

DREAMS AND JOURNEYS

AN INTERVIEW WITH JENOVA CHEN

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I noticed on the resume you have listed at JenovaChen.com you list 'day dreaming' as one of your hobbies. I'm curious what role day dreaming has in your everyday life.

Day dreaming is more like, while I'm socializing I stop listening to other people and start thinking about games or problems. I focus on what I care about more.

With night dreaming, you're not really controlling what you're dreaming. In day dreaming, you are dreaming for the sake of dreaming something great. Imagining, fantasizing, on something that could help make your game better.

Do you see a similarity between that sort of dreaming and creating or playing games?

Yeah, I think you have to have that kind of fantasy to want to make games. If you want to create an experience that does not belong to the reality, you have to be able to dream it first.

I think day dreaming is putting yourself in a virtual reality, imagining something happening to you and feeling what that's like. I think this is important for game developers because making something is a lot harder than imagining, but if you can already imagine what can happen and adjust your experience based on that it can be very efficient [tool].

Do you think a lot of game developers use their dreams as resources for game design?

It's probably not proper to call it day dreaming because I'm really just imagining, which a lot of people do. Architects do, artists do, you imagine something before you make it and then the question is how detailed can you make it in reality.

It's not really the same as real dreaming because you don't go to sleep to do this. It's just your imagination which a lot of people do anyway.

Dreams are a motif that you like to use in your games; both *Cloud* and *Flower* have a lot to do with sleeping and dreaming. What inspired you to make those themes a primary focus for games?

It's interesting because both *Flow* and *Journey* are not about dreams. Basically dreams are a virtual reality; they're a world that exists outside the physical world where we stay. I think that video games essentially are also virtual worlds. They have different laws and different rules and you create them. They both can't be experienced in real life.

What sort of themes do you want to put in to *Journey*?

Because I feel that today's world is filled with technology and power, I really don't remember the last time I felt a sense of awe or a sense of small and unknown.

I happened to talk to an astronaut who told me his story of how he was very confused because he'd been a





space shuttle pilot and never got to land on the moon while his colleagues got to. He basically circled around the moon and waited for them to come back. He told me that everyone who stepped on the moon, no matter how hardcore scientist they were or how atheist they all came back very religious and spiritual.

I happened to study psychology and understood why this happens. If you're a scientist you think you understand everything and believe that everything has an answer. But, when you're standing on the moon and staring at the universe and realize everything you knew about was just this small marble in the sky, you can't resist thinking about why we are here and what are we here for? Why only Earth?

There are so many unknowns just from studying on the moon and I think that's something so many people are missing today, everything has an answer. You can Google it, you can Wikipedia it, and there is no unknown in the world at this moment.

As a commercial artist, I would like to create an experience that fulfills what people need. Not what they want, but what they need. Everyone wants a sniper rifle or a rocket launcher, but I want to offer them something that gives them that sense of unknown, gives them a sense of small, and gives them a sense of awe.

How does this tie in to your game design philosophy?

When I think about making that world, it feels only

natural that there is a companion so you can share that sense of awe with other people. This is why we made it an online game. But most online games today where you know who they are, people brag about their items or scores or leaderboards. That's not what I want the people to experience.

I just want to focus on the world and the feeling so I have to eliminate those things. A good design is simple and minimalistic, so that's why everyone is anonymous. There is no way of knowing if they're a girl or a guy, kids or old people, they're anonymous and they're all very similar.

It's about this sense of connection between two humans, rather than "Hey, I am Leeroy Jenkins and you're So-and-So". It's about making an experience like that, very pure and very simple.

Traditional game design is about giving the player a goal. It sounds like with *Journey* you want to take something away, their sense of knowing and almost their confidence. How do you do that?

I still think of it as giving, but not giving too much and letting it distract from what you want the player to take. I'm still trying to give you something, but I want it to be focused and give you just that.

It's like if I give you a food and want you to taste sweet, then I don't add anything salty or spicy because then it's sweet-spicy, it's not sweet. If I can precisely communicate a message or a feeling to the audience then this art that's well



crafted. If the message is ambiguous, if the feeling is not quite pure then it's just mediocre work.

So, while I'm trying very hard to give you a sense of small adding things that make you feel big and powerful would not be helpful at all.

Do you ever find yourself frustrated trying to include things, but finding they'll detract from the purity of the experience?

Oh, all the time. Because we've played so many games growing up these very bad habits form. A lot of the time we like to make things very fun, but fun doesn't always help the emotion you want to deliver.

Flower was a good example. We had a level up system, spells that you could cast, resource management system and time limitations. These were all things that made the game more fun by making the game more challenging. But, when you failed at those challenges you said, "Oh, shit. Damn it. Fuck." The game makes you frustrated.

Well, with *Flower* we wanted to focus on a very relaxed, peaceful experience when they play. You can't have the player say "Fuck" when they're playing *Flower*, so we had to remove those challenges.

It all depends on how true you are to the experience you want to deliver. If you don't care, and think games should just be fun then there is no way you can make *Flower*

So, what do you never want the player to say when going through *Journey*?

Uh, *Journey* is a lot more complex. It is not just one single feeling. One thing I'm trying to avoid is making them feel too much like role-playing, too much like character development. Too much like "Oh, you just leveled up, your fireball is now 3x stronger than before."

I don't want players to feel like god, like they're the center of the universe. This isn't *God of War* where you kill gods, where you're the most important person and you can kill everyone in sight.

For *Journey* you can't do that because I want the player to interact with the other player and give them a hug, not think "How am I supposed to kill this other player?"

Do you think players will want to play a game where they're not the center of the universe?

Well, they probably don't know they want to play it until they play it. Then they'll think "Wow, I didn't think this would happen and I actually enjoy it."

So, then you'll probably ask me if the game even has market appeal. But it's an interesting thing, I think that many players want to feel a sense of small and wonder because so many people loved *Shadow of the Colossus*, which also offered a similar feeling.



Do you think we're at a state, as a medium, where people can expect these sorts of experiences or seek them out?

Well, you have to look at what video games really are. It's a form of entertainment, it is an entertainment medium. Now, what is entertainment? Entertainment offers a particular emotional experience, a particular experience that the audience is in need of.

If I am really sad and want something to cheer me up, I will watch a stand-up comedy or something very encouraging like a self-help book, something to keep me going on with my life. They all give me a sense of hope when sad. When I'm really bored I want to have something exciting, something to catch my attention and give me an adrenaline rush. I can go race a car, or go to watch an action film. I can also play *Call of Duty*.

The difference between film, novel or music versus game is that traditional mediums have a very wide range of emotional goods. So, no matter how old you are or what gender you are or what country you're from, no matter what mood you're in there's always a film or music or book that you can experience.

If you ask someone what sort of movie they like you'll usually get a few different genres. That's because everything is covered. No matter what emotional need a person has there's a film to cover it. But for games, they are mostly focused on action film style experience; excitement, stimulation, competition, engagement.

But, you can't really find something to make you sad in video games, you can't find something to make you want to live on or make you feel hope. You can't find something the equivalent of a drama in video games. There is a lot of emotional content that is empty right now in the medium.

Why did film, why did music and novels manage to reach a full spectrum of feelings? It's because of a desire that people had. It's like at the beginning of the food industry, people had fruits and meats but over time people wanted to try something more complex, something more nuanced, something fresh. People started to expand the food industry and the varieties started to grow.

I think for video games, it's the same thing. People will eventually get tired with one kind of feeling, and you can see that happening with the rise of the indie movement that's happening right now. A lot of the gamers who grew up playing games are getting older now, and the emotional needs are not the same as when you were a teenager.

If you're a teenager or a kid in school you always have power fantasies because you don't have any power to control your life. You're in school and people are telling you what to do, and that's why teenagers like to fantasize about power. That's why most of the games have focused on that. You are the soldier in WWII, you are the superman, and you are the elf in *D&D*. It's all power fantasy, and that's what the younger generation likes.

But, if you want to satisfy the emotional needs of adults, people who are in their 30s and 40s, that's not enough.

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You need to give them something more intellectual, more inspiring. You need to give them something that will let them see the world in a different way or something that will touch their heart so they feel moved, or cry or experience joy.

Games are not ready to do this yet, but we have an audience that is a lot older than 20 years old now. I grew up playing games and I'm 30 now. I want to play some games that can really make my life better, but there are not that many games out there to satisfy my taste.

I think a market of people like me will drive developers to make more games that can satisfy this particular group. Because right now we have the hardcore market, which are teenagers and people in their early 20s and a huge market in the 40-50 year olds, the women in to the social network games. But, what about people 30-40? Men and women who are really a big center part of society. Nobody is making games for them, and I think there's a huge market there.

What sort of game did you want to make when you were a teenager?

When I was a teenager I wanted to make the equivalent of *Diablo* or an equivalent of *Starcraft* or *Everquest* or *World of Warcraft*. You know, when you just start learning, you just want to mimic and add a little mod on top.

But, as you look in to it more and start looking at it as an academic pursuit, you start to want to a lot more things than what is out there.

Was there a moment in your life where you realized those experiences weren't what you wanted to make anymore?

Well, it's a combination. I still personally enjoy playing very competitive kinds of games. I was really good at *Starcraft* and *Counter-Strike*, *Street Fighter*. I would always play in tournaments, so I liked those games.

But, because of my study at USC and learning about the state of the medium I began to think the best thing I can do to help the medium, which I love is to get all people to play video games. I want people to stop asking “Are you a gamer or not?” and the only way to solve that is to provide enough content and broaden the frontier of what video games offer. There's a responsibility as someone who studied video games and who really wants to see the medium thrive, I have to make these games.

Like, personally I will not play *Flower* when I am at home alone and tired because I made it. But, I think the medium needed that. I think society needed to see that video games can communicate feelings that are not in the primal spectrum. That's why I'm doing what I'm doing now; it's not to say I only like making peaceful and relaxing games but it's less about my personal taste and more about what people need.

Why do you feel that responsibility though? Why is this only your job?

As someone who studied video games I keep seeing

my friends, my classmates who grew up with me stop playing games. If I ask them why they stop they say they don't have time to play them, or that there's nothing interesting out there. They abandon video games like they abandon toys because as an adult there's no art, there's no substance. I don't want to see video games to become toys but it could very well happen unless we change the medium.

It's like, if you look at Japanese manga, this national art form, it has such a wide spectrum from porno to something for very mature people. But if you look at American manga, and American cartoons a lot of them are still only focused on superheroes. And guess what, the cartoon and manga is treated a lot worse here by the public than it is in Japan.

If you only focus on the money and only focus on the market and make violent video games because the teenagers like them, then eventually people will stop playing them. I think that someone really needs to be there to make this happen. But at the same time, because I was studying in the school and my masters program was on video games I felt I was educated to see this coming and it's my responsibility to do something about it.

It's kind of ironic because I believe if I don't do anything it will still happen, someone else is going to do it. But, it is a lot more fun if I am part of it being in a battle for something I believe will truly happen in the future. It's like playing a game on easy mode because you know you'll be there at the end, but you have an illusion you're in control.

Do you think there's something about the medium that makes it easier to deliver adrenaline experiences?

No, because every single medium when it first started had to start with something primal, something very easy to understand.

One of the earliest films was about a train coming in to a station, and when they showed this in a theatre to people who had never seen motion picture before half of the people were so scared they ran away from the theatre because they think the train is going to hit them.

The early stage of film was about mimicking the old medium, they'd shoot things on a stage like theatre. They'd shoot sports, they'd shoot ballet. Those things were easy to understand because the audience was familiar with it so

they understood the new medium much more quickly. This helped sell the technology of cinema to the world.

The same thing happens with video games, the earliest games are simulations of things that happen in the real world; sports simulation, driving simulation, flying simulation, fighting simulation or some equivalent of chess. Eventually people mastered the film medium and the same will happen with games. Then they can create something that has never created in the past.

You can see a lot of games now trying to mimic the cinema, a lot of very cinematic games like *Call of Duty* or *Uncharted 2* which are great at mimicking what cinema was. But, in terms of interactivity and what games can do, they are not the games that are exploring the frontier here. They are very conservative.

Where do you see mainstream games in 5-10 years?

I believe in 5-10 years, maybe 15 years, everyone who's never played video games will be dead. (quoting Bing Gordon, ex-CCO of EA) Your grandparent's generation, who has never touched a video game, will be gone. And every child that was born after that will have touched or experienced video games somewhere in their life. They may still stop playing video games as they get old, but they will have experiences with them.

I think that is when video games will become a real cultural reference. I mean, it's already a cultural reference but it will be more. It will be like music, it will be like film. People will treat this medium more seriously; there will be the all-stars of video games.

I think more or less most people will be engaged in some form of interactive entertainment. Maybe they won't even call it games anymore, or maybe the name games will stay until the end like film. Like, what is film? Film is a word to describe this physical thing that the cinema was shot on but people keep saying the word and it becomes a reference for the medium.

I really don't like the name "games", because it makes it sound cheap like it has to be about competition. I don't like the name, but it might just stay until the end to describe interactive entertainment.

But, that's what I believe. It's going to happen. But, who's going to make that happen? I wish I can be one of them.

