

A Shawn64 Retrospective

by clysm (aka tapeworm)

Shawn Noel was already a Game Maker veteran when I discovered Mark Overmars's game creation program in early 2003. His Missile Wave 2 was the first Game Maker title I came across that really impressed me. When I wrote Shawn to tell him this, he became my first contact in the Game Maker community. We talked frequently over the next few years, exchanging instant messages about our work with Game Maker and about other things. I was always impressed by his enthusiasm for game creation and by his prolific output.

Although Shawn may be best known for his chaotic and violent games such as the Jetz series and Infection, he also created quite a few more benign puzzle and skill-based games, such as Marbles and Thrust. Virtually all of his games were and continue to be hits in the Game Maker community and beyond. Today, although his own site is gone, his games can be found in many other places on the Web, where they continue to entertain and inspire many people.

Galaxy Arcades and Missile Waves

Galaxy Arcade was Shawn's first game, released in the Summer of 2002. He had discovered Game Maker earlier that year when he searched for the phrase "game maker" at Download.com. Instead of creating a single game for his first project, he created a collection of mini-games, each employing a different mechanic. In early 2003, he followed this up with Galaxy Arcade 2, a more polished collection with some overlap.

Missile Wave 2 was the sequel to one of the mini-games in the first Galaxy Arcade. In it, you defend a wall of blocks against missiles with various personalities. In my first e-mail message to Shawn, I asked him why the screen capture on the Game Maker site showed a colorful background while the actual game had only a solid black background. He explained that the background image increased the file size beyond five Megabytes, and that was the file size limit for all of the free Web hosts that he knew of.

From Bubble Gum to Mayhem

Shawn's first platform game was Bubble Gum. Although cute and colorful, the game has a taste of the graphical style and the violent themes that he would come to be known for.

[21:53] Shawn64: the intro took me a long time to think up
[21:53] Shawn64: with the intense story line
[21:53] crush13: yeah I'm watching it now
[21:54] Shawn64: i wanted to get the players emotions going in the intro
[21:54] Shawn64: lol.....
[21:54] crush13: Of course. That's very important
[21:54] Shawn64: i was kiddin ya know
[21:54] crush13: yes I know
[21:54] Shawn64: ok good
[21:54] Shawn64: makin sure

The Jetz Rampage series may be Shawn's best-known work. These four games are intense, loaded with violence, strong language, and impressive art and programming. I never played these games much myself, but they became quite popular within and outside the Game Maker community.

[21:26] Shawn64: what name would you like to go by in my game
[21:26] Shawn64: for a guy giving a mission
[21:26] crush13: um. I don't know.
[21:26] crush13: I guess tapeworm
[21:26] Shawn64: k
[21:31] Shawn64: Tapeworm: Hmmm, if you could just drop about ummm 5 people into my grinder i could make a killa stew. Just grab them when they're hanging out of the building and push control to drop them into the grinder. I will pay you \$100.
Push Enter

One day, he sent me an impressive short demo called "Jetroid." This would eventually become Infection, a Metroid-inspired futuristic horror-themed spinoff of the Jetz series.

Other Ventures

While many people may have creative ideas, Shawn was unique in his dedication to realizing his creative visions. As his games became more and more elaborate, he continued to release them at a surprising rate. He created all of his games within about a three-year period. I can't help but wonder what he might have done in the next three years and beyond.

Shawn's games were quite varied. Bounty Hunter SX is a space exploration game with mining, upgrades, and ship battles. Marbles is a challenging top-down action puzzle game reminiscent of Marble Madness.

Thrust may be my personal favorite of Shawn's games, despite my frustration with its difficulty. When I complained about some of the levels, he mocked me by recording a video of himself breezing through the game on its hardest setting. When I reached the end of my skill and patience, he gave me a debug code that enabled me to see the final areas of the game. 1

Mini Golf Pro is an elaborate miniature golf game with multi-player support and additional mini-games. I enjoyed helping him test the game--especially the Gravity Tower mini-game--along with Darthlupi, Mocha Man, and Shaltif.

Shawn's final release was Street Bike Fury, another rather violent fast-action game with an impressive amount of detail and polish.

In addition to his games, Shawn released collections of source code examples on several occasions to share his programming tricks. He also took part in various Game Maker forums, including his own.

An Unhappy Ending

Around midnight on January 17, 2006, Shawn told me that his site would soon go down due to the popularity of Street Bike Fury.

Session Start (crush13:Shawn64): Mon Jan 16 23:52:10 2006

[23:52] Shawn64: no

[23:52] Shawn64: my sites going down in like 2 days...

[23:52] crush13: why

[23:52] Shawn64: bandwith limit

[23:52] crush13: well I could give you a mirror temporarily

[23:52] crush13: if that helps

[23:53] Shawn64: you can do that? yay

[23:53] crush13: yeah I'm doing okay for the month so far. No big spikes

[23:57] crush13: My site does not shut down if I use too much bandwidth.

[23:57] crush13: I just get charged \$

[23:57] Shawn64: oh thats good. i hope it goes over

[00:00] Shawn64: ill wait a couple days

[00:00] Shawn64: i have like

[00:00] Shawn64: 6/50gb left

[00:01] Shawn64: well im too lazy to change the link right now

[00:01] crush13: <http://autofish.net/temp/sbfinal.exe>

[00:02] Shawn64: thank you!

[00:02] Shawn64: your master chief worthy

[00:02] Shawn64: you're
[00:02] Shawn64: YOU ARE
[00:02] crush13: very good grammar
[00:02] Shawn64: thank you sir
[00:05] crush13: I think it's fireworks maker that eats up all your bandwidth
[00:07] Shawn64: great program
Session Close (Shawn64): Tue Jan 17 00:26:44 2006

Session Start (crush13:Shawn64): Thu Jan 19 18:43:23 2006
[18:43] *** NOTE: This user is offline. Your messages will most likely *not* be received!
Session Close (Shawn64): Thu Jan 19 18:51:39 2006

Session Start (crush13:Shawn64): Fri Jan 20 20:47:51 2006
[20:47] *** NOTE: This user is offline. Your messages will most likely *not* be received!
Session Close (Shawn64): Fri Jan 20 20:48:08 2006

He didn't link to my mirror.

Those last two system messages still get to me.

[18:52] darthlupi: dude I really don't want it to be true tapeworm
[18:52] darthlupi: he is going to be one of those great game makers
[18:53] darthlupi: I told him that

In a 2005 interview for Planet Freeplay 3, Shawn said,
"I make games out of boredom and it's often still boring. I have no friends. You get the idea I suppose. Nobody should look up to me, that's for sure."
This is frustratingly false on all counts. I talked with him enough to know that he was passionate about his art. I also know that he had friends, or at least others who considered him a friend. I did, for one. And many people rightfully admired his skill, creativity, and dedication.

When asked about his plans for future projects, he said "I don't know. I really don't." This was quite uncharacteristic. I never knew him to be short on ideas.

I won't speculate here about what made Shawn so unhappy. I had assumed that he was merely going through what most of us do. In Darthlupi's words,
"We've all felt alone and outside of the world of men. We have always wanted something intangible and meaningful and at the same time tangible. We have all been thrust into the horrors of high school, of feeling like you want to hide and at the same shine. Being the strange quiet one. The one who just can't quite make it work out with the people around him."

Being a few years older, we could (and did) tell him from experience that high school isn't really representative of life. As trite as it may be to say so, I still wonder whether there's something more I might have said or done that would have made a difference.

Legacy

Shawn didn't have an impact only through his games. I have several friends who I might never have met if not for him, and I know at least a few other people who can say the same thing. He frequently called himself antisocial, but those who talked with him enough could see that he was friendly and cared about others.

I'm writing this from the perspective of the limited Game Maker circles that I know. I can't speak for anyone in the Graal community or other groups that he was also involved in, let alone those who knew him in person. I saw those worlds come together in the discussions in various places that followed his death. A guestbook on a local paper's obituary site included family and school friends as well as many friends and fans from all over the world.

I don't think we ever really know the extent of our influence on others, or the degree to which others value our presence. There are many of us whose lives are better in some way for having known Shawn Noel, and who won't forget him.

- April 2008

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1. To skip a level in Thrust, press Ctrl + Enter + F1. In Infection, it's Ctrl + F5. In Bubble Gum, it's F6. In Marbles, hold Enter and press a number from 1 to 9 to jump to that level. In Bounty Hunter SX, F1 gives you money and F2 gives you health.

2. Fun fact: Shawn was once made a moderator in the official Game Maker Community forums. This lasted about 24 hours before he stepped down, deciding he'd rather concentrate on his games.

3. Although the Planet Freeplay interview was (somewhat ominously) posted on January 17, 2006, it was conducted a month or so earlier. Surprised by Shawn's negative tone, the interviewer had followed up afterward with some encouraging e-mail messages.