excited about doing the focus test that they'll be more than ready to come back again.
- Don't get upset when kids start to cry. It will happen.

Krome has always conducted focus tests for our all our titles, especially the kid-oriented titles we've worked on (*Jimmy Neutron*, *Barbie*, etc). The experience we'd gained through testing previous kids titles were of great help in preparing the questions for *Ty 2*. The *Ty 2* focus test groups examined almost every aspect of the game; from how clear the in-game instructions were to the suitability of the default controller configurations. The information from these sessions really influenced the way the game developed. For example, while the early versions of *Ty 2* did have the battle bunyips present, much of the information we received was that the kids wanted more vehicles - and so, kart racing, helicopter games and the fourbie were added (and, in fact, became quite a large part of the end game).

In addition to the internal focus testing, *Ty 2* was also submitted to Scholastic to get a formal focus test completed by the worldwide publishing and media company. This Scholastic testing re-enforced the information gained through Krome's internal testing, indicating that Australian kids weren't significantly different from

American kids in their tastes, and it also allowed *Ty 2* to be tested and rated against other family friendly products (something that's much more difficult to do in-house). In the end, *Ty 2* was rated as the top video game at Scholastic's toy testing day.

While *Ty 2* was aimed at a younger audience, a few elements of the game still contain content that rewards older/more mature gamers, including a few more difficult puzzles, dual-layer humor (where there are two separate jokes in the same line, one for the kids, one for the parents) and a few homages to pop culture. However, any puzzle that the focus testers could not complete was made easier to ensure the end product was firmly focused on its target audience. For the development of *Ty 2*, focus testing was an outright blessing and should always be considered a necessity for any game that a group of 20- to 30-somethings is making for six year olds.

Reviewer Ratings and Pricing for the Family

We find that it is sometimes difficult for a younger-skewed game to get an impartial review. Writing an editorial review for a kid's game can be a tricky thing, as it's hard to put yourself in the mindset of an eight-year-old - in an ideal world, there would be more kids reviewing kid's oriented games. When kids DO review games, it is usually conducted with the mainstream media rather than video game publications, but their results are often time more accurate and relevant to the kids buying/playing games.
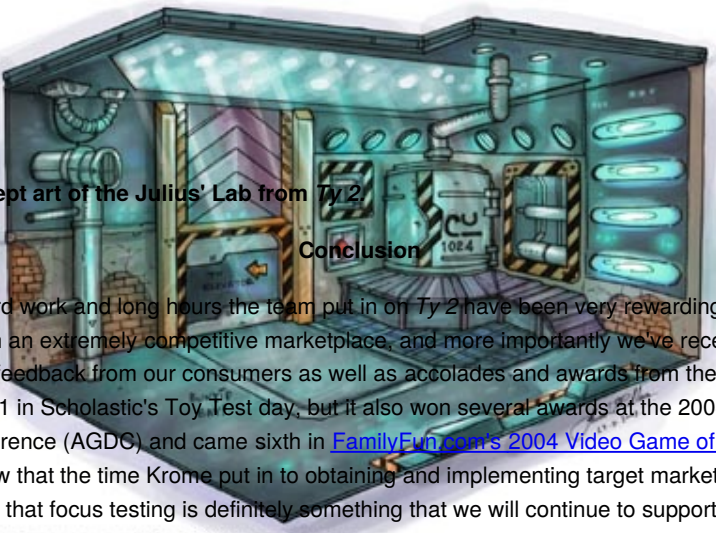
The catch-22 is that we as game developers often place too much value on the opinions and review scores from the gaming enthusiast press. Don't get me wrong, everyone here at Krome - including myself - value this community's feedback (and their feedback is extremely invaluable for other kinds of games), but we also find it frustrating that often times comparisons are made to other games that aren't necessarily relevant to the title at hand. Point in case, on www.Gamerankings.com the average rated score for *Ty 2* on PS2 is 72.8% (ranging from 60% to 91% scores across 25 ranked reviews).

Compare this to the Family Fun test results, in which *Ty 2* scored 94% when reviewed by 50 kids. To us, this shows that (generally) there needs to be more effort in maintaining impartiality in reviewing kids games. Similar to developing a kids game when you're not a kid, reviewers need to take into account who is the target audience and what they like. However, it should be noted that even in the 'bad' reviews, you'll quite often see lines like 'Great for kids playing their first platformer' or 'Anybody who likes X will love this game'. To anybody creating kids games, lines like these usually mean you've hit the nail on the head, it's just a pity that this isn't reflected in the score awarded to the game.

Price point is something that will really affect sales, especially for the younger kids market. In the lead-up to the 2004 holiday season, the big first-party platformers were all to hit the market close together, and irrespective as to whether *Ty 2* was meant to be a direct competitor to them, comparisons were inevitable. Additionally, the price of current generation hardware continued to fall, so with these points in mind it was deemed necessary to release *Ty 2* at a lower price point.

Doing this presented the game as great value for money (as the consumer was getting not only a platformer, but a fully-fledged kart racing game) and separated *Ty 2* from being lumped in with the rest as 'just another platformer' (just look at the sales of the *ESPN 2K5* sports series for another example of how price point can affect sales). Lowering the cost was a good strategy for us this year as it allowed us to lower the barrier of entry and reach a broader audience who either might not be able to afford so many games or who might not feel spending $50 on a premium kids title was justified. Looking forward, it is more than likely that, as the price of the current consoles continues to fall with the approach of next generation hardware, more games will emerge at a lower price point since consumers won't feel they're getting value for their money when the console costs $100, but the games cost $50 a piece.

Concept art of the Julius' Lab from *Ty 2*

Conclusion

All in all, the hard work and long hours the team put in on *Ty 2* have been very rewarding. The game has performed well in an extremely competitive marketplace, and more importantly we've received an amazing amount of positive feedback from our consumers as well as accolades and awards from the media. Not only did *Ty 2* rank number 1 in Scholastic's Toy Test day, but it also won several awards at the 2004 Australian Game Developer's Conference (AGDC) and came sixth in [FamilyFun.com's 2004 Video Game of the Year](#) program. These awards show that the time Krome put in to obtaining and implementing target market feedback was well worth the effort and that focus testing is definitely something that we will continue to support for future products.

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