A Conversation with Louis Castle

by Celia Pearce

This is the second in a series of conversations with creative leaders in the game design industry. The first was with Will Wright of Maxis and can be viewed at http://www.gamestudies.org/0102/pearce/. Louis Castle is cofounder and General Manager of Electronic Arts' Westwood Studios. The conversation that follows took place over dinner on February 25, 2002, immediately following Louis Castle's lecture at UCLA's Department of Design | Media Arts. To view a video of this lecture, please visit the EDA archive at: http://eda.ucla.edu/

Celia Pearce: Let's start with the Mod College. How did that come about?

Louis Castle: As we were developing the tools for Command and Conquer: Renegade, it became very clear from the beginning that it was really important to engage the mod community because these folks have a great deal to do with why the game is successful three months later or four months later. They're the ones creating new and interesting ideas and concepts. We, of course, are committed to putting our own content out there, and we will be putting out some pretty exciting stuff. In fact, we just put out a press release today that we're putting flying vehicles in Renegade.

CP: Flying vehicles. Wow. That will be cool.

LC: But it just shows us the strength of the actual tool set that we built for Renegade, in that you can use any kind of physics system—flying physics, motorcycle physics—which are gyroscopic—as well as 4-wheel, 6-wheel and treaded vehicles—just about everything. So one of the things about having that kind of power and flexibility is that it's not always quite as easy and obvious how to make it work. So we flew a bunch of the people who had made some of the more successful mods out to Las Vegas. Some of these people have day jobs, some of them don't—but this is what they do. They like to make mods for games. And the first product as a milestone was really Counterstrike. That was a product that was built by the mod community. So rather than wait for them to do it, we flew them out to Las Vegas, took care of them for a week, sat them down with the development teams, gave them copies of all our tools and showed them how to use them.

CP: How did you pick the people?

LC: The marketing department went through each of the mod groups and analyzed who had created the most content. So it was somewhat of a qualitative experiment—but it was more quantitative than qualitative. We figured if they identified themselves as a group that developed mods, then based on the volume of work that they had done, clearly they had a passion for it.

CP: Do you think you would ever possibly publish the work of a mod group, the way Valve is doing with Counterstrike?

LC: Absolutely. In fact, actually, our hope is that out of this group of people come some really innovative ideas and that we can publish those ideas in a future product or maybe an add-on of some sort. That's the goal anyway.

CP: I'm really curious about the relationship between players and the designers, and that was one of the things that Will and I talked about. What have you learned from players? What have they taught you and how has that inspired you in subsequent titles and versions of games?

LC: It's an interesting relationship because the two things you find are that people think they want a thing, and they're not always right. So you have to listen very carefully to what the users say, because what it comes down to is most people don't want to pose a problem unless they give you a solution. So they ask for a "thing," whatever that thing might be, and they believe that it's going to solve their issue, their concern. In reality, what you'd much rather know is their concern.

CP: So, what's the problem that they're trying to solve with their idea?

LC: Right. What's the problem they're trying to solve? Because they get the idea to solve a problem. So getting them to articulate the problem is more valuable than taking their feedback verbatim.

CP: So, how do you do that?

LC: Well, the first thing we do is we collect a lot of data from our consumers. Sometimes it's through the website. We read everything. We tell people, send us in your comments, we read them. Every now and then we get a post that says, "Yeah, Westwood never reads this."

CP: Who reads them?

LC: Lots of people at the company. We have community managers, people who are paid to scour the net and look for these things. And then they spend a lot of
time on our own site of course, because that’s where we encourage people to give us ideas. The community managers serve as a filter to collect feedback. So they’ll tell us that the people on Renegade believe X. And we’ll say, okay, well give us the feedback—give us the specific posts that support this particular hypothesis. Then we analyze them as a design team. So we say, “Okay, they said they really want this unit to be a little more powerful, but what all of them are reacting to is the fact that this particular unit is getting destroyed by another unit. The reality is, it’s not that this unit needs to be more powerful. The reality is that that the other unit is exploiting this unit’s weakness too well.” So a lot of times it’s digging through the data and really finding out what’s happening more than just having a knee-jerk reaction to what they say. So the relationship between game designer and customer is becoming more of a relationship of...it’s not a director relationship. You don’t want your designers to be directed by the customer, because that robs them of the responsibility of being content designers. You want them to be more of a filter or an editor, where the customer says, “Hey, I understand the creative idea you have, but I don’t get it. Or, I do get it, but I don’t like it.” And so you use them as a filter and say, “Okay, the customers as a whole have a certain vibe or feel about them, try to dig down and find out why they feel that way, dig to the bottom and get to what their source is. And then it’s eliminative guesswork. You guess, you try something. When you get it right, you’re well aware—they tell you right away.

CP: Do you have people that beta test stuff for you?

LC: For Renegade in November (of 2001), we opened up a closed beta with 600 people and they tested the product tirelessly. I mean we had 250-300 concurrent users for three months, and we only had 600 copies out there. So that means that some people are playing this game 12, 13 hours a day—and we logged them. I mean, I don’t know what they do for a living. But I know they played Renegade a lot.

CP: It seems like with some of your newer games, The Lion King and Monopoly, for example, you’ve been growing the diversity of your audience a bit. Blade Runner was interesting because it’s a boy-oriented story, but the game itself is much broader—I always give it as an example of a game with a real range of gender/play style/cognitive styles. As you’ve evolved into these new markets, how has that person, that player that you’re interacting with changed? Obviously the Command and Conquer player is going to be a different person from even the Renegade player—and then vastly different from the Monopoly or the Lion King player. How do you relate to these different player groups?

LC: Maybe I’m a tad naïve, I don’t know, but I don’t think that there is as much of a player demographic. There’s certainly a demographic of who buys product, and you’re aiming for a certain type of customer, and you should always keep that in mind. But I believe that well-designed products are attractive products to a wide degree of people. If Westwood could claim anything, it would be that we’ve always managed to take a well-established genre, added an interesting somewhat—I daresay—innovative idea, and in every case that we’ve had success, we’ve broadened the audience. So whenever we’ve tried to go after existing audiences, well-defined, tried-and-true and use the analysis, we’ve fallen far short of the kind of growth that we’ve established when we’ve taken existing markets and added expanding ideas.

Those expanding ideas really come in the form of more accessible, deeper experience. So in the case of Blade Runner, you take an adventure game—a well-established market that at that time was shrinking. I think the most successful adventure games that year were Grim Fandango, at like 200,000, and maybe Monkey Island 3 at 300,000.

CP: It’s amazing to think that those numbers were hits once.

LC: That’s a huge hit. But then the adventure market was a declining market. The best seller was King’s Quest at 750,000.

CP: How many copies did Blade Runner sell?

LC: 800,000. And what happened with Blade Runner, was first of all, we had a license, which is always good. But even products like Indiana Jones didn’t do those kinds of numbers. I think there were two reasons Blade Runner kind of broke out. One was that Virgin marketed it as an entertainment experience, not an adventure game. The ad said “Experience—The Game.” They didn’t lock it into this category, this mentality of—if you like this type of game you will like this product. They said—hey, here’s an entertainment experience you will enjoy. Two, the game itself delivered on that because it had a textless, plain click interface, very easy to get into, but it was very rich in the way that it simulated its environments. And still, I mean really just scratching the surface of what can be done today.

In the case of Lion King, it was a very tried-and-true genre, which is a side-action scroller/shooter. (And that sold 4.5 million copies or something ridiculous like that—the best-selling Westwood title to-date.) What we did there was let you re-live the story of the movie—you got to experience, and contribute or take part in the whole rite of passage from the cub to the lion. And the game actually changes right in the middle. You’re halfway through, and you think, okay I’m kind of done jumping around and pouncing on these bad guys. All of a sudden you become the adult lion, and it becomes more of fighting game, it’s more action-oriented—you’re attacking the hyenas and such. So it changed the game metaphor right in the middle, and it became very fresh that way.
I'm a big believer that games that are always evolving the game experience and changing the way they're intellectually treating you, at the same time requiring as little as possible from a human-machine interface point of view—those are the games that have breakaway potential.

CP: This leads me to another question—if you could pick any three movies and make kick-ass games out of them, which three movies would you pick and why?

LC: Wow! I love movies.

CP: I know you do. And also you’re one of the few people that can make good movie-based games. So that’s why I’m asking you this question.

LC: It’s an interesting question. Wow. It’s so hard because I don’t take adaptation of films lightly so I don’t think I could answer it with any degree of accuracy. I’m sure if I sat down and thought about it, I would come up with another film that was even better. But there are a couple that come to mind, that spring to mind, so I suppose they are probably exciting ones.

I’ve always believed that the movie Aliens deserved to be made into a game. There have been a couple products made, but I think that they kind of missed the boat of what Cameron was trying to do. Aliens as a film was not a properly designed story. It brought you up to an emotional level, and it never let you back down again. Which is actually poor film design, because you walk out exhausted. But that was the goal.

CP: Aliens is the only one of the series I’ve seen, and I know exactly what you mean. I thought I was going to have a heart attack.

LC: I’ve always felt that you walk out exhausted, emotionally drained. And that’s not good film design, from a certain level. But it was very successful in what he was trying to do. So I’ve always felt that that would be an exciting product to make a game from. And there have been some interesting Aliens, Predator-like games, but all of them focused more on the activity of shooting—blowing aliens into bits. And I think that they missed the point—the emotional pace of the film was—we’re lean, we’re mean, we’re going to get some, we’re going to go in there and take control. And the discovery that you not in control, your on their turf, they’re not what you expected. All of those emotional moments that were so poignant in the film are lost in all of the games because they focus on you being a superhero and all-powerful. And the film wasn’t about being superman. It was about being vulnerable, it was about being defeated by the animalistic nature of your enemy, as opposed to being superior in your technology and your firepower. And that’s why I think the games missed the boat. So that would be one that I’d love to get my teeth into. I’d have a great time with that one.

Another one that EA is doing right now is Harry Potter. I think Harry Potter could be a brilliant interactive entertainment experience. I’ve played three of the four games that have been released thus-far. All of them are fine games, but they’re playing it very safe, and I don’t think I’d be so safe. I think Harry Potter is about the magical moments—there’s a couple of people, Bill Waterson did it with Calvin and Hobbes, and I think Rowling does it with Harry Potter. There’s an imaginary world that children live in and it’s a filter on our reality. It’s not an alternate reality, but it’s a way of perceiving things. They see things in a different way.

My wife is always telling me I always seem to know what our kids are going to do, and the reason I do is because I delight in their world. I love the way they see things, I find it very entertaining. I would love to make a game that could take that wonderful, charming aspect of children’s lives, and draw it out in an interactive entertainment experience, where you get to be a kid again. I think that would be fabulous. What’s wonderful about Harry Potter is that it’s a great fantasy world where this child gets to be a child. I mean, all his imaginations are real. His perceived dangers—as much as the book talks about it, “well, this could be the end, it could be curtains for Harry”—you know Harry’s not going to die, nobody’s going to get really hurt. And that’s the charm. I think making a game where people run around with wands and zap bad guys is missing, again, the point of what she was trying to hit. I think that this is one of the few instances where literature makes for an excellent opportunity for interactive entertainment. So those two really strike me—they stick in my mind.

CP: One of the things I’m interested in is fantasy worlds and the literature of fantasy worlds. And one of the things that is interesting about right now is that we now have the Tolkien movie…

LC: It’s a great world.

CP:…which is the last piece. I mean there’s 20 years of gaming that’s been built on that world, and now we have the movie! It’s a very interesting statement about the relationship between all these media.

LC: The third one I would love to do, but it’s been done, but I’d love to re-do it. I guess I can’t re-do it because it’s been done.

CP: You can do remakes!

LC: I would love to do Robert Jordan’s Wheel of Time. I think that Wheel of Time as a literary work almost redefines the word “epic.” What I found intriguing about that was the way it wasn’t Tolkien—because the main character is godlike in his power. He’s not a vulnerable little hobbit, and the world really does revolve around him. I also like Orson Scott Card’s Ender’s Game…

CP: Which is terrifying…terrifying…
LC: That would be a great game.

CP: Yes, because it's a game world.

LC: The wonderful thing about the Wheel of Time is that there's an implied tapestry of the universe, the myths of the world is rich, has a history, has a future, a destiny. It has all the things that feel so poignant in the Tolkien books. But it isn't about Orcs and it doesn't have an evil king that's reigning supreme, in fact, quite frankly, the hero is the devil. The hero is the end. Everybody knows it. The main character, Rand, the protagonist, he brings about the end of the world. The problem is that you like him. He is somebody you can really identify with, and you feel sorry for him. But he's a tortured soul. He never really asked for this weight on his shoulders and he realizes that he inherently must bring about great change. What appeals to me about that whole universe is that the player of an interactive entertainment product wants to be important. But it's become trite to be just the superhero. And so if you're going to be a superhero, do it all the way. And if you're not going to be a superhero, then there has to be a penalty. There has to be some consequence of this great power that you have. You want the player to be empowered, but you want emotional consequence. And I think Rand would be a wonderful character to play. Unlike a lot of attempts at Wheel of Time which let you be any character, I would make you Rand. I would want you to be the main character.

CP: As you were talking I was thinking about Blade Runner, because of the fact that the story changes in the middle when the game figures out what you think is going on.

LC: It's always adapting itself.

CP: Exactly. And I think it's interesting because as a game designer, you come from this very narrative and cinematic perspective. I think that your emotional motivation is the idea of wrapping someone in a story, as opposed to Will who is all about Lego and train sets.

LC: Sure. Both of which are very valid approaches.

CP: I find that most people from traditional narrative backgrounds bump into a wall with games because they still think that it has to be some kind of deterministic world. And for storytellers to hear that the story doesn't know who you are until the end—it's mind-blowing. So I'd like you to talk a little bit about that.

LC: (Laughs.) In the case of Blade Runner, I go back to why. The reason Blade Runner is that way is because when I watched the film, I felt this great tension, this great sense of anxiety. And I watched the film dozens of times before we were talking about the property, and I watched it many times after.

CP: Did you initiate that discussion or did they approach you?

LC: Virgin was talking about Blade Runner, and they said "Are you guys interested in this film?" And I jumped on it. So when I started to analyze it, I said, you know the brilliant thing about Ridley Scott here is that just like Alien, the first movie in the series, what he's done is made us think that at any time the world could explode and things might fall apart. But he doesn't do it. And so it's the opposite, the antithesis of Cameron with Aliens. I mean the two movies could be no further apart. He builds up that tension, that fear of action, and then hammers it home in a selective way. The occasional sequences of violence in Blade Runner are really violent, especially for the time the film was made. I mean it's really intense—a woman crashing through five levels of plate glass... it's just not something most filmmakers would do.

From a game point of view, the only way I'm going to feel that kind of intensity is if at any given moment the game will have to challenge me to have to react very quickly. In a typical adventure game, you have this branching story—you know exactly what you've done that would cause something to happen. I wanted a game that would change. I had the characters running around in the world in real time, and they would make decisions based on random number generators. So you never knew when a guy might walk into the scene and take a shot at you, and that added the tension. But then to move beyond that, I said, hey what's really wonderful about Blade Runner is this creepy sense of what's real and what's not real. We wanted to make characters as believable as we possibly could with CG. They still aren't real. They're close, but they're kind of creepy. Which made perfect sense—it fit so beautifully with the world.

What was really important here was to imagine multiple story threads—we called them the Gandhi and Rambo routes. So one side was totally nonviolent, don't want to fight anybody, don't want to hurt anybody, totally sympathetic. And we thought about it in terms of the replicants. So what if you were completely pacifist, you tried not to kill any of these replicants, you tried very hard not to do what in essence the game keeps telling you to do, which is hunt these replicants? At the other extreme, what happens if you're completely violent, you shoot everybody and everything? So we built these two threads. And then we said, okay what if you cut that story again, and you said, I'm playing the game and I am a Blade Runner? I'm human, they're replicants. I want to kill them. And you run the story that way. What happens if I'm a replicant sympathizer? I discover I'm a replicant. I want to save the replicants, I want to help them. And when we put all those things together we ended up with multiple threads, and now the tricky part was that at any given time, we had to watch what people were doing, and say—and this is the trick—"If you play the game as if you are a replicant, then the game treats you as a replicant. If you play the game as if you were a Blade Runner, it treats you like you're
LC: That's true. So you need to write a game that reacts to that.

CP: Basically, the game responds to what it thinks you think. It doesn't do the opposite though? Because that's what I thought, I thought, you know in a way it might make sense that it would do the opposite of what it thought you were.

LC: No. The game rewards you regardless of which path you chose. So if you chose... here's an important part about game design. You can't do film noir in game design.

CP: Why not?

LC: Because film noir has a couple of classic elements. One is the protagonist seeks himself. This is critical in film noir. If you don't have the thing he's trying to search for within himself, it doesn't work. Film noir falls apart. That's why you can't do film noir in games.

CP: But you did do it.

LC: Yes, we did. What you're looking for is yourself. In the film, the Blade Runner is hunting the replicant. He is the replicant. That's why it's film noir. And that's why the film works really well.

The second thing is, film noir ends on a downer. It basically ends with an unfulfilled goal... the realization that you are your quest usually ends in an unsatisfying ending, which leaves you feeling wanting for success. You can't do that as a game because if people feel they've failed. A game is a success--a determinate ending. So if you feel you've failed, you re-load it and you try again, because obviously you've made a mistake. It goes counter to everything you do in a game to not satisfy a person's desires. So what we did in Blade Runner, was we said, okay, if you are a replicant, we let you be a replicant and let you succeed. So you can save the replicants, or you can save your partner, and you can get away. And therefore you've succeeded in being the replicant. If you want to be the Blade Runner, you can kill all the replicants, and therefore, you've succeeded in being the Blade Runner. So regardless of which path you chose, there was a success path. And then there were many different cuts in between. We've got seven basic endings and forty some-odd variants.

CP: But that's so interesting to, because a filmmaker tends to want the film to express his world view. And what you've done is you've said, okay there are a couple of world views that can be expressed through this experience.

LC: There's actually multiple cuts. There's "I am a human and I sympathize with replicants;" "I am a replicant and I sympathize with replicants;" "I am human and I hunt replicants;" "I am a replicant and I hunt replicants." So there are four cuts on the story right there. And each one is very different. Then you add in the love interest. So: "I'm a human, I'm in love with a replicant, I sympathize with the replicants;" "I'm a human I'm in love with a human"... doesn't happen in the game. That was discarded. (Laughs.) So we went through all the possible combinations and that's where we ended up with the seven endings that would lead to 42 or so possible variants.

CP: The love interest is always a replicant?

LC: There are three love interests: there's the little girl, who is not so little, she's older but she plays the part of a young girl. And she could be human or a replicant. In the case that she's human she's a victim of the old man, and the inciting incident of the story is that he has abused her, and so your goal is to save her, which you're allowed to do. In the case that she's a replicant, she's more a piece of property, but he's treated her badly, and so you still get to save her, and that's okay. Crystal Steel is always human—she's a replicant detective. You can be a replicant that convinces Crystal that replicants are okay and you guys get away together. Or you can be a human that gets with Crystal and you go "woo-woo" and you blow everybody away. So these are the cuts that we made on the story. And the important part was to create enough opportunities where people could move from one track to another so the world would respond in a way that felt compelling, that felt like it supported your story. The best review we ever got of the game was when the review started out it said "I played Blade Runner all the way through, and I thought, 'This is a very nice adventure game.' And then I started to write my review, so I thought I'd replay the game, and as I was trying to replay the game, I realized 'This is an amazing adventure game.'" (Both laugh.) Because now, it was a totally different game, and they had no idea the first time through that it wasn't a linear set of events, that it was actually adapting itself to your play.

CP: One of the debates that comes up in the narrative game argument is about foreshadowing—what you anticipate is or is not going to happen, or the threat of something happening. What theorists get vexed by is that problem of "well, if you leave it open-ended, you have a different character at the end." And I hear this all the time: "well if the character makes a different decision then he's a different character."

LC: That's true. So you need to write a game that reacts to that.
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LC:

multiplied by a factor of 10. And so there was only one—a

CP: Because there's a lot of information…

needed a PDA to help you solve this game.

That's why we exposed all the data structures in the E-book, the KIA

whether the information you're getting is right or the person has

CP: (Laughs.) Yeah… But that's what drama is about. Drama is about not

(Laughs.)

they're still trying to make them figure out how to make them tell the truth.

(Laughs.) Yeah… But that's what drama is about. Drama is about not knowing

CP: Tons of information. And right there in the PDA it would give you very clear

indications of whether or not this was probably a truthful thing or not. In fact, of all

the myriad reviews, there was only one—a lifestyle magazine in New York, of all

the places—that picked upon the fact that the game lied to itself. And he said "I

thought this was the case, so I called the designers. And I was amazed to find out

that this was the case. The game lied to itself." And he goes, "That blew me away.

That was something so unthinkable."

And you know what, it's the end of a genre in a way. I would love to make more

adventure game that develop some of these fundamental tenets to the next level.

But the sad reality is that adventure games probably never will see the million-plus
CP: I mean I think the audience that would be most receptive to story-based games is the female market, which even though it's larger than ever before, is still really underexploited. A lot of it is the story genres that get made.

LC: I've had a couple very successful games as far as female-to-male ratios. Monopoly, very successful. Blade Runner is another. As was Lion King to some extent. I believe it was because the character was not threatening and didn't really hurt anything. There was no destruction. In the case of Blade Runner I think it's because the activities were tension-oriented but violence wasn't the means to success. Intelligence and problem-solving was. And in the case of Monopoly it was because it was an accessible franchise.

CP: Isn't it also multiplayer?

LC: The game is multiplayer, it's about socialization and trading. And it isn't about shooting things. So all of those were very successful for those various reasons. But I think that the problem with "games for girls" is that you need to make games that appeal to a different side of human beings besides shooting and blowing things up. And once you do that, you unlock this magical door which means females can play the games without feeling completely torked. But I don't think that it's wise to target a female audience with a product, because there's still an impediment, which is the actual physical device. Right now, I don't believe females in general see a computer as an entertainment device. They see it as an information device, as potentially a creative tool.

CP: That's what a lot of the data supports. All the Purple Moon data supported that.

LC: I didn't know that, but this has been my speculation.

CP: Careful research has reinforced everything that you just said. Although I think that it's shifting slowly. I mean I think The Sims has been a breakthrough

LC: The Sims has been a breakthrough because it's about human needs. And it's about nurturing. You nurture these small things which look like people and act somewhat like people, and by nurturing them, you become successful. And females in general want to nurture something. This is a very gross generalization. I think human beings in general have an equal need to nurture.

CP: Well, it's also an age thing… you find that as men get older they tend to move into nurturing roles…

LC: People want nurturing. So that's why The Sims is five million units. People enjoy adventure. People want to fantasize, people want to explore. People want to nurture. People want to grow. People want to procreate.

CP: (Laughs)

LC: And I don't mean in that way, I mean they want to fulfill their creative desires and build and create. They want their ideas and their thought patterns to exist beyond their mundane and somewhat limited existence. And all of those things can be supported in games. The only problem is that people also like to dominate and people like to control. And it's really easy to make games about this. So right now all games are focused around dominance and control, by and large, because it appeals to a 10-15 year old male audience who is willing to spend the money and sees a computer or gaming system as a device that they can entertain themselves with. I think it goes back to arcades. They went into the arcades and this was a way for somebody to dominate and control a particular peer group if you weren't physically fit to do it. It was no different than sports.

CP: Sports for nerds.

LC: Yes… Sports for nerds. And I think games are sports in many ways. In fact successful games have to have sports-like qualities. That doesn't mean that that's the be-all end-all. I think the be-all end-all of interactive entertainment is when we stop thinking about it in terms of newly-defined genres and we start talking about it in terms of how you would talk about a film.

CP: When I teach game design, I talk to my students about subjective ideas of what's fun. And I give them these criteria: One is they can't have killing in their games, they can't have post-apocalyptic scenarios, they can't have wizards, gnomes, etc. And the game has to appeal to an audience of two or more different player types. And it doesn't matter what they are. They just have to be two different types, and they can be you and somebody else, or two people that aren't you. But they can't be just you.

What I love about Blade Runner is that it lets you do a range of things within the same game.

LC: Well, it lets you be successful with different strategies. Now we're making a game called Earth and Beyond, which the goal is to let you be successful as an explorer, because we feel that one of the things people like to do on online games is, they like to find new things, they want to discover, searching and discovering things, and they want to share it with other people. That's a wonderful mechanic that should be rewarded. In most games it's only rewarded in the sense of communicating it to other people. I've been here, I've seen this, I've done this. Wow, Fantastic. That's the only reward. You know what—that's enough. That's pretty sad, when that's enough to get people to play. So that's one thing that we're really trying to push the button on. The next thing we're trying to do is we're saying, "hey, you know, it's not just enough to be able to discover things and to explore, but trading. We're going to invite you and reward you for being a good trader." It's kind of like the Monopoly thing. You get rewarded if you trade a lot of objects back
and it makes for a really rough time for the guys who because now you have a character whose goal is to heal than straight out blow-'em-away oriented. And that becomes called the technician or the "hot-wirer," and that character has proximity LC: It turns out that the same character that heals, the advanced character, CP: That becomes a synergy.

LC: Of course! They need those guys.

the healing power is often protected by the more combat-oriented CP: But I know when people play in tribes or clans in the buildings don't get destroyed so your economy is maintained. Heals your harvester, which goes out and gets resources, so everybody gets more money. And guess what? We reward you. You get tons of points in the entire game by just... And that becomes something that goes beyond the normal value of objects in the world. And that's a customization issue. And then of course, we'll also reward combat. Now what's going to happen, and what has already happened with our beta test, is that the people who like combat try to prey on the people who do the exploring and the trading (laughs.) But the people who like the combat need the traders, because the traders are the ones who work out the economies, and build up the objects that the combat people need to be successful. So they need to work with those kinds of players. Meanwhile, the combat people also need new places to do combat, so the explorers become important because they identify new areas in the world. And the traders need the explorers, obviously, to find new places to trade. And the explorers need the traders because they need devices to open up new gateways to explore new areas. All of these people work together and they solve problems.

CP: So you end up creating a situation where it's not to someone's advantage to go shoot everybody in the game.

LC: Well, if you're a combat guy, then that's what your advantage is.

CP: But if you shoot the people that are doing resource trading...

LC: That's a bad idea!

Well, you can still be successful. So if you want to be just gungho and go kill everything, you can do that and be successful. If you want to just open up the world, you can be successful. If you're the uber-trader, the uber-explorer, or the uber-fighter, all of those will be successful paths. And we allow a mixture of them too. There are actually six combinations. So you can be a fighting explorer, and you can be an exploring trader, and you can be a trading fighter, and there are these combinations that allow for up to six different character types. And they all have very distinct roles. Like the fighting explorer's scout. And he works really well with other people who are armies, because he finds those things for which you go fight. So, we're hoping that we can actually change the way people think about persistent state world games, and draw people who have already played in other words, and found the excuse for playing, and give them a good reason.

CP: I know for me, I would play EverQuest if there wasn't any killing in the game.

LC: Well, would you play if you didn't have to kill, but at times it was advantageous?

CP: I find that, having gone in five times in succession in a half-hour period, and been killed every time, I had no interest in playing anymore.

LC: That goes back to what I was saying in my talk at UCLA. The problem with playing games online is that there are "athletes" that are world class, and when you go on the Internet, you find them really quickly because you become one of their victims.

CP: But see I think it would be interesting if you could create a situation where there are no victims. Then that becomes irrelevant. With my students, when I take killing out of it, you can create different types of conflict.

LC: But the players that want to be aggressive want victims. They can either prey on each other, or prey on the others.

CP: Well, when you have a game like, say, Quake...

LC: That's where they prey on each other.

CP: And those are games where everybody's there to shoot everybody else. But if you're there for some other reason, and you get preyed on...

LC: I'll give you an example. In the multiplayer version of Renegade you have one base against another. You know one of the best ways to be successful at Renegade? Not to shoot anything. Get an engineer who heals characters, heals your teammates, so they're more successful at combat, heals your base, so that the buildings don't get destroyed so your economy is maintained. Heals your harvester, which goes out and gets resources, so everybody gets more money. And guess what? We reward you. You get tons of points for healing units. It's very very valuable. You can not only cause points for healing units. It's very advantageous. You can not only cause... You can not only cause your team to win, but you can get the most points in the entire game by just simply healing.

I mean you shoot. You heal your own guys with an energy gun, but you're a healer. Now you also have offensive capabilities so if somebody really gets you pinned down, you can pop out your pistol and defend yourself.

CP: But I know when people play in tribes or clans in EverQuest, the person with the healing power is often protected by the more combat-oriented players.

LC: Of course! They need those guys.

CP: That becomes a synergy.

LC: It turns out that the same character that heals, the advanced character, is called the technician or the "hot-wirer," and that character has proximity mines and other types of offensive weapons which are more trap-oriented or puzzle-oriented than straight out blow-'em-away oriented. And that becomes really intriguing because now you have a character whose goal is to heal everybody in his team, and it makes for a really rough time for the guys who are trying to hurt them. And
that's a really fun dynamic. I think that's one of the reasons that Renegade as a product will really sail, because there's a role for me. If I've never played the game before, I can jump in the game and be useful immediately.

CP: Well, I also loved your idea about creating illusion. How in the first scene, they're never shooting at you. You think they are, but they're not. And so it creates this emotional impact without actually putting you at physical peril in the very beginning.

LC: But, if you go right in the way of a rocket, you'll catch the bullet. But if you take any damage at all in the first level of Renegade, it's because you walked in the way of the fire. It turns out that when you watch people play, the immediate presumption is, with all this stuff going on, they must be shooting at you. So, you're shooting around frantically, trying to kill them, "Oh, my God." Meanwhile if you just stood there, you'd be fine! (Laughs.)

CP: I am also wondering, what is the difference in play between these isometric RTS games vs. the first-person genre? You're one of the few people who does both.

LC: Well, it's true. The differences are really about the verbs you use. In a real-time strategy game it's about resource development, amassing troops, coordinating attacks, and waves of enemies. There's these interesting verbs that you look at the game with. And they're about "forwarding," and it's about finesse. When you go into a first person game, it's all about you, it's about running jumping and shooting.

CP: Do you think it's more emotional?

LC: It's more visceral. Not necessarily more emotional. In fact, one of the things I'm trying to do with the next one is to make you have a more emotional attachment to the units. Because I think that strategy game becomes more meaningful if you're emotionally attached to the units that you're putting in peril. So you make the units more survivable, so they don't just immediately die, and on top of that, you actually make them more personal, and you give the player good reason to make them survive from mission to mission, beyond just the battle itself.

CP: So more of an emotional attachment.

LC: I also believe that once a unit has survived a certain number of battles, and it becomes more experienced, if you are able to start to customize its capabilities, and give it a name and give it some decoration, you are investing time energy and emotion into that unit…

CP: You're nurturing it. (Laughs.)

LC: And it has a name. It's Boo, it's Susie, or it's whatever. It's Captain Hicks. You care about that character more than is rational. As a strategist, it's really easy to sit back and go "Well, why didn't that general send that platoon up that hill to take that post. Clearly, those guys were the most adept at it with all their combat experience. Sure, they're going to take losses, but they would succeed?" Well, because a good Colonel knows those guys, he doesn't want to take 50 percent losses in that group. Those are his best guys. He's invested a lot of time and energy. But it's more. It's emotional. He knows the people. He knows them to be human beings.

CP: The big argument that people always have against violence games is that there are no consequences. And if you know the people and you have an attachment to them, it makes it more realistic—not in terms of graphics, but in the interpersonal sense.

LC: Yeah, you care! And I think that's going to bring it to a whole new level.

CP: That's interesting because in the first person games you get into this "reptilian" fight-or-flight kind of self-centered focus.

LC: Right. Kill or be killed. And with the RTS games, you're abstracted to the point of non-consequence, uncaring. And so, you know, you almost delight in it. You watch these people who create massive death and destruction…

CP: Then it's like playing with toy soldiers.

LC: Yeah, you don't care. It's the "guy." Smash him, squish him, it doesn't matter. But I think it's going to change people's perception of a strategy game to actually care about the individual soldiers and their fate.

CP: Do you see a time when you might shift modes in a game?

LC: Probably not. I'm a big proponent of maintaining a consistent user interface. So we have this game that we just finished called Pirates: The Legend of Black Cat. It's an interesting game because you play as a character, Katarina DeLeon who's a pirate.

I think this is a fundamental difference between a computer game and a video game. Computer games, you're imagining the experience, you're fulfilling a fantasy, and the mouse and keyboard are an interface to an alternative world. In the case of a video game it's much more kinetic, and I believe you're actually playing the controller. So you're moving the buttons and dials on the controller and you're getting audiovisual feedback. And success with moving the buttons and the dials gives you a different type of audiovisual feedback where the reward is biomechanic, and it develops a different sense of experience. In this game, we had a character, this female pirate captain with two swords—one long, one short—and this unique fighting style. And we said, okay that's the way that character fights,
But you made a comment in the talk tonight, which I don't really agree with, become less "reptilian" and more nuanced, they're going to become I think a games now gets older, and what they're interested in, and as their interests CP: I'm really curious to see what happens when the generation that's playing LC: Yeah, very smooth. Good with the ladies, has lots of gadgets. That CP: And he was socially adept. reason why I always loved the James Bond films is because he didn't have to be characters are also appealing to guys. CP: It's great that girls can have those models. But it's also been found a huge beta—we have anywhere from reviewers thinking that it's going to success in a wide audience, the less likely you are to have CP: I was impressed with it because culturally we're in the age of Buffy and Xena and Witchblade, where I think girls in the age group that's traditionally the gaming age are starting to find heroines and adventure models. When I was a kid I was really into Alice in Wonderland, and that kind of thing. And to me those characters are kind of contemporary, "urban" fantasy characters for girls. I mean Buffy is a great example. She's so girly, but she's also very tough. LC: She's great. I like Willow, personally. Willow's my favorite. (Laughs.) CP: It's great that girls can have those models. But it's also been found that those characters are also appealing to guys. LC: Now I like Willow because she's successful for being smart. One of the reasons I always loved the James Bond films is because he didn't have to be tough—he was smart. He was tough, too, but that didn't matter. He was smart. CP: And he was socially adept. LC: Yeah, very smooth. Good with the ladies, has lots of gadgets. That appeals to me on multiple levels. (Laughs.) CP: I'm really curious to see what happens when the generation that's playing games now gets older, and what they're interested in, and as their interests become less "reptilian" and more nuanced, they're going to become I think a more demanding audience. But you made a comment in the talk tonight, which I don't really agree with, which
was that we have these "reptilian" game modes because of the technology. What I see is that we have these reptilian game modes, the technology has now evolved past them, but the modes persist because they're popular.

LC: Right, so to put a slight spin on it, I don't remember exactly what I said, but we have the reptilian game modes because the technology was very primitive as a particular time and space. That technology facilitated the very basic reptilian hunt-or-be-hunted play, which then, because it was successful, became what got built. So now we're at a point where we can do something else, but we won't. We won't because we're afraid, because our market has become addicted, if you will, to this particular methodology. They want to try a little something new, but not a lot something new. And people don't want to put up millions and millions of dollars to find out if there's another audience out there. And they don't even know how to educate them if there were.

CP: What would you do if I came to you and said, "I want to find out who the next audience for games are, or how do I expand or grow the audience." What would you say, what would you tell me?

LC: I would say you can only grow the audience by finding a particular segment that already exists and already likes a certain thing and Trojan Horsing the concept into that activity. So if you can get people to consume instead of destroy as a method of satisfying what they believe to be violent and destructive tendencies, you will find two audiences. One, those who destroy, who have now been tricked into consuming, in addition to those who consume, and never intended to destroy. The trick is, you can't market to the latter because you'll lose the former. So you have to actually shoot for those people.

CP: I think you start to hit that that with Earth and Beyond, when there are other options. I mean in the real world, everybody doesn't just run around shooting each other. There are some people who do that, and other people do other things. And even in the military not everybody does that.

LC: Correct. And in fact, actually in Earth and Beyond, what's really critical—and we haven't succeeded yet—is that we're cognizant of the problem, and we are trying very hard to address it. At the end of the day, we want people who are ant-social, violent behavior type individuals to only be successful if they can partner with those who are diametrically opposed to their philosophical beliefs, or at least their behaviors in the game. By doing that, we create an interdependency that prevents them from being completely self-indulgent. At the same time, the reverse is true, too. The explorer needs an escort, needs some protection. So, you don't need to shoot me now, because even though we're going to go into a Player Killer sector, where you can shoot me without being picked up by the Sol Sec Police—because we do have a police force that protects us—we're going to go into the wild hinterlands where you could shoot me, and you might get experience for doing so, because I've become quite successful. On the other hand, if you escort me, and we go and find things together, you're going to benefit far greater than if you dispose of me. And so as an explorer, my trust is in that you believe, and you know this is the better path for you.

There's that old story of the scorpion who was taking a ride on the frog across the river. And the scorpion stings the frog and they both sink to the bottom. And the frog says "Why did you do that? Now you've doomed yourself as well." And the Scorpion says, "Well it was in my nature." There will be some that it's in their nature the minute they get into a PK sector, they're going to blow the guy anyway, even though it wasn't the best thing for them to do. But then they'll quickly be found out, and then they won't succeed as much as another guy, who comes to them with an even bigger weapon and blows them out of the way. They'll realize, "Oh, I've made a major mistake. I thought that I could exist in the world alone, and it really takes coexistence in society for me to succeed."

CP: You made a comment tonight: "We don't make social statements, we just make games."

LC: (Laughs.)

CP: ...and I wrote it down and I wanted to call you on it, because I think you do make social statements. And I think the problem with a lot of game designers is that they make social statements without intending to. But you think a little more deeply about what social statements you're making: "On Virtual Adventures, the theme park game I designed in 1993, one of the tricks that I integrated into the game was that everybody thought that they were a good guy and that everyone else was a bad guy. So everyone can at least be the good guy, rescuing Nessie's eggs, but your ship looked like a bounty hunter to everyone else. And people would say, 'Oh, that's really cool, because it says something about how people are.' And what you're describing says something too."

You know, Chris Crawford says this great thing in The Art of Computer Game Design about conflict, and you need to have conflict in the game for it to be interesting. But what you're doing is you're making the conflict less black and white, and you're putting people into these much more interesting and complex moral dilemmas.

LC: Well, that's the goal. Even in our action/shooter game, it's ironic, because the testers sent back this thing and they said, we know this game it's a shooter game, and it's all about saving the scientists. And I'm like "huh, imagine that!" (Laughs.) The hardest missions in our action/shooter game are when you have to protect somebody else. And the reason they're hard is because, that's hard! First of all, the guy's not exactly the brightest person in the world and that makes it difficult.
But on top of that, it's just really hard when suddenly you're not just looking out for yourself.

CP: Even in the demo you showed today where you're shooting and the way that you set it up, your own people are in the way, so you have to be careful who you shoot.

LC: (Laughs.) Yes, exactly, you can't accidentally shoot your own guys.

CP: There is that sense that you're part of something greater, and that you care about what's going on. And it goes back to story, because I think if you want to tell an interesting story you have to understand human nature.

LC: So when I said that about social statements, we don't make games to make social statements. We make games to entertain people. But I think it is important to understand social dynamics, and I think it's critical actually to create deep social interactions to truly entertain those who have a little bit of gray matter between their ears.

Gamography - Highlights

2002 Earth and Beyond, General Manager and ECP (Executive in Charge of Production)
2001 Renegade, GM and ECP
2001 Pirates, The Legend of Black Kat, GM, EP (Executive Producer)
2001 Dune Emperor, GM
2001 C&C Red Alert 2, Yun's Revenge, GM, ECP
2000 C&C Red Alert 2, GM ECP
2000 C&C Tiberian Sun Firestorm
1999 C&C Tiberian Sun, Nox, Lands of Lore 3
1998 Dune 2000, Super Bikes, Lands of Lore 2
1997 Blade Runner - EP, Art Director, Technical Director, Lead Designer
1996 C&C Red Alert
1995 Command & Conquer, Monopoly
1994 The Lion King, Kyranadia 3
1993 Lands of Lore, Kyranadia 2, Young Merlin
1992 Kyranadia, Dune 2
1991 Eye of the Beholder 2
1990 Eye of the Beholder
1989 Dragonstrike
1988 Battletech, Circuits Edge
1987 The Mars Saga, The Mines of Titan, California Games
1986 World Games, Super Cycle
1985 Temple of Apshai Trilogy
(bold titles: director)

Many Faces of Go is a well crafted, mature software package that I have never had a single problem with, have been using for years, and can highly recommend to anyone. Other software will exceed it in certain areas, but the overall package is a good value. The price is $90 currently, and can be purchased directly from Smart Games or any of its distributors. The most direct competitor to Many Faces of Go is likely the competitively priced SmartGo:Combo package, which covers a similarly wide range of areas. Igowin, a 9x9 only version of Many Faces of Go, is also available as a free download (and