



THE GFW INTERVIEW: DAVE GROSSMAN

The former LucasArts funnyman tells his tale BY RYAN SCOTT AND SEAN MOLLOY

**1989-1991****Begins career auspiciously as a writer and designer on LucasArts' first two *Monkey Island* games.****1992-1993****Partners with Tim Schafer to design, write, and produce the adventure classic *Maniac Mansion: Day of the Tentacle*.****1996-2000****Sets a high bar for writing children's games with the first three adventures in Humongous Entertainment's *Pajama Sam* series (notable for having been played by an unusually high number of adults).****2006****Works as lead designer and head writer on Telltale Games' *Sam & Max: Season One*, considered by some to be the first successful episodic game series.**

INTERVIEW

GFW: Comedy is hard. Discuss.

DAVE GROSSMAN: Comedy is work, but it's not hard. Or maybe it is hard, but it's not as hard as drama. Doing drama is like trying to draw photorealistic characters—because it's supposed to look like real life, the audience will be acutely aware if you miss the mark by even a little bit. Comedy is essentially stylized, so people are more forgiving if you're not 100 percent consistent. Just as long as it's funny, that is.

Of course, having discussed this with plenty of other writers, I note that there are two distinct camps, and the other one feels that it's easier to make something true to life than it is to make it funny. Thankfully, both sides are correct.

GFW: Comedians are fond of saying, "Good comedy comes in threes." Based on the structure of your games, you seem to agree....

DG: I use threes very often, but it doesn't have anything to do with the comedy. It has to do with how we tokenize information in our brains, and how I organize challenges to build a dramatic structure for the gameplay. Three happens to be the largest set of things that I'm likely to remember without actually trying. If you send me out to pick up a hot dog and you list three condiments, chances are I'll get it right, but if there are four, I have to take some deliberate action to remember them—otherwise I'll forget one before I've rounded the corner. And if there are three turns on the way to the hot dog stand, I'll get there...any more, and I want a map. In an adventure game, I'm sometimes asking people to remember quite a lot about what they need to do, and breaking things into threes and then more threes seems to be the point where it's complicated enough to feel challenging, but not so complicated that the game turns into a memory exercise. It's science! Sort of.

GFW: So let's talk a little bit about your history. What was life in the early days of LucasArts like? Did you guys ever have a clue that you'd become one of the most cherished game-design houses of all time?

DG: It was pretty exciting, particularly my first year there, when we were still headquartered at Skywalker Ranch. Working in a normal office building was kind of a letdown after being at a dreamy hillside retreat with a top-notch restaurant and its own mountain lion. But a lot of interesting and talented people worked there, and that didn't change when we moved downtown. I remember a lot of talking and looking over each other's shoulders—"synergy" is a word that's been overused to the point of nausea, and it isn't quite accurate for what I want to describe, anyway.... Let's just say we nudged each other to new places that we might not otherwise have gone. Like creative Brownian motion. And while I wouldn't say we could do anything we wanted, we had a great deal of creative freedom, and it took a couple of years before there was serious pressure on the

games group to show a continuing profit. We worked pretty hard—but, at least in my case, it felt like I was doing that according to my own drive rather than because someone else expected me to, and that made all the difference.

GFW: Did you think much of Sierra's adventure games at the time?

DG: They were interesting and often amusing, but I found them quite frustrating to play. It wasn't so much that you died all the time that bothered me, although I disliked the disruption of the fantasy caused by loading a saved game. No, it was mainly that I always died unexpectedly while doing things that didn't seem the least bit dangerous, like stepping off of a curb. It made the experience feel arbitrary and unfair. If I die after jumping out of an airplane, that's one thing...but if I get killed for walking down to the street corner, it's quite another. My opinion was that curiosity should be rewarded, not punished—and that was one of the crucial underpinnings of the LucasArts design philosophy at the time.

GFW: Many adventure-game fanatics point to *Day of the Tentacle* as the pinnacle of LucasArts' library. How do you feel about it today?

DG: I haven't played it in many a year, but I remember it fondly and still think it's probably my best work to date, though I like to imagine that I've learned a few things since then. I've always felt that *DOTT*'s principal strength was the cohesive way in which the art, dialogue, and gameplay all worked to support this idea that you're playing in a world that's essentially a Chuck Jones cartoon. You don't just look like a cartoon character; you also have to think like one in order to succeed—painting stripes on cats and so forth...and that really helped bring the thing to life.

On the other hand, I also remember a couple of rather long cut-scenes and a lot of exposition at the beginning, which in retrospect feels slow and awkward, and generally is not a good way to tell a story in any medium. I blame inexperience. To me, the best opening for an adventure game is still the one from *The Secret of Monkey Island*, where the protagonist sets the whole thing up with a single line of dialogue: "Hi, I'm Guybrush Threepwood, and I want to be a pirate!" That's all you need to know.

GFW: Any scrapped LucasArts adventure game projects that you can reveal to us? We understand you have a history with the many iterations of *The Dig*, for one....

DG: Well, *The Dig* was eventually finished and released, so it probably shouldn't count as a scrapped project, though the version I worked on with Noah Falstein between the two *Monkey Island* games was quite different from the one that eventually hit shelves. We had lumpy alien creatures with six limbs, and you could eat them before you figured out that they talked. And it was designed as a bit more of an RPG-adventure hybrid than was typical for the studio, with elements of action and resource management. I also worked with Steve Purcell and Collette Michaud on the beginnings of a design for a sequel to *Sam & Max Hit the Road*. It was never produced, but I think some of the ideas popped up later in the console version they were doing at Infinite Machine, and maybe even in LucasArts' ill-fated *Sam & Max: Freelance Police* in 2004. We also had a great concept about planting a tracking device in [fellow designer] Ron Gilbert's skull and following his movements through a model of our building, but I'm not sure that would really fit under the umbrella of "adventure games." More like productivity software.

GFW: Since you never had the opportunity...what kind of story would your ideal *Maniac Mansion 3* have told?

DG: A funny one, I hope. I guess if I were doing it now, I'd consider doing a story about Weird Ed Edison. Now there's a guy with some deeply rooted issues that might be interesting to explore. And I always like to see things from different angles, which is one of the cooler aspects of an interactive medium—so perhaps a revisitation of *Maniac Mansion 1*, but from the Edisons' point of view, as a group of neighborhood ruffians ruthlessly invades their home.

GFW: After graphic adventures allegedly went the way of the dodo, your *DOTT* codesigner Tim Schafer went on to do *Psychonauts*. Did you ever talk to Tim about helping out in some capacity?

DG: I might have been a bit redundant on *Psychonauts*—although we play off of one another very well, Tim is probably all the design and scriptwriting muscle you need for that game. And I'm not all that into platformers as a genre...unless, of course, there's a story that seems to call for that sort of play. If I were making a game of *Ocean's Twelve*, for example, I would want to treat the parts where François Toulour, the cat burglar, goes into action as platformer segments. *Sly Cooper*? Great excuse for a platformer. >

"I STILL THINK DAY OF THE TENTACLE IS PROBABLY MY BEST WORK TO DATE."

GFW: Why did you and fellow LucasArts luminary Ron Gilbert take a detour into children's games with *Pajama Sam* and so on?

DG: Although relocating was the only thing that kept me from leaving LucasArts to start Humongous Entertainment with Ron, I never had any specific desire to do children's games until *Pajama Sam* came along. By this time, I'd struck out on my own and was freelancing with Ron long-distance, designing and writing the lost *Bobo and Fletcher* adventure games, which he intended to produce when Humongous branched out into grown-up titles—they eventually started the Cavedog label, but *Bobo and Fletcher* was never made.

Then he called me one day and said they were concepting out a new kids' game that was intended to have a peculiar sense of humor, and he thought I'd be ideal for it, and asked me to write the script. It seemed like a nice change of pace, so I gave it a whirl, and it turned into *Pajama Sam*. It was really, really fun. The challenge of writing something that holds the attention of both children and the parents playing along with them is—it turns out—quite interesting. We did several more of them, and I got to write a couple of books besides. The critical success of those games led to projects with Disney and Fisher-Price and Lego and so on—and quite by accident, I became "that guy who does the children's games" for a number of years. And I'm glad to be working for an older audience again, because I like the variety...but I'd do another *Pajama Sam* game in a New York minute.

GFW: You've also self-published a book of poetry entitled *Ode to the Stuff in the Sink: A Book of Guy Poetry*. How'd you dream that up?

DG: In 1995, I started an online project more or less like a blog, where I wrote a piece of verse—usually a funny one—every week, and then e-mailed it to people and posted it on a webpage. This was ingeniously called "The Poem of the Week." It was just for fun, really...kind of a pick-me-up for people arriving at work Monday mornings, but with some ulterior motives about keeping myself writing all the time and avoiding the crippling effects of excess perfectionism. I decided to e-mail them to people so it would feel like a responsibility, and that way I'd be less likely to procrastinate and forget about it.

Apparently that worked, because I'm still doing it today—you can find it at www.phrenopolis.com. At some point, I noticed that I'd done a fair number of poems that had particularly bachelory themes—love poems to pickup trucks and the last beer in the fridge, angst poems about burning toast and the hopelessness of shaving, that sort of thing. It felt like a good set, so I collected my favorites, wrote enough more to make what seemed like a reasonable-sized book, and drew a bunch of cartoons to go along with them. Then all I had to do was become a book publisher, distributor, and retailer—which is even more complicated than it sounds, but I got some good advice along the way, and in 2002, *Ode to the Stuff in the Sink* was born. It's a very satisfying thing to have hundreds of pounds of your book show up

with a thump on the doorstep and then have to figure out where to put them. After that, I breathed a sigh of relief and started doing other things for a while, but I've actually started working on a second book—not a sequel, since it doesn't share the same theme—that I hope to have out next year.

GFW: Do you ever get confused with Lieutenant Colonel Dave Grossman—the guy who specializes in studying the psychology of killing, and who claims that some videogames ape military training techniques?

DG: On a few occasions, I've run across people in the industry who don't know we're two separate Daves. We'll be talking, and they'll say, "Oh, yes, I think I've read something you've written," and I can tell from the look in their eyes and the way they start to lean away from me that they've confused me with the colonel. I freelanced for 11 years between LucasArts and Telltale, and I have to wonder how many times I didn't get a phone call because somebody thought I was him. On the other hand, I wonder if he ever has problems because people think he has a writing credit on *Total Annihilation*.

I've exchanged a couple of e-mails with him, by the way—and he seems like a reasonable individual. We didn't discuss games.

GFW: How'd you hook up with Telltale Games for *Bone* and *Sam & Max*?

DG: [Telltale CEO] Dan Connors and I were already friends, having been members of an obscure public-access television group together some years earlier. He and [Telltale chief technology officer] Kevin Bruner came over right after they left LucasArts to talk to me about what they were planning. I was interested, but they weren't funded yet and I was already working on a project on spec—I was developing a property called *Insecticide* with Mike Levine, who's building the game now for the PC and DS—and I couldn't afford to do two things for no money at the same time. We stayed in touch, and about a year later the pieces all fit a little better and I signed on. It was the first time I'd taken a "regular" job since leaving LucasArts 11 years earlier, and I felt some trepidation about that, but it's been great! By that time, Telltale had about a dozen employees and was already working on finishing *Bone: Out from Boneville*, its second title. I helped wrap that up, but didn't really get my shoes dirty until *The Great Cow Race*. Ewww, did I just say that? Sorry.

GFW: What was it like working on *Sam & Max: Season One*? We'd heard it was "extremely hectic" keeping to that schedule, to say the least.

DG: "Hectic" is a good way to describe it, and more accurate than "crunch." Instead of having one particular part of the development cycle where everybody's working double-time to finish everything, we have a sort of sustained beehive where there's always something happening, always a deadline within a week or so, always something breaking, and steps being taken to correct it. It's more about adaptability to maintain a constant flow of produc-

tivity than it is about logging endless hours to build a giant mountain. I think it's probably toughest on the designers, who have responsibilities at all phases of the project, and consequently wind up, not infrequently, working on four separate episodes in a single day, because of the way things overlap.

The worst things always seem to happen the day before we go into the recording studio to do the voices. I dread that day. At one point during *Season One*, an important voice actor had to bow out at the last minute due to an unforeseen emergency. We recast the role before the end of the day, scheduled a new session, and reprioritized people's tasks in the meantime, so it wound up OK...but if we weren't prepared to deal with things like that, it could have been a big, fat disaster. Then, on *Season Two*, gremlins in the machinery were causing lines of dialogue to disappear from the database immediately prior to recording, which was a little unnerving. Did I mention that adaptability is key? Some days it feels like we're the marines. You just have to be ready to shift gears at any time, because losing even one day is a big deal. Some might find that unnerving, but it does keep things interesting.

GFW: Some argue that *Sam & Max* is really the only successful episodic game so far. Why do you suppose Telltale succeeded where a juggernaut like Valve couldn't?

DG: We got into the water gradually, and by the time we attempted the episodic series, we were already pretty confident we could pull it off. We first built several small games on short schedules one at a time—*Telltale Texas Hold'Em* and the *Bone* series—to prove out the engine, work the kinks out of the development process, and develop an idea of how long all the pieces would take the studio to do. By the time we started *Sam & Max*, the remaining issues were mainly about organizing the overlapping production, and we had enough data to do a fairly good job of that up front. After that, it was mostly a matter of taking the schedule seriously and being creative about how to stick with it as time went on.

As for Valve or anybody else, it's hard for me, as an outsider, to say what did or didn't work for them. You mentioned the word "juggernaut," and it occurs to me that having too many resources at your disposal could be a detriment to keeping an episodic schedule. It gives you the ability to second-guess yourself and fiddle with things to make the game just a little bit better, but also quite a bit later. Which, to be fair, might be a rational choice for Valve—they're competing in a different arena than we are, and their priorities would be quite different as a result. But since Telltale is a small startup, we didn't have the luxury to do much fiddling. When you're working without a net, you'd better stay on the tightrope.

GFW: And finally, we've saved the best for last: What drives a man to create a *Pumpkin House of Horrors* (www.phrenopolis.com/pumpkins/)?

DG: Ha! Yes, the *Pumpkin House of Horrors* is by far the most popular thing on my website. I've made CafePress greeting cards out of a couple of my favorites, and once I was even invited to Singapore to do a carving demonstration, which sadly never came about. All I can say in defense of my disturbed treatment of squashes is...um...well, everybody needs some kind of outlet. And apparently, I need more than one. ●

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