

389COM: Games and Open Source - Part 1

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State of the onion

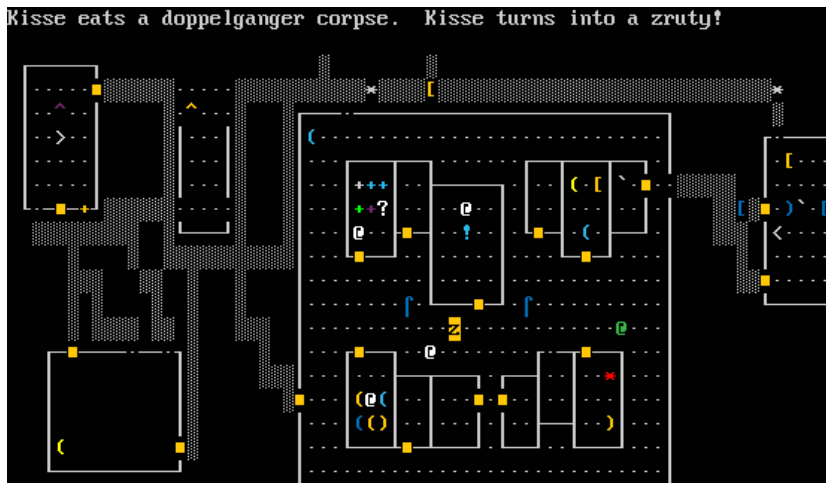
- There are 354,421 projects on Github locatable with the search tag 'game', 3467 on Gitlab.
- But there are no AAA quality revenue generating Open Source games.
- We will try to examine why this is the case

Potted history of Games development

- During the 1980's and early nineties, the emergence of home computers meant that thousands of people could develop games themselves.
- Many fortunes were made, and many iconic games series were born.
- The perception that being a programmer means being wealthy stems from this era, although even then it was only rarely true.

Open Source and Games - 1

- Version one of Nethack was released by Mike Stephenson on July 28, 1987. a Rogue-like Dungeon crawler that is extremely hard, and still under active development.



Open Source and Games - 2

- Nethack has been very influential in the three decades it has existed. I've tried several times to get good at it, but I'm just not.
- It has also always been free, with contributors gaining reputation and employment based on the quality of their work, not making money from Nethack itself.
- No commercial game has enjoyed such longevity, or attained a comparable level of code quality.
- Nor has any Open Source game, of which there are many.

Open Source and Games - 3

- Many people have written Open Source games for fun.
- Id software have released the source code for all their games once they have moved on. Source code only, not game resources.
- Attempts have been made to duplicate commercial games using all new code, sometimes these have been stamped on hard.

- Open Source and Games - 4

- Simcity has been the inspiration for several open source games (linCity, OpenCity).
- Freecraft, a Warcraft 2 clone was killed by Blizzard in June 2003 for trademark infringement.
- Blizzard also killed an attempt at an alternative Battlenet service called bnetd by threatening to sue anyone involved.
- Since it is GPL code, the project still exists under different names.

Cast off games

- Some software houses have released entire formally commercial games as open source.
- Laudible in theory, but the reality is that these are games that have run their commercial course and retain no opportunity for someone to make a living from them.
- Side note Abandonware is not a real thing.

Clones

- Some very old games, some which made their millions in the eighties have been cloned (duplicated in their entirety).
 - ▶ Manic Miner
 - ▶ Chuckie Egg
 - ▶ Space Invaders
 - ▶ Missile Command
- However the problem remains that while entertaining, these are not going to make anyone a living now.
- Not that online code portfolios are a bad thing, and some classic games are a good place to cut your teeth, since people know what to expect, and can therefore appreciate a good rendition.

Examining the problem - 1

- So why has no-one ever managed to create a commercially viable Open Source game?
- People have managed to use open source tools to make closed source games, so the tools exist for a totally free project, the limitation is not software based.
- The traditional games industry often views attempts at interoperability with their products as promoting piracy.

Examining the problem - 2

- Current AAA games cost multiple millions and several years to develop.
- Yet Minecraft, a program initially written by one man, became a worldwide sensation, and was bought by Microsoft for Billions.
- So the idea that succesful games must innevitably cost millions to develop is clearly flawed.
- Mobile games are now dominating the games industry, and AAA developers don't seem to be near mastering that.

The Traditional games industry - 1

- Warning, vast oversimplifications follow.
- Since it's emergence in the 1970's, the traditional games industry has grown more complex and centralised.
- The AAA industry has gained, through acquisition, most of the most popular franchises.
- As each iteration of mainstream games appears, changes have been less significant, and innovation/risk taking has been less appealing to them.
- Gameplay innovation has been replaced by graphical ones, and even that is beginning to stagnate.

The Traditional games industry - 2

- As innovation in their mainstream products has become less appealing, revenue has been dropping. This means that game complexity and quality has been dropping.
- DLC (most often instantiated as whole games being sliced up to sell as pieces) are increasingly used to increase revenue.

The Traditional games industry - 3

- Microtransactions and in game stores have been borrowed from mobile and web based games and put in games that previously had, and needed none, to further increase revenue.
- They have not thus far seen Open Source as a valid avenue, since any such game, if true Open Source, would easily slip from their control if mis-managed.

The Console Market

- As it stands today, the Console market is not available to Open Source games.
- Console games also tend to be the primary focus of releases, with PC releases being ports. This may be changing, I don't buy many new games that were on a console.
- Hardware is not the issue, at present Console manufacturers are actively hostile to the Open Source world. This is possibly due to a lack of perceived revenue stream.

Mods - 1

- Mods for commercial games have existed since Id software actively promoted community contributions to their FPS game Doom in the nineties.
- Not at first however, initially they were against it. [John Romero](#) seems to have been the driving force in changing their minds.

Mods - 2

- Mods have led to careers in gaming.
- Id sought to hire many early community developers, and there are examples of mods becoming full games.
- [Steve Polge](#) created an AI mod for Quake [Reaper Bot](#) in 1997 that essentially began the rise of AI NPCs in games that we see everywhere today.
- Mods are however predominantly 'free' products that enhance non free products.

Mods - 3

- Incentive for modding is rarely commercial. My most used open source product is a game profile manager.
- The company whose game it is for (Egosoft) have distributed it, and the work of many other free content creators with their games (with their permission).
- This is more about community contribution than open source, but it shows that the mindset for free, high quality contributions where the rewards are status and enhancement of the gaming experience, not cash does exist.

Mods - 4

- An attempt to monetize Mods in Skyrim collapsed recently on Steam, so monetisation using the conventional game sales system hasn't worked yet.
- Possibly this is because mod developers have never been motivated by cash rewards, so adding in this meant that there was a rush by developers new to the mod scene to push low quality work into the same potential revenue stream.
- I haven't looked into this much though.

Kickstarter

- Lots of games have been funded through Kickstarter.
- Kickstarter game projects reward contributors with, among other things, early game access, a say in game development, and extra features, either exclusive, or just earlier than non contributors.
- How would this work if all the code, and game assets, were free to anyone all the way along?
- The advantage of a succesful Kickstarter campaign would be an initial cash lump sum.
- It seems to me that Kickstarter favours the closed source model.

Patreon

- Contributors to Patreon projects generally expect to be funding something which has regular output.
- I have mostly encountered it on Youtube.
- There would be no initial cash lump sum.
- Patreon Does seem to favour a more open model, since no-one gets exclusive content, but they do often get a say in subjects covered.

Obligatory XKCD



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