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Postmortem: Wadjet Eye's *The Blackwell Convergence*

By Dave Gilbert

[In this honest indie postmortem, Wadjet Eye Games' Gilbert discusses the creation of adventure game sequel The Blackwell Convergence, looking at everything from promotion through art direction and engine to analyze what went right -- and wrong -- in the game's creation.]

The *Blackwell* games are point-and-click adventures made by my small indie game studio, Wadjet Eye Games, that center on an awkward writer named Rosangela ("Rosa") Blackwell who, upon her aunt's death, inherited the family ghost. The ghost in question is Joey Malone, a sardonic spirit from the 1930s. Their task is to assist lost souls and investigate supernatural goings on.

The Blackwell Convergence marks the third game in the series, and after three games I have realized that sequels are a very funny thing. On the one hand, you have the opportunity to enlarge a franchise and keep your characters in the public eye.

You've learned from your mistakes, and can apply your newfound knowledge to making the next game better. But you also run the big risk of alienating your old fans in the hope of courting new ones. Is change always good? Well, read on, and see how I fared.

What Went Right

1. Evolving Rosa's Character

When I wrote the first *Blackwell* game, my goal in creating Rosa Blackwell was to make a character who was hurt by her past and thrust into a situation she had no interest or desire to be in, but made the best of it and emerged a better person because of it.

For the most part, people liked Rosa. They liked her awkwardness; they liked the fact that she was a relatable human being with flaws. Unfortunately, because of these qualities, they also found her very difficult to play. She was often so socially awkward that she became a hindrance rather than a help.

There was a key moment in the first *Blackwell* game where Rosa needs to speak to a woman named Nishanthi. Nishanthi is in the park, playing her flute in front of a crowd of onlookers. A normal person would just walk up to her and say "Excuse me" but Rosa is too shy to approach her in front of a crowd. Instead, you have to solve a puzzle in order to draw Nishanthi away from the crowd so Rosa is comfortable enough to talk to her.

As a character study, it worked. It's a natural thing for Rosa to do, and it really hammered home her sense of isolation and cemented her as a social misfit. But for a player involved in an interactive experience? It was frustrating. he original game was littered with moments like these and I wanted to fix that for *Convergence*.

But, how was I supposed to "fix" Rosa without completely changing her character? Simple. I didn't change her. I just put more focus on her positive traits than her negative ones. Rosa is the bookish sort. She's a writer and a reporter, which makes her intellectual and very observant. She knows when people are acting suspicious or when they are lying. This is a side of Rosa that we didn't see in the first game, so I made a point of showing these traits in the sequel.

Plus, the sequel takes place six months after the first, so she has had the time to mature and get used to her new supernatural abilities. Rosa is still very awkward in the game (and it provides the game with some of its more funny moments), but the awkwardness takes a back seat to her other qualities which get a chance to shine.

When the game was released, the change in Rosa's character was instantly noticed by reviewers. Some criticized it for being too much of a drastic change, while others felt it gave her a much-needed edge. I don't think either is entirely accurate. For me, she is still the same Rosa Blackwell -- just viewed from a different angle.

2. Using AGS as a Development Platform

It's a very good time to be an indie, as there are countless free third party tools that you can use for development. As for myself, I use AGS. Short for Adventure Game Studio, it is a third party engine geared toward the creation of old-school adventure games. It is a system that has been tested and refined for almost 10 years by many users, so it one of the more reliable tools out there.

Using a mature existing engine like AGS took a ton of the grunt work out of development. Being familiar with the system I was able to do 99% of the programming myself, saving a lot on development costs.

It also enabled me to prototype game events very quickly so I (and QA testers) was able to see what worked well. If something didn't work well, it was a quick matter to make adjustments. The only disadvantage of the system is the lack of portability, so *Convergence* will never play on a Mac anytime soon -- but the benefits more than made up for it.

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3. The Change in Art Direction

A large advantage of having an episodic series is that you can reuse assets. Two games in, I had lots of art and animations for Rosa and Joey which we could use (for free!) in *Convergence*, as well as several backgrounds that could be reused (again, for free!). All we had to do was make sure the other characters and backgrounds were drawn in the same style for consistency.

The problem? The original artist who designed and animated the characters was not available. So, the quest was on to find an artist who could match his style. Unfortunately, that proved to be more difficult than I thought.

The first artist I hired tried valiantly for several months, but his designs -- while very good -- were just slightly off when placed next to the original sprites from *Legacy*. The heads were too big or the proportions were never quite right. In the end, he didn't feel he was up to the job and politely bowed out.

After spending ages trying to find an artist who could mimic the original style, I eventually came to the realization that I didn't have to. The purpose of reusing the original art was to save time and money, and that wasn't happening. So why not just cut my losses, redo the original designs to make them better?

I called upon a sprite artist and animator I had worked with before and asked him if he was up for it. He was, and within a week he sent me new designs for Rosa and Joey that not only looked good, they even surpassed the originals. Within a month they were fully animated and he was on the way to creating the rest of the cast. The problem was not only solved -- it never existed in the first place.

This improvement in art direction also extended to the backgrounds. The game needed nicer-looking backgrounds to go with the new characters, so I called upon an art studio to do the job. Working with a professional art studio to do the backgrounds was a totally new experience for me, and while they were more expensive than my usual freelancers the results were worth it.

The lesson learned? Sometimes starting over from scratch is the best way to go.

4. The Long Tail

I first game up with the idea for *Blackwell* in 2003, and I knew very quickly that there was no way I could plug the entire story into one game. There was too much back story, too many characters, and way too much... well, *everything,* for it all to be easily absorbed in one sitting.

I made it into an episodic series instead. The whole "episodic gaming" thing was kind of new at the time, but it made sense. You create one "episode" and you gain a following, which helps fund the second game. The second game then helps renew interest in the first, and so on...

This is a great system for getting games out the door, except of course for when it isn't. The biggest risk in undertaking an episodic series is that the first game might not sell well enough, so the series becomes dead in the water. Fortunately, this never came to pass. While a struggle at first, the first two games in the series have slowly earned a steady following, so by the time *Convergence* came around there were plenty of customers waiting in the wings to buy it.

The initial short-term sales of the game were more than satisfactory, but once that release buzz and initial flurry of sales winds down, something has to take its place. Which leads me to...

5. Stepping up Marketing Efforts

My knowledge of marketing and PR is only slightly greater than my knowledge of quantum physics.

For years I had relied on word-of-mouth to sell my games, and I didn't do any marketing or PR at all aside from sending the games to review sites and buying the occasional cheap banner ad. I was putting most of my efforts into making the games so I couldn't be bothered with all that sales stuff. How I was able to earn my living for three years doing this is beyond me, but somehow I managed.

Of course, that was before our current economic meltdown. There's only so far word-of-mouth can take you when people have less money to spend. When *Convergence* was released I knew I had to step my efforts up. I began speaking to every PR person I could find and asked

them for advice.

I sent out press releases, I offered discounts, I implemented limited-time offers. Basically, I did everything I could to make some noise and tell people that my games were out there and it would be a darn good idea to give me their cash in order to play them.

In the end, the efforts proved worthwhile. My traffic surged exponentially. My site's Alexa ranking, languishing in the two million range, sprinted ahead to a respectable 300,000 to 400,000 and it continues to gain traction. My monthly income is still enough to pay all the bills and keep me doing what I love. I still have a ways to go, and I'm always looking to PR people to talk to, but putting more time into PR was the best move I could have made.

What Went Wrong

1. Some Marketing Efforts, While Earnest, Were Quite Amateur

I had a brilliant idea. I was going to create a bunch of short animated cartoons starring the two characters from the game and start spreading them around the internet. Curious about the characters in the cartoons, people would come to the website to learn more about them. Viral marketing! That's what it's all about.

So, I brought on board a few writers to write the cartoon sketches for me. Six were written, and I brought in the actors to record the lines. Now all I needed to do was nab an animator to make the cartoons for me. Easy, right?

Heck, no. I was a bit naïve, and I figured I could just hop onto Newgrounds and find some budding young animator who would be happy for the opportunity to make these in return for a bit of cash. I found some soon enough, but not a single one of them followed through.

In the end, I ended up hiring a professional animation studio to do them. They gave me a generous rate, but even still I could only afford to make three of the cartoons and I had to severely limit the amount of animation in each one. But, hey -- at least they got made.

So I had my cartoons, but it wasn't long before I realized I had no idea what to do with them. I put them on the usual places like YouTube, GameTrailers, Newgrounds, and announced them on various game sites, but they did not generate the buzz I was expecting.

I like the cartoons. They are funny and people seem to like them. The idea of making the cartoons was sound, but my limited marketing experience left me with no idea what to do with them once I had them.

2. Getting a Publishing Deal

What? This is a bad thing? Well, not really. But read on.

The second game in the series, *Blackwell Unbound,* was released in August of 2007. I soon announced that *The Blackwell Convergence*

would be finished by March of 2008. What I did not expect was that I would get a call from a major game publisher who was interested in hiring me to design and produce a fully-funded game. This was an offer I couldn't refuse, so I accepted, and soon, *Emerald City Confidential* was greenlit and on its way.

Getting this gig meant many good things. I was working with a genuine budget, and could create a game with real production values. I was working with a real marketing and sales department, who could help guide me into making something that would really sell. Also, for the first time in years, I had some semblance of financial stability.

Unfortunately, this also meant that I had to put *Blackwell Convergence* on the back burner. I didn't have the energy or the manpower to work on both projects at once, so production on *Convergence* was almost completely halted. This disappointed many fans, who had been promised a new game by March and weren't going to get it. When they asked when the game was coming out, I could only reply that I didn't know.

Blackwell Convergence came out in July of 2009 -- almost a year and half after it was promised. Do I regret what happened? I don't. I learned a lot working on *Emerald City* and the money I earned while making it enabled me to pay for the new artwork that I mentioned above, so *Blackwell Convergence* emerged significantly improved as a result. I do regret disappointing the fans, though, as well as not giving as much attention to my own budding community while I was working on the bigger game.

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3. The Notebook Interface

In the first two Blackwell games, *Blackwell Legacy* and *Blackwell Unbound,* your character carried a notebook with her. As you went through the game, you'd collect clues and you'd write them in your notebook. These clues acted like inventory items that you could combine together and get more clues.

This interface was touted by the critics as being very unique and innovative (although *Discworld Noir* did it first), but the players told a different story. For most players, the notebook gave them the greatest amount of frustration.

"It's obvious that Cecil Sharpe and the band C-Sharps are related," complained players of *Blackwell Unbound.* "Why doesn't my character know it too?" My suggestion to combine the "C-Sharps" and "Cecil Sharpe" clues in the notebook was met with replies of "Oh. That's annoying."

At first I shrugged off these complaints, but they were right. Combining clues in this fashion was not an intuitive way to get through a puzzle, even though it's a very appropriate mechanic for a mystery game. I had originally designed *Blackwell Convergence* to include the notebook mechanic and incorporated several puzzles with it, but after the umpteenth complaint about the system I knew it was dead weight and I had to remove it.

However, this caused a problem. One the one hand, removing the notebook made the game much more streamlined and pleasant to play, but on the other hand it removed a significant amount of challenge. In the end, I decided that making the game more fun was more important than making it more challenging, so I removed the clue-combining aspect of the interface completely.

The result? Many more players mourned the loss of the notebook than I thought would, especially the hardcore fans of the previous games, and the critics. A lot of reviews said that the "simplification" of the game was the one thing holding it back from being the best in the series. I still stand by the decision, but I wish I had made this decision earlier so I would have had time to come up with something better to take its place.

Will the notebook return in the fourth game? Perhaps. At least now I can now plan ahead and make a solid attempt at making a clue-combining interface that is both intuitive and fun to use.

4. Higher Production Values Made Little Difference in Profits

I mentioned earlier how the production values of *Convergence* were significantly better than those of the previous games. This also meant that the game cost significantly more money to make!

The slicker production values did help *Convergence* sell much better than its predecessors, but it also took much longer to earn back the production costs. So in terms of pure profit, my earnings are exactly the same as the previous titles. I am satisfied enough with how the game is selling, but I do have to ask the question: would I have been better off keeping the lower production values (and cost) of the original games?

Honestly, I don't know. Perhaps some kind of cost/sales analysis would shed some light, but as an indie developer with very little experience with business or sales I wouldn't know where to begin. Either way, on a personal level I love how the game looks and sounds. It easily conveys the dark mood and atmosphere of the series perfectly, and is exactly how I envisioned the game when I first started out.

5. Over-Reliance on Distribution Channels

When the first Blackwell game, *The Blackwell Legacy,* was accepted by the game distribution portals I was a nervous wreck. At the time, I was struggling very hard to sell my games and I figured their success on the portals would make or break me.

When the game leapt up to the top 10 charts of game portals like Big Fish, PlayFirst, and iWin, I figured I had finally "made it" and had discovered the secret to successfully selling my games. In a nutshell, I was going to rely on the distribution networks to do it for me.

That was in 2007. Now, a whole two years later, things are different. A lot of distribution channels have lowered their prices to the point where it's very difficult for a developer to earn any serious money. In addition, the competition is a heck of a lot more fierce and the economy is severely limiting the number of games people buy. The result is that customers are buying fewer games and paying less for them.

So when *Convergence* went up on the portals, I was not surprised to see it struggling to get noticed. I learned my lesson very quickly: I could no longer rely on the game portals to sustain the majority of my income.

They can make up a part of it, but relying on them completely was a bad idea. I had to -- gulp -- actually do some marketing and PR work myself. This forced me to become much more self-reliant, as I explained above.

Conclusion

In reading over this postmortem I realize that most of my "rights" are about evolving the series and my "wrongs" are about sales and marketing, which I guess shows where my priorities are. Being an indie studio made up of me and a couple of freelance artists, there are limits to what I can accomplish.

I have a story I want to tell, and this is the medium (no pun intended) that I've chosen to tell it. I am constantly re-evaluating what works and what doesn't and trying new approaches in how to tell an interactive story, but for too long I ignored the business end of things and that became a liability. I'm glad I finally noticed this and took steps to correct it. Learning from your mistakes is important, because it enables you to make room for more!