

YANNICK JUA

EXPERIENCE

17 : FREEDOM TO LIVE

Extract : Frédéric Raynal's interview

Frédéric Raynal

Back at last ?



End of 2004, we met up with him at the Game Connection event(Lyon, France) to discuss his past and his current occupations. In December 2005, we arranged a new appointment to check what happened to him in the meantime and to learn more about his projects. Some good news from a developer we can't forget.

SANQUA: Last year we talked about your current projects and you mentioned a secret one which would start by 2005. What happened since last year to this fine project, Ludoid ?

FR: Indeed, Ludoid was founded in March 2005, for a creation consultant position. It's quite hard to define, let's say "high level conception support". This is not specifically linked to "game design", rather "game mechanics", its conception on the whole. To develop a game, you need to have a global vision. There must be a clear consistency, a proper balance between all ingredients. This is where I support teams, in a more or less creative way.

I currently have several clients and some more nice projects might come. I am very pleased with this occupation. At least I was, because the more I dealt with it, the more I felt at ease in this position. I am a bad marketer, a bad speaker, but I

genuinely feel very reactive about games. In the end I realized I was getting more and more frustrated not to make those games myself.

When you have been a programmer for years, you don't lose your programmer mind set. I always wanted to please people while creating games. Even before the age of computers, when I imagined board games to play with friends, it was to please them. And during this last year of thinking on teams and projects, I started to think about myself. I noticed that during all those years of game-making in teams like "Adeline" or "No cliché", there were of course a lot of pleasure, a lot of successful games, a lot of rewards, a lot of honor...

A lot extremely pleasant things, but we were aiming first at satisfying people. Then I said to myself: "So, what about me ? What satisfies me?". Knowing that it is always very touching to have

a game which is working, to get rewards, the best one of which is the feedback of players who say they liked my games - when I meet people who tell me such things, it is always extremely rewarding for me.

The most enjoyable thing was to work within the team. Working every day, spending nights when we were late, despite the telling-off there were, the clumsiness - to cut a long story short, all those things that were my life. So, the news for Sanqua is that I decided to restart a team, because I miss all those things.

Of course, that won't happen just like this, snapping my fingers. I am in touch with publishers, teams, various people, to discuss my projects. The persons whom I worked with before are now widespread all over the world. Some of them would like to work with me again, and that gave me more reasons to take this decision.

I know that won't necessarily be easy, given that I don't like extravagance. But I do have ambition, and I don't want to make a 150-persons team.

At the beginning, when I created games alone, I used to see the job of game creator very much like the job of a painter or a sculptor. Take a painter, for example : you give him a brush and some paint and he is going to make something out of it. It is the same for a sculptor with a hammer and a cold chisel. In my case, I found a computer which I could manipulate to create something that works. Making games alone is something which is not possible on the long term. First there were 2 persons, then 7, then 30... But the most important in the end was to work with people. Now I come back to this: I will start a small team again, maybe 10 persons, we will see.

We will start with some modest games, but particularly some

sincere games, entertaining/funny attempts. Not thinking "This, this kind of things is a hit on the market, so we'll do something like this". Of course, there must be some marketing notions like "Will there be a number of people who will like this?". But, in fact, I would almost prefer my future partners, publishers or distributors alike, to take care of these aspects. And even then, I tend to be suspicious, because sometimes some UFOs manage to reach success. The "Sims" story with EA is anyhow something quite extraordinary, and it happened several times.

Even with "Alone in the Dark" it happened. Infogrames didn't want me to start this project because they didn't feel confident about it. There are things that are important to me, they must appeal to some persons, and first please me. It's important to try out. It may be long, it may even not happen. I want to make it with the persons I trust. As I said, I am not a good

marketer, nor a jurist or whatever. I want to work with persons who have the same mind set, with who it is nice to work. There are a lot of publishers out there who have such mind sets.

Regarding to yesterday night's conference (refer to Sanqua Experience 14), the "creative players" do well understand what it is, because a lot of their products are tools of creation of different aspects.

Because people like to create.

I will modestly try to launch again some small projects which are important to me. If it grows, we will see. A game studio, before, was like a music band. There was a leader who had his own ideas and held the rest of the team, and inside, some musicians who played their own instruments. It may be "Maya" or "Visual C++"... Different tools.

In the end, a game needs a soul.

People often laugh at me when I say this. For a game to have a soul, all depends on how everyone feel like doing their best - and at the end, you feel it in the game. It might be stupid, but it's important for me. I really feel like gathering a team of people who want to invest themselves in it. At the end, it may become a hit or not, but at least it would have been made with the idea of making something good. So, it is important for the partners to also feel like this. Of course, I know the financial coercions; I managed teams during a long enough time to understand budgets, time constraints, things like that. I know how to deal with all that, these are components we really cannot disregard, in this "poetical" side of the job.

A few years ago, it was said that only 150-persons large studios, if not more, could manage to make it. Now we notice there is

a big gap in the market. As said in yesterday's conference, the "wider public" is not necessarily satisfied with nowadays' games. Free downloadable games blow-up more and more on the internet - because a lot of people don't want to play the games they find in shops, which aim at experienced players, particularly on consoles. On consoles, games are not "complicated", but are hard to access, no matter how simple they are. What's more, there is nothing more custodian than a player. They want things to be more and more accurate in the category they like, FPS, strategy or whatever. This audience is getting harder and harder to please. So they are custodian and in the meantime they want new things.

The "Sims" players are extremely hard to define, they are not complete "strangers" from the gaming world. Even I want to play a certain category of game. Meaning games that are deep, that may be

sophisticated and require thinking, but which are easier to play, less demanding on my free time, because I have many other things I need to do. The gap is very large. I want intermediate games between sharewares that can be found on the Internet and big games sold at retail. I want to try to keep being creative and make original things.

SANQUA: What do you think about making games on portable consoles (the DS, the PSP) ? You talked about it last year, saying it was an attracting format for you, allowing interesting games, without a huge budget.

FR: Yes, indeed. It's really a question of scale. A priori, I would also make PC games - with at least 400 or 500 million PC players, even occasional players, it accounts for a very large audience - downloadable or in box games - This audience is much larger than the console one, and more importantly much more varied. It gives more chances to

make a game that will be interesting for a certain category of players. The DS is really interesting, I find this device really extraordinary and extremely well designed for games. I don't feel the same with PSP which doesn't really offer something different from a classic console. Besides we can notice that there are loads of PS2 games adaptations, it's a pity. However, there is still the wireless connection, yet also available on the DS.

I'm inclined to like more the DS. But yet, the PSP also belongs to the good format.

SANQUA: Don't you think that precisely as the PSP benefits from the PS2 world, there might be a market for different games on this console? Most of PSP owners are getting bored with it. Wouldn't it interesting to develop atypical games on PSP?

FR: Yes, but I'm mainly talking

about my personal preference for the DS. But the kind of games I would like to make in terms of size perfectly fits the PSP. There are also the network capabilities. I think there are things to make with this.

What's good with portable consoles is to play with your friends easily when you meet them. Or even on the Internet, but it's more complicated. What is more interesting for me is the concept of playing with friends. You just have to have played Mario Kart with friends once to understand what is appealing in it. But the PSP is also fits that model.

SANQUA: What about bigger projects? Any plans or not?

FR: I'm not afraid of working on big projects involving numerous people. I'm already doing it as consultant. It's not a question of being afraid. I also have some ideas of projects on consoles. I'd love



to make a "survival horror" title again. I have several ideas on how to renew the genre.

So why not, if it comes to it and we have to work again on consoles... but, as for now, the PC is my favorite target :

I started with it and I really want to return to it. Anyway, no matter whether it is on PC or consoles... what is important is to make games.

SANQUA: What do you think about Nintendo's Revolution?

FR: The Revolution is an absolutely extraordinary device. The pad, the inbuilt characteristics of the device eventually do not really matter: knowing there is a pad with a 3D positioning system is enough for me to say that all will be extraordinary on this device: even the smallest tennis game, golf game or whatever!

However there are still some issues to solve: the Eye Toy, for example, is extraordinary but very tiring. After 2 hours of an Eye Toy game, you are dead tired the following day! But this is extremely fun, this is what I call a game.

In fact, there are some unknown factors. One of them is what the public will think of the Revolution: people who did not know the principle said "why do everybody think this remote control is so extraordinary?". It's hard for them

to understand that, what is special with it is not some new keys, but the position of the pad itself that will allow a new way to enter the game. Nintendo has already featured a video where they don't show the game screen at all, focusing on the players having fun - that is the right way to position it, I hope everybody will understand.

I'm sure there is a bunch of extraordinary things to do with this device. I can foresee there will be an impressive number of different extra options for this pad. Would it just be for a simple racing game, you just have to put a piece of steering wheel-shaped plastic, insert the pad in the middle, and you there have a steering wheel for your game! I'm dreaming of an interface where you place the pad on your forearm, with a contact sensor to check when you close your palm - that would mean you could be able to hold swords, objects... Having your hand inserted into the game. As it's possible to connect 4 pads,



we would come to terms with 2 hands - we would really fight, open doors, handle objects, pads, as with natural hands, in front of the screen.

Of course, there is a risk to make people feel tired if they keep their hands up all the time. But after all, if video games end up turning you into someone beefy... it's not all bad, right ? Games are things that must be "touched". I have always thought so.

This statement will almost become true on the Revolution. Even though I do not have it in my hands yet and I can't see how it works, I'm quite enthusiastic about it.

SANQUA: Don't you think there will be a split between classic consoles like the PS3 and the Xbox 360 which keep a normal pad system - while the Revolution would allow a larger audience to enter the video games world through its direct interface?

FR: I'm looking forward for it. In my opinion it's Nintendo's job, that's what they have to do. They had done a pseudo-mistake with Game Cube which was a console like any other. For me, it was not Nintendo.

Nintendo has always been here to bring innovations and that's actually what they are currently doing.

Indeed, that's their job and I hope it will work, and open video games to a new public. Or even simply bring new ways to experience games. They are looking in the right direction. We can already notice this in arcade games with numerous specific devices (oars, wheels, skates ...). Especially in Japan, people are maybe less "shy", they don't hesitate to express themselves when playing: see the dancing games, it looks incredible. In France, even if it's getting a little more common, people are less crazy about this - they are more afraid to show themselves in public while there

are loads of very expressive games in Japan.

I like it a lot. So I won't say I won't make console games as I am interested by the Revolution. But everybody will get the same ideas: the pad will be inspiring: would it be just making a tennis game, a sword game... We want to play those games.

SANQUA: How do you see the future of the PS3 and the Xbox 360? Is it still something interesting for you as developer, or will you just forsake this market, becoming simply too elitist?

FR: The problem with those devices - well, it's not actually a problem - is that they are full of publishers who work with huge teams and who make some visually extraordinary games. So I just skip the problem which is not exactly one, which is to say "it's just another console like the others, with more polygons, higher resolution, higher everything".

That is not basically bad. It's better if it looks good, it's better if more things can be displayed as it can lead to new gameplay ideas, so I don't inevitably criticize this, even if it's a pity that it is "only" this compared to the Revolution.

I have recently discovered a detail I ignored until now: I talked about it yesterday and that made me quite change my mind about the Xbox 360. On XboxLive there will be an online shop to download small games. That fits what I said before about modest games - so that's something I may look forward to: a system of less risky games where it is still possible to experiment different things. Why not! I don't know exactly how this will work, especially in terms of price. The freedom of the PC world, i.e. to put a game on the Internet and sell it, this is still something that seduces me a lot. I don't know what will be the structure on the Xbox 360 though.

SANQUA: What do you think about online game distribution behaving like virtual publishers? Is it positive for independent developers?

FR : Yes, I think more and more people will be interested by download portals. Steam is a games vector, but not exactly - as Steam comes from the Valve world - Half Life - the main public of Steam is made of gamers who like FPS, a specific category of games which is not really the one I want to try out. There are already enough skilled people to produce extraordinary things. However, if it allows players to discover thanks to Steam some new small games they wouldn't have noticed in the first place, then it reaches what I have mentioned: being able to get to a large choice of downloadable games.

The PS3 will feature a Blu Ray disk. That's good, but you have to fill it. There are all the DVDs, films, which will attract people but there



are not loads of films using this format. The DVD format can be confident about its near future... The general public use of DVD is not even 10 years old! A few years will go by before the next gen takes advantage.

SANQUA: *I guess you still play - what got your attention this past year ? What did you find worth remembering?*

FR: Yes but, as usual, I have always preferred making games than playing to them. Usually, I try out a lot of games, such as demo versions, to understand their mechanics, to see what they wanted to make and how they did it, but I rarely play games from the beginning to the end. I kind of play indirectly as my wife often plays and I have a TV in my office that displays what is on the living room TV and so I can check out the games. A recent game I have played or tried..? Well... There was Fahrenheit of course.



SANQUA: *Despite what you said about it ?*

FR: Yes, I have criticized it a lot, because that is not the kind of game I like to create. Still, I found it to be so extraordinary... That is what I said to David (Cage) : it was a risk to take, and I am glad it was successful, I hope its success will go on. He might not have brought the adventure genre to a higher standard but he brought a certain point of view which is interesting. That means I really enjoyed this game. So that's really nice he made it.

Mario Kart: I must admit it, we were talking about wider audience games, and that is the case because I am playing with my son, my daughter and my wife. Those are inter-generational games : anyone can simply have fun, it is pure gaming pleasure. I am going to play to it a lot again. I appreciate games where you can have a lot of fun quickly, even if

it's not necessarily the kind of game I create - which ask for more involvement.

Those are the 2 last that I remember most. I also often play to Trackmania. I had already talked about it with Florent (Castelnérac), I don't really like the Internet constraint - I prefer solo games, yet, to have a player community and to be able to download tracks constantly renewing the game makes it very enticing. In the end, I don't really play the games I like to make.

SANQUA: *Did you try out The Movies?*

FR: Not yet, I really have to check it out. I like the idea of a game where you play the role of a creator. It is something I thought of a few years ago. I think Peter have had the same approach. We used approximately the same devices around the same time, knew the same game eras. There was a game a long time ago - I don't remember

its name - a short time after Alone In The Dark, where we could create films, with a fixed background, and 3d characters. It was really low-poly, on PC, low resolution, it was possible to add some dialogues, musics, sounds, voices and make some short animated sequences with some characters - a bit like what we now see with the Machinima creations - But it was a long time ago, and I have a good memory of it. I thought that now, with the currently available hardware, something very accessible could be made available to a larger audience.

SANQUA: While working with Ludoid, did you discuss with publishers your new projects, or did you simply think of a new studio on your own ?

FR: That's quite new with the Game Connection event : I take advantage of the situation to tell people that I have projects, 4-5 projects of different sizes, that I



take to heart. There are not too few projects. I selected a few of them for some scale and originality issues. I have many projects in mind, depending on a number of parameters.

There is not only the concept in one game. A game has to come from a team. We must adapt it with each person's affinity, with technical production possibilities - I have different kinds of projects demanding different kind of people. I do exactly the contrary of what has to be done: it's better to gather the team first, to work with a single project as the selected one... In my case I come with several projects and people would tell me "you don't know what you want to do!". But I have a bunch of ideas, I like them all as much as the others, I have much more of them than I can show or talk about. But I still have a naive boy utopist dream to unite a team in such a way.

SANQUA: About the community and the way it is organized: The Game Connection, is it a unique opportunity for you, or do you get similar chances at other events ?

FR: I've not been to the E3 for a few years. I find that Lyon Game really had an extraordinary initiative to make a reversed exhibition where publishers come to see developers: so they come here to shop for products. Developers have their own booth, I find that idea excellent. What's more, I live in Lyon, it is in

Lyon (laughs) - I also take that in consideration! This decision to go back to development was recent: a few days or weeks ago, as I saw the GC opening soon, instead of coming to prospect as a consultant for several firms, I am trying to work towards my dream which is to re-unite this team.

SANQUA: What is the reaction of the ones you talked to about your desire to create a new studio ?

FR: Well, for the moment I am very satisfied, there is a good feedback.

Now, it's important to always be careful - everybody is always gentle, polite with everybody. I remember before, when I used to present my projects, people would be saying "this is superb", yet nothing would happen after.

I am waiting to see what it will be like. I have forsaken human relations for a long time, and that is precisely what the most interesting part is for me now.

The relations I want in my team, I would like to share them as well with the publisher, the distributor, the investor, in fact whoever would be interested by my projects. I am satisfied with the feedback, I have the advantage of what is called a "track record" - people are more enticed to welcome my ideas. They listen carefully to what I have to say

anyway, because they know those are not lost ideas. Many persons have many ideas about many things. When I voice out my ideas, I know I can make them happen. I know where I am going, even if it changes a lot during development. I have a lot of experience now, the things I propose are consistent.

SANQUA: It is more and more common to talk about the producer job in video games, who is looking everywhere to find funds for games - would you be interested in working with such people?

FR: Why not. It depends if the producer thinks: "so, I invest that much, I will earn that much out of it" - Same here, it is a question of personality. If you deal with someone who wants to help projects come true, it is a matter of confidence. That being said, going through a producer also means approaching publishers later to try and make things more consistent. I saw a producer yesterday and I

talked about one project to him, and it was too small for him, compared to the time he invests in finding funding, paper works, etc...

I want to make something relatively small, at least at the beginning. If it has to grow after and become enormous, why not, that doesn't scare me at all. But since I want to start things really well - starting with huge teams too quickly is the best way to run into the wall. I want team members with experience and younger one who are motivated. That's not the stupid nostalgia of someone who is growing old and who wants to make the things that worked before... I have a certain view of a team able to be creative, productive, and efficient. This is why I am modest in the projects I present - that would be clumsy to start with something too big. I want to make it again in a very efficient and stable manner.

SANQUA: There are more and more schools that offer courses to develop video games, did you participate in a way or another to their establishment? What do you think of it ? Is it going to standardize the way people work?

FR: I think it's good. No, I have not been implied yet, because the firm where

I worked before, F4 toys, is a very secret firm, with which I didn't make anything like that. But I am in touch with some persons who are very capable as Sebastien Doumic, or Stephane Natkin who I already met at the time - I found it interesting and I wanted to participate, but it didn't happen. I see them again now and I will go and check what's happening in those schools. About a possible standardization... No, I don't think so. I have always made games in an extremely instinctive way, but now there are so many things which need to be formalized, theorized, and analyzed. That's

precisely what I said to Stephane Natkin yesterday night, I just hope we will not say one day: “well, to make a game, you have to make this and that and it works”. I hope they make it clear that we can’t know everything, that there are still things to invent, that we will always ignore how games will work on the market. Peter Molyneux had this beautiful phrase: “to make a good game, we know the ingredients, but we don’t know the recipe.”

Try to make a list of good ingredients, and then the good chef will invent the good recipes - Then, we can find people to make the best out of each ingredient, in a professional manner - There is actually a messy side of the first studios where everything had to be invented - when I am talking about creating a new team, I am not interested in having a team of pioneers who are searching for many things over and over again. You need to be efficient still and

to have outstanding co-workers in every position - This kind of universities will teach people to be directly effective in their jobs. Once someone is able to make an good ingredient, I hope to be a good chef to make a good recipe.

SANQUA: How would you select someone to work on a project? How do you proceed?

FR: I have not done so for quite a long time. I didn’t do this at F4. In general, there was a connection in the first place. Being effective is one thing, but it is not sufficient. I need people who display motivation when they talk about their creations, who know what they are talking about. Motivation was the first key point in the interviews. I will be more and more demanding from now on: the teams have to be really efficient; I am looking for quality work. There are a lot more able professionals now, so it has become important to be demanding.



However it is all about how people relate to each others: it has to hook on, there must be a good mix between everyone’s humor, even if everyone is all very different in a good team. You need this mix for a good balance between the various characters. I will also ask for the help of a good programmer, a good designer. They will be asking

precise questions about their area of expertise. I would rather look at other details. I will not be the only judge of everyone’s capabilities in any precise area.

SANQUA: Thank you for all those answers.

Thanks to Meego and Jika for the french version. Thanks to LinkMBN for the translation

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