

Interview: The World Design Of *Diablo III*

By Sterling McGarvey

[Blizzard designer Leonard Boyarsky talks to Gamasutra about the process of expanding the *Diablo* universe significantly with the third installment of the series, talking about what has both worked and what has not.]

Tackling mammoth expectations while building a world for a highly-anticipated sequel would be daunting for most game designers. Thankfully, Leonard Boyarsky isn't just any designer. With nearly 20 years in the industry, Boyarsky's career encompasses several PC cult classics, including art direction for *Fallout* and *Fallout 2* at Interplay, as well as *Arcanum* and *Vampire: The Masquerade - Bloodlines* during his helm as CEO and co-founder of Troika Games.

After Troika's demise, Boyarsky joined Blizzard in 2006, where he's been hard at work as *Diablo III*'s game world designer. He has integrated his years of know-how into crafting a game that evokes the feel of its predecessors while driving a more plot-focused experience.

In this interview, Boyarsky details the experience of working on a title with lofty expectations, infusing *Diablo III* with more back story, and scrapped iterations of the game on its long journey from concept to product.

What's challenging about going from wholesale crafting an aesthetic -- as you did in *Fallout* -- to working within a certain set of expectations?

Leonard Boyarsky: Well, it's really just interesting to come in and work with an established franchise, but a lot of the process is the same: trying to find interesting ways to explore the story, to develop the universe.

I think the most interesting thing about the *Diablo* universe is just that there's so much richness to it that hadn't been really explored.

So, I think that's the way I approached it, looking at what we could do with this universe that really hasn't been exploited. [VP of creative development] Chris Metzen was really on board with that because he really had a lot of ideas and a lot of things that he wanted to see in the series that hadn't been brought to the forefront. So, it's been a very creative process. It's been very challenging but enriching at the same time.



Can you provide some examples of elements within the *Diablo* lore in which there were gaps for you to expand upon?

LB: Well, I think they had a lot of ideas -- like Chris was talking about [during the *Diablo III* presentation preceding this interview], the battle between Heaven and Hell, and all that stuff -- where they kind of touched on some of that stuff, but they didn't really explore it.

A perfect example is like [Deckard Cain](#), you know. He identified your items, and he threw out a bit of lore for you in the first

two games, but you know, we've give him this extra depth that we feel like he should've been able to see... if he had taken the [Horadric](#) teaching a little more seriously earlier on, he could have avoided what happened during *Diablo*. Kind of giving him a little more depth as a character, we feel.

And it's a different time in terms of game-making. You know, we want the characters to be deeper. We want them to have more realistic motivations, I guess you'd say, have reasons for what they're doing, and feel like they have a background and history to them.

In your long career of working on different franchises from *Fallout* to working with *Vampire: The Masquerade*, you've definitely dealt with very passionate, vocal fans. Would you say that's given you thicker skin for coming into *Diablo III*?

LB: [laughs] Yes. You would definitely have to have thick skin, because there's always going to be people who don't like what you've done or are objecting to your latest decisions. So, you get used to it after a while. Try not to take it too [personally]...

It's a double-edged sword because it's very helpful to hear what people have to say, how people see things and what people want to see from a franchise, whether it's one that you created or whether it's one that you're carrying on.

It's not to say that we always have to blindly follow what the fans want, but it's nice to know what the fans are looking for, if that makes sense. [It's important to know] what people are expecting, what people are looking for, the questions that they feel that they need to have answers to. Because if you don't deliver on at least some of those things, then you've kind of failed.

What do you think is particularly different now working on this compared to your experiences with, say, the *Fallout* community?

LB: Well, the big difference was with *Fallout*, there really was no community when we started. I mean, we just were starting from scratch. You know, there was no expectation. So, this is a big difference from that. But the *Fallout* community is extremely vocal and extremely opinionated about what they want or don't want, so that's kind of prepared me for the *Diablo* community, which is also very passionate about the game. They have distinct wants, likes, and dislikes for the series. But overall, I mean, we've gotten a really good response from everything we've showed and the stuff we've done.

Are there any other contemporaries that you've looked at and admired something about their execution, different elements?

LB: In terms of games?

Yeah, in terms of games.

LB: I really thought *BioShock* was really cool. I thought they did some cool stuff. I'm really excited to see what they've done with *Infinite*. What else is out there? I thought *Batman: Arkham Asylum* did a great job of creating the world of Batman, which was something that had been tried before but hadn't really been accomplished. I'm sure there are others, but those are the first two that really come to mind.

Several years ago, you mentioned some dismay over seeing *Fallout* be "sold to the highest bidder," but said that it was too early to judge. How do you feel about what Bethesda and Obsidian have done in resurrecting the franchise that you helped birth?

LB: I don't like to comment on other people's games. I liked the *Fallout 3* stuff that was done. One of the most interesting aspects of it... I started as an art director on *Fallout 3* [the cancelled version known as "Project Van Buren" at Interplay], and I did a little art on it, so it was interesting seeing a lot of art that I had done recreated in this different space by different artists, but, you know, they obviously bought this license, and they had a love for it.

They put their heart and soul into it. It's not easy making games. [laughs] You know, I'm not going to come along and second-guess what other people have done. The people who made *Diablo* before me could say the same thing about what we're doing with *Diablo III*, so I wish them all the best of luck with what they're doing with it.



Perhaps it sounds a bit cliché, but it's often said that adversity and strife build character. In past interviews, you've said that the writing was on the wall at Interplay and it was a major reason that you moved on to co-found Troika, which was undoubtedly quite the experience. What is Blizzard providing you?

LB: A very creative atmosphere. You know, they've let us pretty much guide the development of the project. It very much has the kind of game development culture that we tried to create at Troika, and feels like old Interplay did, when Interplay was doing really well. It feels like the teams have control of their destiny, and they were making games because we think these are the games we want to play, we think these are the games our fans want to play. So, it's really a creative culture, and it's really just a great environment to work in.

What are some specific challenges of building and designing a world that's versatile enough for one person and bots to play, and for a chaotic party that's sniffing around for stuff to break and exploit?

LB: Well, as far as multiplayer goes, we tried at the beginning -- approaching this from the story angle -- we were really trying to make sure that the story came across, even in multiplayer.

We've come to the conclusion that when you're playing multiplayer, the story of the game is more about the story you're playing with your friends as opposed to the actual quest line. Now, if you're playing with a bunch of people who are really interested in getting the story of the game and the quest lines, that's a different thing, but *Diablo* can be very frantic and fast-paced, so a lot of times, you're in there and you're just playing it... You know, it's all about the fun of just playing with your friends.

So, the story and the story delivery is really focused on the single-player aspect. And the multiplayer, you can still get that, but we've tried to leave it open so you can have a great multiplayer experience, as opposed to forcing the story on people or forcing these things that are like, oh, you have to jump through these hoops to get the gameplay experience because of the nature of the game in itself.

It seems that the push-pull dynamic between satisfying long-time fans and crafting a world that's not too confusing for newcomers has become a bigger priority for designers. Where does your approach to design fall within those parameters? Is it applicable to what you've worked on?

LB: For us, on the story side, we just had this feeling that we wanted to bring forward a lot of things that kind of had been left hanging, and bringing back some old characters from the old series. We just felt there was a lot of rich ground to still explore as opposed to going to a completely new direction. It obviously felt like *Lord of Destruction* ended on a cliffhanger. So, it was really ripe for us to step in and continue the story. But at the same time, we weren't really bound by the storytelling in *Diablo II*. They had the story there, but it was a little looser.

It wasn't as -- how can I put this..? *Diablo* gameplay is all about grabbing all the loot you can and moving through it as fast as possible. We've tried to align our storytelling with that kind of mentality of playing the game.

We've tried to streamline it and really make it so that as you're playing it, as you're getting the story, it doesn't feel like you're taking a break in the action, whereas in *Diablo II* or *Diablo*, you'd talk to somebody and it'd just be a wall of text.

So, we really feel like, in the style of telling the story, we're moving even more toward the kind of gameplay that people don't feel that they're being taken out of the gameplay when they hear the story.

And I feel like this is the reaction we've gotten from internal people that are playing the Alpha, players who said they don't really care about the story, and really care just more about the action. Once we started delivering the story in that manner, they started to respond more to it. They're like, "Yeah, I actually cared to stop and see what was going on." So, it feels like we're evolving, from that standpoint.

As far as the content goes, it's bringing depth to what was there before. The example I used about Deckard Cain before, in *Diablo*, he talks about how he's doing his research. It's kind of obvious that he wasn't really enmeshed in being the last of the Horadrim at the very beginning. It's a little hinted at, but not really touched upon. His relationship with Adria in that one is kind of touched on, but not really expounded upon. There's a lot of this raw material that we just felt was really ripe for us to get in and deepen and bring more to the forefront, I guess is the best way to put it.



It's been three years since unveiling at the Blizzard Worldwide Invitational in Paris. In those initial interviews, you discussed the process of creating and implementing ideas that would've undone extensive elements of progress, but then going ahead and implementing them anyway. Can you provide some examples of ideas that might have worked a few years ago that wouldn't fit into today's build?

LB: I don't know if they ever worked. When we first started, we had a concept of "let's introduce player choice. Let's have some quests in which you can choose how you end them." And that really just kind of brought gameplay to a halt. It just really was antithetical to the *Diablo*-style gameplay of continually moving forward, and chasing the action.

It was a great idea. It felt very RPG, you know? It was going to be great. But then what happens when you're playing with your friends? You have to roll for whoever makes the choice. It really just kind of stops you dead in your tracks. So, ideas like that -- that sounded great on paper -- when we put them in, just didn't feel like *Diablo* gameplay.

In general, as I've mentioned, the delivery of the story is something we've done a lot of iteration on. We obviously decided early on to go with conversations as opposed to monologues. Our process has been one of trying to keep paring it down to as little as possible.

But we even found just even recently, we've gone through and even done what we call a micro-pacing pass, just to do things like, maybe the player... instead of having as part of the conversation... maybe the NPC or teammate will say the line as you're running away. Just little things like that make the game feel like it's a little quicker in the pace.

And those things kind of build on each other. It kind of creates an overall feeling that really reinforces the *Diablo* gameplay. So, it's really been a trial-and-error and iteration, as Blizzard is known for. We just put our best guesses in the game, and see if it works. And half of the time we end up tearing it out and re-working it.

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