



THE GFW INTERVIEW: BRIAN FARGO

Living in the fallout BY DARREN GLADSTONE



1983
Brian Fargo forms Interplay Productions.



1985
Tales of the Unknown Volume I: The Bard's Tale becomes Interplay's first hit. Fargo made the maps for the first two *Bard's Tale* games and directed the third.



1988
Produces post-nuclear role-playing game *Wasteland* (the spiritual dad of *Fallout*), which ships the same day as *The Bard's Tale II: The Destiny Knight*.



1989-1996
Interplay breaks off from EA to become a game publisher and give breaks to little developers like Blizzard and BioWare.



1997
Interplay's Black Isle Studios division releases *Fallout*.



1998-2001
Interplay releases a string of classic RPGs like *Fallout 2*, the *Baldur's Gate* series, *Icewind Dale*, and *Planescape: Torment*.



2002
Fargo leaves Interplay and founds inXile Entertainment.



2003
Acquires rights to *Wasteland* and *The Bard's Tale* from EA.



2004
Releases first game under inXile brand, action-RPG parody *The Bard's Tale*. It ships the same week as *GTA: San Andreas*.



2007
Currently bringing Web game *Line Rider* to consoles and working on *HeiSt* (set for release this fall).

INTERVIEW

GFW: How do you think the game industry has fundamentally changed since you started making games in 1985?

BRIAN FARGO: Wow, so much for starting small! Well, you know, it's night and day. Back then it was just a hobbyist's business. You couldn't even begin to imagine how you'd make a living at it. We'd try all sorts of differ-

ent creative things out. You weren't betting your life on every project. The stakes weren't as high, so you could tinker with different things and different ideas. Everybody was pushing the envelope in every category.

Wolfenstein 3D—the first time you saw that, you knew it was the start of something. Same with *Dune*...into *WarCraft*, and so on. People were inventing categories with every game. Some worked, some didn't.

Now it's all sequels, so you don't get that same "inventing of the categories" as you did back then. Everything's very stylized today and very professional. There are good and bad parts to that. I was thinking the other day that our industry is very interesting: Designers don't have [the same clout] they do in different entertainment businesses. Spielberg can walk in somewhere and say, "This is the game I want to make." We don't have that. [*Sims* creator] Will Wright is the closest we have to that, and he's still an employee. You give designers some freedom, and what do you get? *Spore!* That's the way the business is structured these days, and you can't really blame publishers, because they're just doing what they can to survive.

GFW: And your post-Interplay survival tactics include...?

BF: Well, the trick is trying to keep your team small and costs relatively low while finding the right people to work with. Since leaving Interplay, I wanted to ramp up very slowly and look for new talent. That's why we're working with *Line Rider* [see "Line Rider," page 36—Ed.]. I saw that as something completely innovative, creating a new breed. I'm proud that at Interplay we gave [some] big developers their first deals—BioWare, Blizzard, and Treyarch, to name a few. I always had a talent for finding good people.

The reality, though, is that for every 20 *Psychonauts*—critical successes that don't sell well—only one becomes a true hit. If you had that kind of track record today, you'd quickly be out of business. That's why you're mostly seeing sequels and licenses—because that's what people are voting for with their dollars. People still say to me, "High fantasy, science fiction...is that the cleverest stuff you guys can come up with?" No, but that's what our users love. That's why you see a lot of the same stuff over and over and over again.

GFW: Well, you did step way outside the box early on in your career. After creating *The Bard's Tale*, you made the post-nuclear role-playing game *Wasteland*—not your traditional sci-fi fare. And old-schoolers still have fond memories of it...

BF: In a way, we think of *Wasteland* as our version of a sandbox game. We wanted to let people wander around and explore the world

without having to push the plot forward. There were side quests, random combat encounters, and puzzles, sure, but we also tried to leave things hanging out there to make players explore. Early on, you're warned not to go near the Citadel. It's right there, in the beginning of the game, but you're not supposed to go in. So what do you do? You go in. And if you escape alive without getting killed, you poke your head back in a few levels later. Still not ready? Come back later. We didn't have to write anything extra—just tease people with what lies inside—and when someone finally survived, there was this real sense of accomplishment. I think that's why some people have so many fond memories of the game. It's kind of like *GTA* today. There's nothing to stop you in your tracks. That's why adventure games pretty much went away, don't you think? If you can't solve the puzzle, the story—and game—come to a halt. People don't like to be stuck.

GFW: That openness of the world also led to moral ambiguity....

BF: Letting people play the game the way they want means dealing with the repercussions that come with actions, right? There's one part in *Wasteland* where someone asks you to save his rabid dog. Kids with BB guns, who are rightly pissed, attack you for defending the dog. You can be the Good Samaritan and walk away, or you can shoot the kids and be done with it. And deal with the consequences later. That's the fun.

GFW: And, of course, that sort of interconnected storyline, cause-and-effect stuff needs lots of planning.

BF: Absolutely, and since game development is like an assembly line these days, that's impossible to organize. You can have a couple hundred people on a project. They'll say, "You do level one; he'll do level three," and you bang something out in 18 months. Some designer working on level 10 doesn't say, "Let's take this NPC from level one and try adding him here." Everybody's moving ahead at 100 miles an hour. There's no time for that subtlety, and that's what gets left out on a lot of projects these days.

GFW: You seemed to pull that off in the recent *Bard's Tale* remake. Was that because you had a smaller team?

BF: That's part of it. The game has a lot of subtlety, characters that appeared from level to level, running jokes. We laid that entire game out on paper. That took a lot of effort and a lot of discipline, but we sat around the room and fake-played through the game. We created funny moments that we could've easily missed otherwise.

GFW: Well, the humor has always been there in your games. It really stood out, and—in some ways—defined your work.

BF: Yeah, but it's not like we can put on the to-do list that "the game has to be funny." When we started the new *Bard's Tale*, for example, I had taken time off to play all the latest RPGs, and the games were doing the same stuff from 25 years ago. We were joking that "I can't >



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"GAMING IS THE ONLY ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY WITHOUT A COMEDY SECTION."

believe this modern game is making me kill rats in the cellar.... I can't believe that there are this many "Chosen Ones." I thought, "Wouldn't it be funny if the main character also saw things the way we as gamers do every day—that the Bard himself had had enough?" I think that's where the humor succeeded in that game. Basically, we have to look to what really inspires us, and then the humor should follow.

GFW: So writing *The Bard's Tale* came pretty easy?

BF: I couldn't have made that game 20 years ago. I didn't have enough real-world experiences to draw upon at that point. Our audience is very intelligent and very cynical. Especially you guys [game journalists]! Stupid humor doesn't work. Some of the best stuff that LucasArts did—and BioWare does—requires a level of maturation that a 22-year-old making games probably doesn't have yet.

As designers, if we make a game with humor as a main selling point, we need to make sure that it's genuinely funny and that it doesn't get annoying as you play. Some games do pull it off in small amounts, but for all the talk of stories and plots, only a handful of games [are] truly funny. You know, gaming is the only entertainment industry without a comedy section. And I don't know if that's going to change anytime soon.

GFW: While not many games are straight-up comedy, some do have it in degrees. Take your work on *Fallout*—it bridged that gap, but in a very dark way.

BF: Oh, yeah—we love the dark humor. [Laughs] And the older we get, the darker we get. When you mix the absurd with the hyperviolent—like what Tarantino does in films—you can get some great results.

GFW: Bethesda [the developer making *Fallout 3*—see page 26] hasn't really done dark humor in their games. Do you think this will matter?

BF: Yeah, their stuff is a little more serious, a little drier. Humor is tough to do, but you know what? They're clever guys, and I can't wait to see what they do. I know that they'll do well. In fact, I'd trust maybe three developers with *Fallout*—and Bethesda's definitely [one of them]. One thing I can tell you, though, is that our *Wasteland* would be much darker than their *Fallout*.

GFW: That's right—you've acquired the rights to *Wasteland*.

BF: It started it all. If the right design idea comes along, we would love to make another *Wasteland* game. I think Bethesda is gonna do gangbusters with *Fallout*—just great—and if they make a huge hit, maybe people will be

curious to get another look at what inspired *Fallout* in the first place.

GFW: Why didn't you just make a *Wasteland* sequel back then? Did it not sell well?

BF: It was strange. You see, EA released *Wasteland* on the exact same day as *The Bard's Tale II: The Destiny Knight*. They were trying to meet financials for their quarter end. We were like the BioWare of that time, known for our RPGs. Imagine if BioWare released two games on the same day. That'd never happen—it makes no sense. So, end of story, the game did well, but it fell under many people's radar because of when it released. We did actually try to get the rights to *Wasteland* to make a sequel, but EA considered us competitors at that point. We had to create *Fallout* as a result.

GFW: Interplay used to be the place for all the great RPGs—between BioWare and Black Isle Studios, you guys had a lock. Then Interplay imploded. What happened?

BF: My cost of making a game back in *The Bard's Tale* days was \$30,000 to \$40,000. *Descent*—which we published about 10 years later—was \$300,000. Get to the late '90s, and things are costing millions. That means little room for error. Look at it this way: *Tony Hawk* sold 4 to 5 million, making Activision what it is now. Take-Two has *Grand Theft Auto*. THQ survived off wrestling games. EA? Well, with the lock on *Madden*, that paid for a lot of other games that didn't sell as well—and that's to say nothing of *SimCity* and so on. If you didn't have one game that'd carry the day, you were in a world of hurt. All we had was *Baldur's Gate*. We had a heavy royalty load to both BioWare and TSR. So we'd sell 1.5 million copies, but after royalties, that amounted to something like 750,000 copies sold. We were making all these really solid efforts, whether it was *Kingpin*, *Descent*, *Icwind Dale*, or *Planescape: Torment*. We just didn't have one that was really going to break us out.

That's when I brought in Titus Interactive to raise capital, but it turned out that the whole relationship was a bad one. Culturally, we couldn't have been more different. They never actually shipped a good product before—after 20 years, all they had to show was a game about a fox? The battles were hard enough to get a game made, but fighting over fundamentals with the executive board was ridiculous. Basically, I said, "It's time to sell and get a different partner." I had some buyers ready, but Titus' demands pretty much stopped anything from happening. It was an untenable situation, and by that point, I handed Titus the keys to what was left and said, "Good luck!"

GFW: With Interplay gone, you don't see as many RPGs as you once did. Why do you think that's the case?

BF: I just don't see many publishers willing to take the chance these days. We went to Microsoft with an idea for an RPG. They didn't even want to hear it. They don't care how great an idea is at this point. It was simply, "Nah, we've got RPGs covered." End of discussion. They have their boxes to check—their shooters,

their RTS games, their RPGs. [With] those boxes checked, they aren't interested in hearing about anything else.

GFW: And experiences like that don't sour you to the game industry?

BF: Truth is, it's very hard to make money in the game business. Take my buddy, Jason Rubin from Naughty Dog [creator of PlayStation games such as *Crash Bandicoot* and *Jak and Daxter*]. He left the game business saying, "Screw this—I'll make Internet applications." He said that it was 10 times easier than a game, but he just sold his company for over \$20 million, and he wasn't even in business a year. You've really got to be in this because you love it. And I do. •



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