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Case History: History of Computer Game Design
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Adventure Gaming: Where has the quest gone?

Adventure games were the backbone of computer gaming through the early 1990's. You know, those kinds of games where you spend hours figuring out how to work the magic clock so that it will spring open and give you a key which will unlock the safe, which contains the code to get into the warehouse where your main nemesis has been hiding. One of the powerhouse adventure gaming developers in the early 1990's was Sierra. Sierra had many hit adventure games, but one of their series in particular seems to chronicle the rise and fall of adventure games. The Gabriel Knight series by Sierra is a great example of how changing technologies gave adventure games the chance to become a prominent form of interactive entertainment. If you asked virtually anyone in the early 1990's where computer games were headed, they would have told you that interactive fiction/adventure games were the future. The three Gabriel Knight games that Sierra produced starting in 1993 and ending in 1999 represent an evolving computer game market and a changing company.

At the head of adventure game development for many years was the then well-known company, Sierra. Sierra was started in the early 1980's under the name Online Systems, which was changed to Sierraventure in 1982, and finally shortened to Sierra in 1984 (Meier). Sierra was most known for their pioneering adventure games. They were the leaders, always trying to push the boundaries and come up with totally new innovative games. Their first game "Mystery House" was released in 1982 for the Apple II and was one of the first games to combine graphics with text-based input. Admittedly,

the graphics were not much, actually just stick drawings, but the game was extremely popular. This provided the player base that Sierra needed, and they went on to dominate the computer game market for many years.

Sierra made a name for themselves through adventure games, and when they decided to abandon adventure games in the changing market, they ultimately disappeared from the list of serious gaming companies. The decision to kill the adventure gaming department was made in 1999, shortly before the release of Gabriel Knight 3, the idea being that adventure games were not profitable enough anymore to warrant spending a lot of money and resources on them. The company had also recently been sold and was being restructured under new management. One former employee, Josh Mandel, in a letter to adventure game fans said, “Whether you were a Sierra fan or not, we are all diminished by the loss of history, talent, and continuity within the gaming industry.” The computer gaming market in general has always been a volatile market. You can have a hit game but one hit game will not keep you in business. If you do not have/use the latest technologies in each of your games you will not succeed. If you are not continually pushing the boundaries and using new technologies your company will not survive. You need to find the right balance of innovation and familiarity. Sierra did achieve this with their Gabriel Knight games, and a few other games as well, but, unfortunately, an adventure game company cannot stay in business with only a few hit games.

In 1993, Sierra published the first Gabriel Knight mystery titled, “Gabriel Knight: Sins of the Fathers.” In “Sins of the Fathers” you played as the title character Gabriel, a bookshop owner in New Orleans, LA, who was researching Voodoo murders in New Orleans for a book that he is writing. Throughout the game, you interact with many

interesting characters, travel to Germany and Africa, and learn about Voodoo. The Gabriel Knight (GK) stories are well known for giving accurate historical information within the storyline with enough fiction to make the story intriguing. As the story unwinds, Gabriel realizes that he is tied to the murders through his past and that there are many things he does not know about his family history. Gabriel discovers that he is the last in the line of *Schattenjäger* (Shadow Hunters in German), those people who are destined to fight the dark forces of evil. This story was what really separated GK from all the adventure games Sierra had done before it. Jane Jensen, the game's designer, had created very real characters that even had character growth within the game. *Gamespot* called GK "arguably the most mature game ever released by Sierra." GK holds a place on *Gamespot's* "Modern History of Horror Games" as well. Sierra's tagline for the game was "A supernatural psycho-thriller." *Gamespot* also goes on to say, "The story recounted was a true masterpiece of plot and pace capable of drawing in the most jaded adventure aficionado (*Gamespot's* Modern History of Computer Horror Games)."

As mentioned, the designer of GK was Jane Jensen, an aspiring writer who worked for Sierra after being a programmer for Hewlett Packard. She had been at Sierra for two years before she started working on Gabriel Knight, which was the first game that she totally designed by herself. Jensen was very excited about the possibilities for interactive entertainment. "Sins of the Fathers" was considered to be untypical of most Sierra games at the time, as it appealed to a more mature audience. It was also technologically dazzling at the time. It was the first game published by Sierra to take full advantage of the new CD-ROM format. Tom DaSalvo, the lead programmer for GK was impressed with the "movie like quality [they] could attain from CD (*Making of GK*)."

GK was “truly CD orientated (*Making of GK*).” Sierra worked hard on finding just the right people to cast as the voices of the game characters. They were surprised to be able to attract such actors as Tim Curry, Mark Hamill, and other well-known actors. The actors working on the game were very excited to be a part of what Mark Hamill called a “groundbreaking” process. They all agreed that recording for a computer game was like nothing they had ever done; the script for GK contained approximately 7500 lines of dialogue, which is equivalent to 5 full length feature animated movies. The actors were also all very excited about what the future of interactive entertainment held (*Making of GK*). Robert Holmes, the composer for GK was also very excited about the new CD-ROM format. Using CD meant that he could increase the quality on GK’s score. He created all original music for the game and used variations on the main theme for the various different locations. That main theme would figure into the other GK games in the series as well. Even though GK was Sierra’s first direct-to-CD release, Sierra was interested in reaching as large an audience as possible. Because of this, Sierra also released GK on 3 ½ floppies without the voices. At the time of GK’s release, many computers did not have CD-ROM drives and CDs were thought to be the medium that would really advance adventure games and bring them to the next level (*Jensen Designer Diaries*).

“Sins of the Fathers” was programmed using Sierra’s in-house SCI (Sierra Creative Interpreter) engine. SCI added mouse support to Sierra’s adventure games and in SCI1 Sierra did away with typing commands all together. Instead, they used a series of icons to allow the player to interact with the world. The set of icons were unique to each game, and GK contained many more icons than previous games. Fans of Sierra’s

previous adventure games had complained that there were not enough options for looking at and manipulating objects. Jane Jensen took this to heart and came up with nine icons for Gabriel Knight (*Making of GK*). The icon commands for GK were walk, look, ask, talk, pickup, open/close, operate, inventory and recorder. Another new feature in the SCI1 engine was the ability to make games in 256 colors. This was important to GK, which contained many varied, colorful backgrounds. Of course these are not much by today's standards, but when the game was first released, the graphics were considered quite stunning (Provinciano).

The state of adventure games was hopping when GK was first released, and Sierra was at the center of it. Tim Curry likened GK to "Make[ing] your own movie." Interactive entertainment was the buzzword of the day. Sierra declared, "Gabriel Knight Sins of the Father's represents a bold step down this [interactive entertainment] path (*Making of GK*)." Another employee at Sierra said "[interactive entertainment is] the thing of tomorrow. Wait 'til it matures—wow!" Moby Games called GK, after the fact, "A very new step in animated adventure gaming." With such promise for the future of interactive entertainment in 1993, what could have changed so drastically that by 1999, Sierra found themselves creating their last adventure game, Gabriel Knight 3? Sierra embarked into the realm of serious interactive entertainment with Gabriel Knight and left it with Gabriel Knight as well. In 1993, the money was in pursuing adventure games, but by 1999, Sierra could not even find enough gamers willing to buy their classic-style, story-driven adventure games to warrant making any more. The clue to this ultimate state of affairs lies in the realization that technology was rapidly changing, and Sierra

seemed to have lost the adventure gaming touch as its audience moved on to a different sort of computer game experience.

In 1996, Sierra released Gabriel Knight 2 “The Beast Within.” GK2 took place in Germany where Gabriel had moved at the end of GK1. “The Beast Within” finds Gabriel getting used to his Schattenjäger lineage by hunting a werewolf in Munich with the help of his researcher, Grace, a character from GK1. The game was broken down into chapters and each alternating chapter was played by Grace. This was an interesting approach because it gave the player an opportunity to switch viewpoints. Gabriel did more of the questioning of suspects and figuring out puzzles whereas Grace was more into the research side of things and how the current werewolf story related to past historical events. Of course, by the end of the game, the two different viewpoints met for a final dramatic conclusion.

Gabriel Knight was one of Sierra’s three entries into the Full Motion Video (FMV) market. At the time GK2 was in production, Sierra was looking for the next big idea in adventure gaming, and they thought that FMV was it. When GK2 was released, DVDs were just on the horizon and Sierra envisioned creating FMV games for DVD. Full Motion Video in a nutshell is where actual actors are filmed against a blue screen and then digitally inserted into the game on either computer drawn backgrounds or photographed backgrounds. This was a major undertaking requiring many of the same elements as a movie, but ultimately it was quite a different task. An actor would have to be filmed doing the same scene many different times to account for all the options that the player had. Sierra hired no-name actors Dean Erickson and Joanne Takahashi to play the parts of GK and Grace. Other unknown actors were hired to play the minor roles.

One of the best things about FMV was the ability it gave Sierra to stay true to real places. One who has played GK could go to Munich and recognize one of the main areas where the game takes place, Marianplatz. Sierra used actual photographs of locations in Germany for the backgrounds in the game and this made a big difference in the quality of the game play. As part of her historical research, Grace visits Ludwig the II's castle, Neuschwanstein which was re-created in the game with stunning detail. One honestly feels as if they have been to these real-life locations.

Due to the FMV though, game play in GK2 was more limited than in GK1 and the story was also affected. The icons were downsized to a "one-cursor fits all" way of interacting with the game. This led to complaints from some people that FMV games in general were just point and click fests—that all you were doing was clicking and waiting for the next movie which contained bad actors and an uninteresting story. Again though, as with Gabriel Knight 1, Gabriel Knight 2 was held together by the incredibly layered, complex story. FMV worked as a medium to carry this story. Jensen did another superior job crafting very believable characters. Gabriel Knight 2 (in my opinion) has the best storyline of any adventure game I have ever played. The story was so well done that it has given me the desire to visit Germany. It had just the right amount of suspense, intrigue, betrayal and the like. The story was also very well balanced by puzzles that were not impossible to figure out.

Jensen has some very good ideas about what interactive entertainment could be and she really believes in the "powerful nature of story (*Making of GK*).” One of the things that particularly excited Jensen about interactive entertainment when she was working on GK1 was the ability to take "all kinds of side trips" in the story (*Making of*

GK). Not every line of the story had to advance the plot. She felt that this would lead to a much richer interactive environment. If you wanted to ask everybody in the game every possible question on your list, you could, and even though they did not have plot-advancing answers for every question, they did have entertaining answers.

Unfortunately, this was also one of the downfalls with FMV. FMV was so resource intensive that most of the little “side trips” had to be cut from the final version. Even with the cuts, GK2 weighed in on 6 CDs (Jensen *Designer Diaries*).

With the release of GK2, Sierra was trying everything and anything to recapture the waning interest in adventure games in whatever way they could. One of the movies in GK2 was part of an original opera that was written by Robert Holmes and was an integral part of the story. To my knowledge, GK2 is the only adventure game to contain part of an original opera! Sierra was trying to show that so much more could be done with FMV than with the previous animated games. Holmes again created all original compositions for GK2, but built off of his previous compositions from GK1. When one listens to the music in GK2 they can hear the familiar strains from GK1. This helped to create continuity in everything from characters to music to locations, which really helped players feel like they were picking up where GK1 had left off.

In 1996, when “The Beast Within” was published, the adventure game market was already starting to falter. The days of the early 1990’s when anything seemed possible were gone. Technology for 3D games was becoming possible and game developers were experimenting with other genres. For example, the first person shooter genre was beginning to really take off and so was real time strategy (Adams). Also, in 1996 the Internet was becoming extremely popular. This led developers to create games

that could be played online with many people. Sierra-type adventure games did not lend themselves well to this. They were meant to be a single person player experiences.

Sierra was very good at the single player adventure games, and they were having a hard time making the jump to other genres. Also, to create a game like GK2 took a lot of time and money, and Sierra was not seeing a great return on that investment. Jane Jensen expressed her frustrating saying, “I just wish more people played these darn things (Jensen *Designer Diaries*).” In 1997, Jensen reflected on the adventure gaming market in general: “Okay so we all know this industry is about hi-tech. Content is nothing if you don’t look fer-gosh-sake COOL. That’s okay. I like looking cool. What’s harder to take is this industry’s nosedive towards carnage games and arcades, and the general disregard of story and content. (Jensen *Designer Diaries*).” Jensen went on to reflect that the masses that were more story orientated were not interested in computer gaming. They preferred to watch a movie or read a book.

Despite Jensen’s dim outlook on the adventure gaming market, she continued to work on Gabriel Knight 3, “Blood of the Sacred, Blood of the Damned.” While she was working on GK3, Sierra was sold and broken down into departments. GK3 was set to be published under the new Sierra Studios publishing house. In 1999, Gabriel Knight 3 was released to the public after a year’s delay as a last ditch effort to gage the floundering interest in computer adventure games. The new Sierra Studios placed the future of adventure games on GK3, but had pretty much made up their mind that this was it. “Blood of the Sacred, Blood of the Damned” had just as rich a storyline as the first two in the series with Gabriel again assuming his role as Schattensjäger by traveling to France this time to investigate the kidnapping of a prince’s son by what appear to be vampires.

Grace once again returned as his faithful sidekick and the same format was used in alternating play between Gabriel and Grace. In the forward to the GK3 official strategy guide, Jane Jensen gave an idea of how she thought game play should be: “I approach adventure games as interactive fiction. You are the hero of a book—the main character of a tale—but you cannot simply turn the page to find out what happens next. You must *do* what the hero would do.”

When the idea of making GK3 first came up, Sierra was convinced that FMV was dead. It was not the revolutionizing format that they had hoped for. DVD’s had not emerged as a successful medium for games either. They made the decision to make GK3 3D, because it seemed that the new market lay in 3D games. GK3 was their first 3D adventure game, though, so they faced a long production cycle that included building a 3D graphics engine. This was complicated even further by the fact that many of the people on the programming team did not have the experience needed to design a game engine (Bilas). Half way through production, the engine had to be totally redone. This resulted in lots of wasted time and lots of frustration, of course. In the end, though, Sierra felt that 3D was worth the trouble and Jensen felt that 3D allowed the player to feel even more involved in the story and to explore everything even more thoroughly. Also, Sierra was happy to return to the days of simply voice over casting instead of actor casting. They were able to convince Tim Curry to come back as GK and found a newcomer, Charity James, to voice Grace. Also, it appeared that the players were excited about 3D and were looking to it as the next big thing.

Despite the setbacks during production, Sierra Studios still produced an acclaimed adventure game. *On* magazine wrote a review of GK3 that started “If you want to beat

someone to death with a crowbar or just plain shoot them, this is a very good year for computer games...and the whole adventure game genre is, if not dead, then at least lying on the pavement in a puddle of blood (Herold).” The article went on to say, though, that GK3 “just might” save the future of adventure games “Here is everything you want in an adventure game: clever logical puzzles, an involving, immersive story, tremendous atmosphere, mystery [and] danger (Herold).” GK3 had everything that makes an adventure game good. Unfortunately, by the time GK3 was released, the glory days of computer adventure games were long over. Store shelves used to be lined with Sierra adventure games, but in 1999, GK3 was the only one. By then the computer game market was dominated by 3D shooters and real time strategy games (Adams). There were still adventure game players, but not enough to warrant production costs. The Sierra that had once been king of adventure games simply faded from existence, even going so far as to sell off the adventure portion of their developing house. Despite the release of GK3, it was a sad year for all as far as enthusiastic adventure gamers were concerned.

The Gabriel Knight series is thus an excellent example of the changing computer adventure market. Even a popular game with a large fan base could not save the market for Sierra, and they had many series with numerous fans. However, many factors affect computer game sales, such as the state of the market, the technology involved, and the time involved in development against returns. Jane Jensen is now writing novels full time and does not foresee another GK mystery in the near future. She has decided that the only way GK will continue to live on is through possible future novels she may write about him, but right now she is currently involved in other projects. Sierra still owns the

rights to GK, and she does not think that they will sell them (janejensen.com). Still, Sierra has no plans for another GK game. Computer games, ultimately, are a business venture. That is the bottom line. In my opinion, it is unfortunate that adventure games have reached the low point they are at now. At times there has been some hope that maybe Sierra is trying to get back to its roots, but so far this remains to be seen. The thrill of becoming involved in classic computer adventure stories needs to be introduced to the new generation of computer game players. This is the only way such games might begin to make a comeback and once again provide a lucrative business for their creators.

From 2D...



Gabriel and Grace's close up pictures used during question sequences, check out that brilliant 256 color! And their moveable, regular characters to the sides.



To Live Action 2D...



Dean Erickson and Joanne Takahashi as Gabriel and Grace -- stunning video quality!



To Stunning 3D!



Gabriel and Grace back to their good old animated selves, but now larger than life in 3D!



Game Play



The icon bar from GK1 ©Sierra 1993



The inventory buttons from GK2. In GK 2 you used single cursor that highlighted when you could click on an object.

GK3 used the same concept as GK2, you had a single cursor that highlighted when you could click. Once you clicked a group of icons was brought up that showed you how you could interact with the object. Because it was all cursor based it cannot be captured in a screen catch.

Music



"GK1 Theme.mp3"



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"GK2 Opening Theme.mp3"



"GK3 Theme.mp3"

Music is an important part of an adventure game; it helps to create atmosphere and suspense. The Gabriel Knight series was interesting in particular because the composer, Robert Holmes, used bits and pieces of music in GK2 and 3 from GK 1, which helped to create continuity between the games.

Note on music: Coursework will not let me upload a folder that contains the MP3's, but if you would like to hear them, let me know and I will e-mail them to you. I've always thought it was interesting how much music affects game play, but if you're not interested that's fine.

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