

This interview appeared on nisute.com on November the 15th 2009-11-26
<http://www.nisute.com/2009/11/25/stefano-gualeni-interviews-stefano-gualeni/>

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Stefano Gualeni interviews Stefano Gualeni

Or: a few advices on how to get into the game industry and be a jerk about it.

G: Greetings earthlings, in this NiSuTe exclusive article I will have the pleasure and hopefully the amusement of interviewing myself on a number of game-related topics. As would any respectable journalist, let me begin by thanking Stefano Gualeni for having dedicated time to us today. Welcome Stefano, it's great to have you here, really.

S: Ahem... I would hope the "really" would not be necessary. Anyway, thanks for being interested in the stuff I do and for hosting this interview.

G: Well, it was clearly not my idea, but let me join you in thanking Maikel de Bakker and the guys at Nisute for having made this possible. You just mentioned "the stuff you do", could you tell us what is it that you do exactly? In other words, could you briefly introduce yourself?

S: You know as much as I do about myself, but let's see... I guess I could start by saying that I am an Italian individual of thirty one years of age and that games constitute the main part of my reality.

G: That is not a self-introduction, Stefano. That is a poorly quoted extract from "The Babylon Lottery" by Jorge Luis Borges.

S: Agreed, but it would have been classier of you not to point it out. I wonder why you are so interested in making me look like a jerk?

G: Listen, you're interviewing yourself. This means that the only chance that you have got is to stand out as an ego-maniac or as a jerk. Personally, I believe the second one fits us better. So, are we going to have a self introduction or an argument here?

S: Fine, fine... Let's see: I tried to write my first RPG game when I was seven with a friend of mine who used to go to school with me. It was written in basic, for the COMMODORE 64. The amount of variables and the full screen graphics took us a whole summer to organize three rooms and two corridors. Then as a teenager, I designed some board-games for my amusement and my friends' and I used to write stories for the magazine of my high-school. In 1994 some people I knew were working on a game for the AMIGA 500 asked me if I could put together a silly storyboard for their demented, postmodern tennis game. I ended up writing the storyboard and doing some basic QA for the game that was finally released under the name of "Mikro Mortal Tennis" in 1995 and is still considered one of the best

titles released for that machine.

G: Or that's what you think! Anyway, it is safe to say that it was a lucky coincidence for you to have gotten in the game industry and at such a young age.

S: Well, at that time and in particular among the independent developers for the Amiga, it was rare to find something already structured as a business, especially in Italy. This made it easy for people with enough passion, creativity or technical knowledge, to start developing home-made videogames that would eventually reach the market. Some still consider the early nineties a golden age in game development. The creative freedom that independent developers could show and sell back then is very rare to see in the current production. I am thinking about titles such as Lemmings, Another World, Worms, Alone in the Dark, Myst, etc.

Nowadays the videogame market is among those with the largest revenue in the global economy, and there is huge competition both partake in the said revenues and to get into the industry. The professional standards to work on products for digital entertainment are a lot higher than fifteen years ago and it normally requires specific experience and having successfully completed a production circle as part of a development team of some kind... Which leaves us with the famous catch-22: "you need experience to be hired as a developer and you need to be hired as a developer to get experience".

If my illustrious interviewer will acquiesce, I will discuss ways around this conundrum later in the interview.

G: That would be great, but let's get back to your career. After "Mikro Mortal Tennis" came "Tony Tough", correct?

S: Yes, then it was time for our little team to get bigger, more structured and more serious. We started to work on "Tony Tough and the night of Roasted Moths", which took two years of development time and a group of variable size. I believe at some point there were about fifteen people working on it. I wrote the plot, the dialogues, the puzzles, designed the interface... Essentially all the game content. Tony Tough was released for PC in Italy in 1997 and was distributed worldwide in 1999. I was still at the university back then and it was quite hard to work on a videogame full time while keeping up with my studies.

G: But now you are going to tell us it was worth it, right?

S: Ah, you tell me! I did not go out on weekends for two years and I have developed an obsessive attachment to certain kinds of detergent. Would the recognition for having written be sufficient repayment for having lost all traces of humanity?

G: Totally.

After Tony Tough you graduated in Architecture in Milan with a thesis concerning the philosophical aspects of spatial design.

S: Well, not exactly. After Tony Tough I moved to Australia, then to Mexico. This second relocation happened while working on a licensed title which was only released in Italy and France, as far as I know. It was a PC point and click adventure titled "Prezzemolo in una Giornata da Incubo" and it is probably my best game design so far.

Indeed I was writing my bachelor thesis at the same time. After Prezzemolo came my graduation, followed by the pre-production for Tony Tough 2.

G: Tony Tough 2 was another title which was only released in a few European countries.

S: Yeah, a big disappointment for a number of reasons, including the quantity of bugs the game had to be released with...

G: According to my sources, after that you worked on the design of a couple of DVD games, on a couple of Game Boy Advanced games and on two titles of the International Basketball series.

S: Correct, and then got my masters degree. All of this and a few other details can be found on my official page www.farfetch.org/tiipsi

G: Shameless self-promotion.

S: Right, like you were not part of it.

G: Fine. Pffftt.... Enough! Also enough with your background. Architecture, philosophy, game design... Let's talk a bit about the present, shall we?

S: What about it?

G: You stopped working for the industry full-time to teach in Breda, The Netherlands, at the International Game Architecture & Design (IGAD) program. What motivated that choice?

S: I guess it's my personality, mostly. I tend to get bored very easily and, as most people I guess, I tend to only enjoy things that I can do when I want, how I want. Working in the industry in the last years was a job rather than a passion. It absorbed all of my time and it got a lot more serious. By that I mean that it became more like a technical profession rather than a creative one and that it was not something I could mix with side dishes such as working on my thesis or writing for magazines. It became my everything and it started to stifle me. As mentioned before, I hate it when I just cannot take my time and make my own way.

On top of that I guess I was always more interested in the theoretical and creative aspect of game design rather than in the practical realization of entertainment products. So I decided

to come to the Netherlands and become a teacher. I really like IGAD (see the article written by my student Chris McEntee: <http://www.nisute.com/2009/11/13/the-life-of-a-game-development-student/>) due to its hardcore professional attitude, the great people teaching there and the passion that drives our students. On top of it, NHTV and IGAD are investing in my research: every week I have one or two days dedicated to developing my PhD dissertation. It is truly great not to have a single focus and to be able to more or less freely dedicate time to all of my interests.

G: Regarding your PhD, let me guess: some weirdness involving philosophy and games?

S: Spot on. You seem to have figured me out quite well!

G: Just so you know, that is not funny.

Let's go back to your teaching rather than trying to be humorous.

S: Okay. I am teaching game studies, game design and game architecture. That leaves me enough time to write the aforementioned thesis, write articles for magazines like this one and occasionally work on some games.

G: Is there something you are working on and can disclose?

S: I think that nothing harmful would come from telling you that I have just finished working together with one of my students (Marcello Gomez Maureira... Hi, Marcello!) on the design of an action-puzzle game which will be released next year on the Nintendo DSi.

G: Anything special about it?

S: Probably the fact that, in collaboration with IGAD and NHTV's medialab, its design will be tuned and revised with a new biometric methodology that, if successful, could be offered as a service to Dutch companies developing for the casual sector of our industry. It is a very exciting and pioneering possibility...

G: I believe you, but – at the same time - I am not sure if most of the readers are familiar with the concept of “biometric methodology for game design”. Could you elaborate a little about that?

S: I can try, briefly.

Instead of only performing design iteration on a prototype with a group of players (in the targeted audience), we integrate it with a more scientific approach which allows us to observe and predict the biological response to the game, in terms of stress, pulsation, pupil dilation, skin conductivity, etc. In this way, the user response becomes a part of the process of game design, rather than a procedure to refine the quality of an already existing game structure.

G: Okay, look. I think that the only people who actually got what you're talking about

are either students of game design or actual game developers. What about all the rest of the population reading this interview?

S: What rest of the reading population are you talking about?! Plus I know as a fact this interview is already too long.

G: I will not argue on that point. So, teaching, writing for your doctorate and still developing games...

S: Yeah, without sacrificing one to the oth...

G: Please let me finish!

S: Sorry. Humph...

G: So, teaching, writing for your doctorate and still developing games. Are we missing something? Or... Is there something ELSE you would like to talk about before we finish this rather pathetic monologue?

S: Actually, yes. After having proven themselves in the last Global Game Jam, this year the students of IGAD (a team in the second year lead by the same Marcello who is helping me with my commercial projects) are participating to the prestigious Student Showcase of the International Game Festival competition (IGF2010). I was involved in the project as a client and I contributed to the initial idea for the concept with some preliminary research connected to my dissertation.

Normally the competitors in the IGF student showcase are Masters students. We believe that in IGAD we can get students to a competitive level already in the second year. I think the game speaks for itself: check the trailer at <http://www.vimeo.com/7509186> or the official webpage for the game at <http://haerfestgame.com/>

The professionally-supervised teamwork in game development schools and the participation to competition and contests give students visibility. I believe that, as already mentioned, those games and production experiences in general (a crucial aspect of our education from the very first semester) are crucial tools to get to work in the current configuration of the game industry.

Of course another way which is not necessarily connected to institutions of higher education would be becoming part of the various mod communities.

G: You see, Stefano, by something ELSE, I meant something which is not necessarily about your games or games that are somehow related to you.

S: Well, I started this off by saying that my life is mainly constituted by games, what did you expect?

G: One can still hope...

S: Sorry for the disappointment.

G: That's a quote from Douglas Adams, you jerk!

S: Ah, screw off!