A life in games

Richard Lemarchand (1987), lead game designer on the award-winning *Uncharted* video game series, talks about his work

'Games are so much more than a pastime. They're at the very core of our understanding of the world.'

As a game designer at Sony-owned video game development studio Naughty Dog in Santa Monica, Richard Lemarchand worked on multiple multimillion-selling projects, including the award-winning *Uncharted* series for the Sony PlayStation 3. He was a lead game designer for *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune* (2007), *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves* (2009), and *Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception* (2011). *Uncharted 2* was a runaway hit, winning ten AIAS Interactive Achievement Awards, five Game Developers Choice Awards, four BAFTAs and over 200 Game of the Year awards.

Richard is a sought-after speaker on the subjects of game design and production, and is also a passionate advocate for independent and experimental games. He is now an Associate Professor in the Interactive Media & Games Division of the School of Cinematic Arts at the University of Southern California, where he teaches game design to graduates and undergraduates. He has also begun work on the development of a series of experimental research games that investigate virtual reality and participatory art. His recent game *The Meadow* was nominated as a finalist in the 2015 IndieCade International Festival of Independent Games.

Do you feel that the time you spent at Balliol influenced your career at all?

I was a callow kid with a pretty narrow outlook when I arrived at Balliol. By the time I left, I understood that video game design – this diversionary pop culture thing I had fallen in love with as a teenager – was a budding art form. It was the inclusive intellectual environment at Balliol, fostered by my professors, friends and peers, that helped me to realise that video games could be artistic and expressive, and not just a fun way to pass time in the JCR bar.

Video games are technological, participatory, and often cinematic or literary in nature, so my degree in Physics and Philosophy, which bridges science and the humanities, has served me well. I now teach a class in 'philosophy of mind for game designers', thanks to a course I took with Professor Stephen Mulhall (1980 and Tutorial Fellow in Philosophy at New College). The fascinating ideas around personal identity and memory that Steve described – using examples from films like *Blade Runner* – are now inspiring my students towards new ideas for game mechanics and storylines.

What led you to working in games and how did you start?

Like many Balliol people, I'm an odd mix of skills and interests. Having always felt unsure where I fitted in, during my second or third year at Balliol – my passion charged by the coin-operated games like *Gauntlet* and *Joust* that we played in the bar, and by late-night game sessions on a friend's Commodore Amiga – I realised that game design was something to which I was uniquely suited. The year after I graduated my mum found a job advert in the local paper: a game development studio called MicroProse was hiring video game designers. But the duties were rather unclear. I managed to convince the studio that, even if they weren't entirely sure what I was going to be doing, I could work it out. They took me on for a trial period, and I never looked back. My parents were very encouraging, and I'll always be grateful to them for helping to set me on such an interesting and rewarding professional path.

What does a game designer actually do?

In principle, game designers come up with ideas for the play mechanics and stories in a game and then work with their development team peers to create the game using a set of software tools. In my experience, though, the best game designers spend much of their time gathering up strong and interesting ideas from *everyone* at their company – whether they are programmers or artists, animators or sound designers, the receptionists or the cleaners – and then synthesising those ideas into a coherent whole. Everyone has great ideas. The curation and cohesion of those ideas is the key to a great game.

Can you pinpoint why the *Uncharted* series was so successful?

Game design is very much a design discipline with a capital 'D' and I've always liked the 'ten commandments for good design' described by the famous industrial designer Dieter Rams. The aspects of design he names, like innovation, usability, ease of understanding, and the aesthetic integration of form and function are all very important to good game design. Certainly the

Uncharted games tapped into these principles, but the real key to their success was that they touched people's hearts with their drama, comedy, and romance. The series' co-creator, my friend Amy Hennig, is a big fan of screwball comedy, and so there's quite of lot of Katharine Hepburn-style banter between the characters in the games that makes them amusing and heartfelt, as well as dramatic. It's a tribute to all the talented people who worked on those games that the emotional tone in the *Uncharted* series is so colourful, nuanced, and human.

What have you learnt about how creativity and innovation come about?

I got my start designing for computers with processor speeds and memory capacities that were tiny by modern standards, and so the idea that constraints are a liberator and spur creativity and innovation is an important one to me. To make as big a splash as possible, you have to stop moaning about the constraints and just do what you can with what you've got. But the real key to innovation is a willingness to fail. If you don't fail sometimes, you're clearly not pushing any boundaries, artistically or commercially. That means that you have to have a creative process, like the one at Naughty Dog, the studio where I worked for a long time, which supports experimentation and failure. I now teach my students that same process and do my best to help them cultivate the emotional resilience they'll need to go with it.

How much are video games an art form of their own and how much do they employ elements of other arts?

Like all art forms, video games can draw on every other cultural form imaginable. In the type of cinematic games I spent many years creating, the dramatic arts of storytelling and performance are very much to the fore, as are musical composition, architecture, cinematic production design, and costume design. We're beginning to see more games that look elsewhere for inspiration and innovation: there are games that draw on ballet, like *Bound* by the Polish studio Plastic, and on Islamic geometric art, like *Engare* by the Iranian game designer Mahdi Bahrami. Video games also have special creative opportunities related to their interactivity, and I think we're still only just beginning to explore those aspects of the form.

How do you feel about the perceived negative effects of game playing?

Video games have their problems: I empathise with parents struggling to regulate their children's screen time, and games have been dogged since their early days by misogyny, militarism and otherwise politically oppressive issues. I'm happy to say that we're starting to leave some of those problems behind us as game designers think more deeply about what they're saying with their work. Meaningful and artistic games like *Journey*, by USC Games alumni thatgamecompany, are helping to redefine what video games can be by creating new styles of gameplay oriented towards interactions other than competition, and by taking a less frenetic, more contemplative tone. The interactive nature of video games aligns them naturally with concepts like learner-centred education, and I think their mechanics and interfaces represent an important opportunity for our modern digital literacy. I always encourage parents to talk to their children about the games they are playing, to play alongside their children whenever possible, and to engage their children's critical thinking around interactive media.

Why did you become a professor and how has that enriched your career?

After two very enjoyable decades in the mainstream of the game industry, I began to think about a career change. My friend, the educator and game designer Professor Tracy Fullerton, gave me an opportunity to join the faculty of the USC Games programme at the University of Southern California. I'm now in my fifth year of teaching, and I'm enjoying it enormously. The more I try to explain to other people how to make games well, the more I come to understand games and their creation. Games are so much more than a pastime. They're at the very core of our understanding of the world: they inform how we use language, how we learn, and how we perfect our skills. The more I teach and the more I study, the more deeply I understand how philosophically interesting games are.

What are the possibilities for game design in the future?

The future of game design is incredibly exciting – and potentially very important, when the present is so troubled. Virtual reality, augmented reality, smart devices, AI, and pervasive networks are each going to bring both challenges and extraordinary opportunities for people making art and entertainment, as well as for educators, urban planners, health professionals and our systems of government. Games can be a tool for helping us find our way out of what often feel like intractable problems, and people are using games to do everything from healing PTSD to resolving conflicts between hostile groups. Games have always played an important role in bringing people together: the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga saw them at the root of every human cultural endeavour. I think that game designers can help see us through this next period of history by enlightening and uplifting us, even as they give us new forms of fun.

Screenshot from *Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception*. The *Uncharted* series of action-adventure games feature the treasure hunter Nathan Drake, who travels around the world fending off foes to uncover historical mysteries. The games were applauded for their realism, technical achievements and innovative storytelling.