Positech Games

Talking To 'Pirates'

A few days ago I posted a simple question on my blog. "Why do people pirate my games?". It was an honest attempt to get real answers to an important question. I submitted the bog entry to slashdot and the penny arcade forums, and from there it made it to arstechnica, then digg, then bnet and probably a few other places. The response was massive. This is what I found:

Introduction

Firstly it's worth pointing out that there were LOTs of responses (and they are still coming in now), hundreds of comments on the sites listed, a ton of comments on the blog (despite it crumbling under the strain) and hundreds of emails made it through to me. I read every one of them. They were also generally very long. Few people wrote under 100 words. Some people put tolstoy to shame. It seems a lot of people have waited a long time to tell a game developer the answer to this question. Some people thought my name was chris, or that I developed Braid. But that doesn't matter :D It's worth pointing out that the original question was specific to MY games, because I already do the majority of what people complain about (free demos, easy demo hosting, digital distribution, original games, good tech support etc), but the majority of the replies were aimed at games devs in general, not me. Here is what they said:

The semi-political ones

I got a few people churning out long arguments about whether or not intellectual property is valid, and claiming that it was censorship, or fascism and other variations on this theme. I'm used to reading all this, and find it completely unconvincing, and to be honest, silly. The really interesting news was that this was a trivial proportion of the total replies.

Money

This *did* surprise me. A LOT of people cited the cost of games as a major reason for pirating. Many were kids with no cash and lots of time to play games, but many were not. I got a lot of peoples life stories, and a ton of them were my age. Even those who didn't cite cost as their main reason almost always mentioned it at some stage. A lot of anger was directed at the retail $60 games, and console games. People in Australia were especially annoyed about higher prices there. My games were $19-23, but for a lot of people, it was claimed this was far

too high. People talked a lot about impulse buying games if they were much cheaper.

Game Quality

This was a big complaint too. And this also surprised me. I have a very low opinion of most new games, especially triple A ones, but it seems I'm not alone. Although there were many and varied complaints about tech support, game stability, bugs and system requirements, it was interesting to hear so many complaints about actual game design and gameplay. Not a single person said they had felt ripped off by a game due to substandard visuals or lack of content. The consensus was that games got boring too quickly, were too derivative, and had gameplay issues. Demos were widely considered to be too short and unrepresentative of the final product. People suspected that the full game was no better than the demo. Almost everyone had a tale of a game that was bought based on hype which turned out to be disappointing.

DRM

This was expected, but whereas many pirates who debate the issue online are often abusive and aggressive on the topic, most of the DRM complaints were reasonable and well put. People don't like DRM, we knew that, but the extent to which DRM is turning away people who have no other complaints is possibly misunderstood. If you wanted to change ONE thing to get more pirates to buy games, scrapping DRM is it. These gamers are the low hanging fruit of this whole debate.

Digital Distribution

Lots of people claimed to pirate because it was easier than going to shops. Many of them said they pirate everything that's not on Steam. Steam got a pretty universal thumbs up from everyone. I still don't get how buying from steam is any different to buying from me, other than you may already have an account on steam. For the record, I'd love to get my games on steam. I wish it was that easy.

Confessions

I got a few people, maybe 5% of the total, who basically said "I do it because I like free stuff and won't get caught. I'd do the same with anything if I knew I'd get away with it." This is depressing, but thankfully a small minority. I also got the occasional bit of abuse and sarcasm from hardcore pirates who have decided I am their enemy. Who would have thought that would happen? They give the other 99% of pirates a bad name, and are the reason people don't listen to pirates.
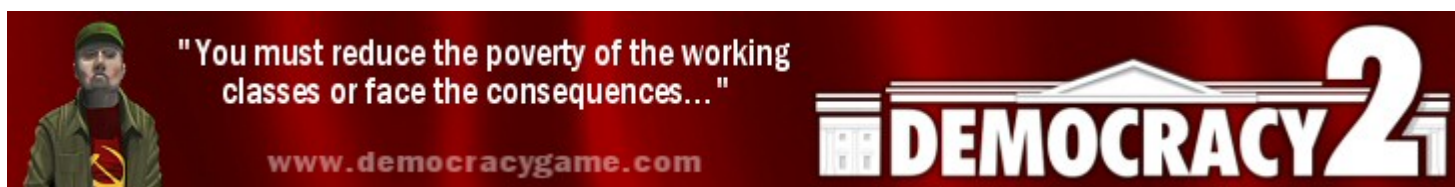
What I'm going to do about it

There was a point to all this, and it was partly to sell more (I have bills to pay!) as well as hopefully get more people to legitimately play my games. I'd be very happy if some reduction of overall piracy happened too, as I love PC gaming and the current situation is only helping to kill it off. I've thought hard about everything people have said and I have decided to change a few things about my games.

1) No more DRM

I only used DRM for one game (Democracy 2) and it's trivial. It's a one-time only internet code lookup for the full version. I've read enough otherwise honest people complain about DRM to see that its probably hurting more than it help's. I had planned on using the same system for Kudos 2, but I've changed my mind on that. I have also removed it from Democracy 2 today. **I now use no DRM at all**.

2) Demos

People think demos are too short. My demos *are* short, because the marketing man in me sees that you can't give away too much. I've wanted people to feel a bit annoyed when the demo cuts out, so they buy the game to keep playing. Too many people are put off by this and pirate games so they can see exactly what they are getting. I'll be making my demos much better, and longer, and will retrospectively change this when I get around to it for some of my older games. (I'm swamped with work right now)

3) Price

I think my games are priced right, and was considering charging more for Kudos 2 (which is my biggest and best ever game). I sometimes play casual games for $20 which seem to have maybe a tenth of the effort I put into mine. However, enough people out there see price as a factor to change my mind. I halved the price of Kudos 1 a few days ago, to **$9.95**. I'll keep an eye on how it does. I'm also strongly inclined to price Kudos 2 lower than I originally planned to.

4) Quality

My games aren't as good as they could be. Ironically, one of the things that reduces your enthusiasm to really go the extra mile in making games is the thought that thousands of ungrateful gits will swipe the whole thing on day one for nothing. It's very demoralizing. But actually talking to the pirates has revealed a huge group of people who really appreciate genuinely good games. Some of the criticisms of my games hit home. I get the impression that if I make Kudos 2 not just lots better than the original, but hugely, overwhelmingly, massively better, well polished, designed and balanced, that a lot of would-be pirates will actually buy it. I've gone from being

demoralized by pirates to actually inspired by them, and I'm working harder than ever before on making my games fun and polished.

A final note is trying to make it easier for people to buy my games. I'm really hassling my payment provider to support amazons one-click method. For me, I think that's even more convenient than steam. I'm always doing what I can to make buying them as quick and easy as possible.

Conclusion

So it was all very worthwhile, for me. I don't think the whole exercise will have much effect on the wider industry. Doubtless there will be more FPS games requiring mainframes to run them, more games with securom, games with no demos, or games with all glitz and no gameplay. I wish this wasn't the case, and that the devs could listen more to their potential customers, and that the pirates could listen more to the devs rather than abusing them. I don't think that's going to happen.
But I gave it a go, and I know my games will be better as a result. I'll never make millions from them, but I think now I know more about why pirates do what they do, I'll be in a better position to keep doing what I wanted, which is making games for the PC.
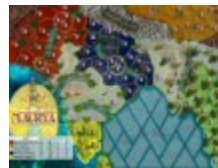Thanks for reading.

Cliff 'cliffski' Harris

Kudos 2	Rock Legend	Ancient Empires	Cute Knight	Kudos

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