

## **My Own Vision of the Revolution**

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There's something pathetic about the contrast between the visions of revolutionaries and the reality of revolutions. Rousseau's grand dreams crashed to earth in the bloodthirstiness of the French Revolution and the holocaust of the Napoleonic Wars. Karl Marx would not have recognized socialism as it was practiced in the Soviet Union. For all his hotheaded talk, Luther really could not have anticipated the Thirty Years' War.

I therefore launch into this discussion with a rueful realization that my idealistic prognostications will almost certainly not be realized in their full glory. The faint glittering I see in the distance may only be the reflections from metal fittings on soldiers' uniforms. But those who shrink from what should happen because of what might happen can live their lives out in their little holes. Onward.

The launching point of my revolutionary vision is the belief that the system is stuck, locked up, frozen. Every revolution is driven by pent-up forces that cannot be released by the current regime. Much of human history is a tale of gradualism, of slow and steady increments to the human condition, but occasionally the forces of history get stuck, the pressure builds, and the system rights itself in an orgy of dramatic change. I believe that we are in the midst of a pressure-building process even now. I will not bore you with a repeat of my earlier essay on why computer games are dead; I must instead ask you to accept my overall claim that computer games have reached a point of creative stagnation. The crucial observation, I think, is that computer games can no longer pretend to hold any claim to the broad entertainment market; they are clearly confined to a core group of adolescent males and adult geeks.

Yet I also believe that interactivity is a profoundly important artistic development. Perhaps I will need to present my reasoning on this point at a later date; for now I again ask you to accept my assumption as to its importance.

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If you accept these two points:

- 1) interactivity is profoundly important; and
- 2) computer games are dead; then you have the conceded the inevitability of a revolution.

### **Evolution versus Revolution**

Some have argued that the nature of change will be more evolutionary in character than revolutionary. I reject this for twin reasons. First, I've been pleading with the computer games industry for ten years now to broaden its horizons, to reach out to a larger audience, and the most charitable assessment of my efforts is that I have retarded the continuing atherosclerosis of the industry. Those newcomers who plead that we should give the industry a chance to prove its mettle are unaware of the historical fact that the industry has had more than a decade to prove its mettle, and has clearly shown its colors.

The second reason for rejecting the evolutionary solution is the "Let them eat cake" attitude of the computer games industry. These people have thoroughly convinced themselves of the essential rightness of their approaches. Over the years I have met with a great many people in the industry, from executives to direct contributors, and the single most striking development is the hardening of attitudes on their part. Six years ago at the Computer Game Developers' Conference I participated in a debate on "Graphics Versus GamePlay." Nowadays such a debate would be inconceivable. The industry has established firm rules for what works and what doesn't work; proposals that violate those rules are not considered to be creative opportunities but simple mistakes. You can't have change where there is no perceived need for change. The computer games industry has created its own inbred aristocracy that continually reaffirms its own beliefs but has lost touch with the broader marketplace. Such an aristocracy cannot be convinced to relinquish power gradually; it must be swept away.

### **Blueprint for a Revolution**

So, how will we build this revolution? What's my plan? You can't plan a revolution—you unleash it. A revolution is a leaderless torrent of energy, a freshet of humanity tumbling not so much towards a predefined objective as out of an old confinement. My goal is to provide the initial common ground on which the forces of change gather, the beaker into which we gather the amino acids that will become the building blocks of the new way, whatever it will prove to be.

I don't wish my high-flying rhetoric to take the place of necessary specifics. Here's one specific: this effort must involve a genuine interdisciplinary grouping. I have noted with sadness how inbred the approaches to interactive entertainment have been. The Silicon Valley techies enjoy pride of place, and so in their arrogance they tend to exclude or minimize the contributions of non-technical

people. The Hollywood people respond by forming their own little organizations, almost in defiance of the technical people. Writers' associations form interactive subsidiaries in which they talk among themselves about interactivity, as if it were their own intellectual property. Meanwhile the academics hold their conferences and write their papers in magnificent isolation.

We cannot build a revolution on a divergent set of loyalties. So long as we think of ourselves as writers, programmers, gamers, cinemaniks, or something else, then our differences will overwhelm our fragile commonalities, and our revolution will fizzle out in mutual finger-pointing. We must think of ourselves first and foremost as creators of the new interactive medium, with our loyalty placed not on what we once were, but on what we hope to become. I know that it is hard to let go of the comforting certainty of existing expertise, but it is necessary.

I was once a physicist, a teacher, and a programmer, but I am none of these things now. I carry within me the wisdom and expertise derived from these experiences, but I do not identify with them. I strive to be something more, something new. I ask you to make the same leap of faith. More than mere good manners, this will enable you to really listen to the alien thinking of your fellow revolutionaries, to absorb some respectable fraction of their viewpoint. This revolution cannot be built by programmers, nor by writers, nor by Hollywood people, nor by academics. It will require a new breed of people, a new collection of skills, and that collection cannot be achieved by merely jamming such a disparate group into a committee. I must learn to see the world through my Hollywood friend Caitlin Buchman's eyes—a prospect that leaves me shaking my head in confusion. I must also see through the academic eyes of Dr. Joseph Bates, and the brutally pragmatic eyes of Sandy Schneider, Executive Vice President, before I can truly see the revolution. I'd even like to see through the soaringly artistic eyes of Greg Roach, although perhaps I overrate myself in that aspiration. Each of you must do the same, for the only way to build such a collection of skills inside one person is to melt them all together. It's going to get hot in here.

#### **"Talk don't cook rice"**

Talk is feckless; revolutions are built on actions, not words. Why sit around talking when we should all be concentrating on the task of creation?

The rationalist answer is that new ideas require the communal efforts of many minds, and so talk is a necessary means of winnowing out the best ideas. But I place most of my money on a very different answer: we're all cowards, and we need to cling together to build our confidence.

Imagine an oppressive regime exploiting its people. They suffer in silence, unable to throw off the yoke, even though there are millions of citizens and only a few thousand soldiers. A small crowd gathers at the foot of the great capital building, muttering angrily. A

hundred discontents square off against a dozen soldiers. The soldiers always win, because they believe in themselves, while the rabble cannot bring its will to bear. We stand in the computer store, confronting the serried ranks of insipid action games, our hearts crying out against the artistic injustice of it all, but in the end, we slink away; what can one person do?

Every revolution is in essence a contagion of confidence, a ripple of shared belief in a new idea spreading through society. If we can establish a robust new system of beliefs about interactive entertainment, something that we all believe in, then our mutual confidence will infect those around us. With enough confidence, anything is possible; look at Wall Street's reaction to internet stocks and tell me that's based on analysis rather than confidence. But confidence is not concocted by a mere act of will; it must be built brick by brick. There are a million flawed potential revolutions out there waiting to happen, and only a handful of magnificent ones; we won't put our finger on one of the good ones unless we mercilessly assault every idea. Confidence can only emerge from a ruthless process of selection.