



March 4, 2013

Agenda:

- **Article of the Week** – Let's talk about Steam opening up *by Frank Cifaldi*
- **Reflection on Checkpoint Presentations**
- **Announcement**
- **Reminder: Dream Job Application**– due by next week
- **Keep The GDL Clean**

Article of the Week

Let's Talk About Steam Opening Up *by Frank Cifaldi*

http://gamasutra.com/view/news/187374/Lets_talk_about_Steam_opening_up.php#.UTU2WDCcd8E

From: Frank Cifaldi

To: Kris Graft, Christian Nutt, Leigh Alexander, Mike Rose, Brandon Sheffield

Subject: Let's talk about Steam opening up

Valve co-founder Gabe Newell doesn't speak publicly very often, but he took to the stage twice in recent weeks — first at UT Texas then at the D.I.C.E. Summit -- to talk about how Steam has become a "bottleneck" in this new world where smaller, cheaper games are managing to actually find an audience and make money.

Valve just can't keep up on being a gatekeeper for all of this content, he says, so they're talking about opening Steam up completely into a more iTunes-like model where anyone can distribute a game.

Rather than Steam being a platform, he hints at it becoming an API that developers can put right into their games. And to solve that ever-present discoverability problem, he says Valve wants to open Steam up so that its community can "curate" content by giving its users the power to open their own stores.

We've been having some interesting discussions behind-the-scenes about what this all might mean, so I thought it would be a good idea to get some of these thoughts down in a way that would bring Gamasutra's readers into the conversation. So let's talk about this! I'll start.



March 4, 2013

Frank Cifaldi (@frankcifaldi)

News Director

It's impossible to say whether this will work out, but I'm all for it. I think he's dead on, here. I've often bemoaned the lack of, for lack of a better word, proper DJs in this modern digital age where everything is at my fingertips. Discovery engines do an OK job of recommending things that I might like, but I miss being at the mercy of tastemakers that might expose me to new things I might have otherwise missed. Like Newell said during one of his talks, imagine a video game store run by Old Man Murray in its day!

I have to admit that I might be getting overly optimistic here. One need only look only at the Android store to know what a mess a purely open system can be.

What do you guys think, is Newell on the right track, or is this a dangerous direction for a platform that people have come to rely on?

Mike Rose (@RaveofRavendale)

UK Editor

I'm sort of wary of open platforms like this, and I think at least an element of curation can do wonders for keeping an online store manageable for those exploring it. The iOS store is obviously a prime example of where a (relatively) open platform has worked pretty well, allowing smaller studios to expose their games to hundreds of millions of people. But then again, just because we hear about all these great iOS success stories, doesn't mean that success is guaranteed - in fact, it's quite the opposite from what I've read.

Compare that to Steam in its current form. I constantly hear stories about how a game from a small indie studio wasn't selling very well, and then it launched on Steam and suddenly saw a huge rise in sales, simply for being on the popular and, more importantly, trusted platform. Getting on Steam is a *huge* deal to indies, and a lot of people feel like they've "made it" if they're accepted onto the platform. Now imagine that suddenly everyone and anyone can be on Steam - it simply wouldn't be that special anymore,



March 4, 2013

and I can imagine that rather quickly, launching on Steam would no longer do anything that special for your sales figures.

It could also have a negative effect on consumers. Right now, there's this really strange situation where some PC gamers absolutely hate DRM, and will consistently rail against it - yet at the same time, they'll refuse to buy a game outside of Steam, even though Steam is technically a DRM machine (although it is relatively light on the M). This is one of the main reasons that developers want to get on Steam - this perception by many that if a game isn't on Steam, it isn't worth playing.

So if suddenly ever game under the sun is on Steam, how will that alter consumer spending? My opinion is that at least some of these people who would only buy on Steam will suddenly not feel like every big new release on the platform is that notable anymore, and may well pass on a game that they would have previously grabbed without question. An exclusive system like Steam won't feel as exclusive anymore if the door to the VIP door has been taken off its hinges.

So I guess my thoughts are: If they're truly going to open up the platform to everyone, there still needs to be a heavy amount of curation, perhaps in the form of user ratings, games featured on the front page, multiple daily deals, lots of promotions to help the good stuff that might otherwise get missed in the inevitable release stampede - all that sort of stuff.

Leigh Alexander (@leighalexander)

Editor-at-Large

"Wisdom of the crowds" is an increasingly popular philosophy to business these days. I'm pretty in favor of open systems and not a fan of Apple-like gatekeeping, but like any system, there are downsides to this one. I keep saying I think we'll see a huge Kickstarter backlash soon, for example, and that there are a lot of reasons not to let your fans be your publishers.

Similarly, there are a lot of reasons, as Mike points out, that crowds create a mess. This is where I think we see the unique opportunity for curators to play an important role in crowd-driven systems.

I agree with Mike's reservations, but I also think the solution isn't necessarily even the best possible user rating and recommendation engine. There are so many ways to game ratings. I think frequently systems driven by masses of users result in their own constraint against innovation -- people want things that are exactly like the things they already like, and respond to these oft-repeated, visible and obvious genre or style signals.



March 4, 2013

We hear all the time that sometimes the most successful products come from an innovator giving people not what they want, but what they didn't know yet that they wanted. Educated tastemakers and social leaders are going to become crucial to the landscape.

I hope that's a role we can help play as media, for example! I'm excited just thinking about the kind of content we could organize and serve on, say, a Gamasutra Steam channel.

There's been a lot of anxiety in general about content democracy, and what that does to the formerly-authoritarian relationship between creators and consumers. I think now we're reaching a critical mass in content democracy where audiences will gravitate toward and elect their own information sources and content curators -- rather than educated authority becoming irrelevant, it becomes more necessary than ever, and excitingly, curation is a role one needs to earn through beneficial interactions with the community.

It's an exciting frontier in the evolving relationship between creators and their audience, I think! A messy wild-west would be so bad for everyone that some signposts must necessarily evolve naturally out of it.

What do you guys think good curation will look like?

Brandon Sheffield (@necrosofty)

Sr. Editor Gamasutra; Editor Emeritus, Game Developer

I'm similarly skeptical, but I'm sure Valve will have a store of its own that indies can still "make it" on.

The trouble with community stores is if everyone can have a store, then you've got even more noise than if all the games are just out on the platform. I think noise will increase exponentially, and I'm not sure what that'll do for discoverability. Plus, why would you follow a store? As a consumer, I'm not one to follow a particular tastemaker, though. Maybe a bunch of people would look at Brandon Boyer's store, or Notch's. But how will discoverability of storefronts work?

This whole thing is particularly interesting for me as a developer, since I just signed a deal on behalf of a third party, for publishing on Steam. Seeing how that shakes out in light of this potential "free-for-all" is going to be a good experiment, because the publisher does have greater marketing capability than the developer in this case, but is perhaps no longer necessary as a gatekeeper to the Steam store.



March 4, 2013

Personally, while I think discoverability is very difficult on iTunes, I like only seeing a few things, as a consumer. A huge number of games in front of me gives me option paralysis. I don't know how to solve this problem though, and I don't think anyone does! Maybe Valve can figure it out.

I'm of the mind that this is better than Greenlight, but will come with a whole new set of problems, and we may see a glut of lower quality games flood the marketplace, which is never a great thing.

I think the best curation is an Amazon-style "if you liked or looked at this, maybe you'll like this other thing!" - but most stores already do that to some degree. I'd like to see a service where, like the thousands of QA and support staff for World of Warcraft, we have an army of paid curators that pay attention to tastes and trends, and actively recommend interesting titles based on those trends for each user of steam. That is an unsustainable and crazy dream... but it sure would help discoverability!

Christian Nutt (@ferricide)

Features Director

I have to say that the idea of relying on DJs, as Frank put it, appeals to me — and that this seems like a natural extension of how the internet works today. The people I like best on Twitter aren't necessarily the wittiest, or even my real life friends. Many of them are those who share the best and most interesting things in their feeds.

Interestingness is the currency of our times; time is the resource many of us lack. If Steam will enable us to save time and effort by getting recommendations straight from trusted sources, I see that as inherently valuable.

Now, we don't know what form this will take, but it see it, at its highest potential, as creating "mini-services" within Steam — places where you can go to find the just kind of games you like. The great thing is that nothing would stop you from trying the games that are outside of your comfort zone, yet it would enable you to mine your own niche. If this ends up being what I ultimately envision it could be, I don't really see a downside.

Frank Cifaldi (@frankcifaldi)



March 4, 2013

News Director

I'm going to have to disagree with Brandon here, I don't think this is going to create more noise for consumers at all. If anything, this will REDUCE noise. Rather than having to wade through the hundreds of diverse titles trying to find that 1% that might be appealing, this is going to create an ecosystem where (eventually) an end user is going to immediately see something they want to play, every time they go shopping.

User-curated content will not bury indies. I see it more as an organic, honest "marketing" tool for making sure their games are seen by the people who might actually want to play them. This will INCREASE — not decrease — discoverability for weirder and more interesting games, because they won't have to shove through the crowd to get noticed. They'll be displayed front and center to people who might actually buy them.

And as a bonus, it will significantly decrease regrettable purchases. Every time a player takes a chance on a game that turns out to be lousy, they're getting less and less likely to experiment with new games in the future. With user-curated stores like Newell is proposing, this is going to happen less often. Consumer fatigue will decrease because every purchase a player makes is probably going to be satisfying, so they'll end up buying more games than ever.

I can even see a scenario where user curation becomes the cure for video games' devaluation into free-to-play apps, but I'll spare you all that tangent.

Kris Graft (@krisgraft)

Editor-in-Chief

Like Brandon, I can't say that I follow a specific tastemaker, and I don't think that's how most people discover games, or make their buying decisions. When a game isn't recommended to me personally and directly, I more often discover and buy after I detect a buzz trend among a group of people whose opinions I value (see social media).

Valve's system for discovery shouldn't really be focused on game discovery; it'll have to center on people discovery. If a user-gen storefront system can facilitate this, then sure, it has potential to be useful.

To answer Frank's question, is this a "dangerous" move for Valve? It'll be difficult (massively so), but the PC has always been an open platform with what you could call discoverability challenges. In trying to solve some of those discoverability challenges by creating its own curated platform, Valve has found itself



March 4, 2013

as a gatekeeper, and I think that goes against the philosophy of openness that Valve often espouses. It's impressive that Newell is self-aware enough to realize this, and is willing to realign his company to "fix" a situation that most execs wouldn't think needs "fixing."

Newell has attributed Valve's success to the openness of PC and now the company is going in the direction where the PC naturally wants to go. It's the right decision, but again, it'll be very difficult. Valve is full of smart folks, but it's not hard to imagine how a company could really trip up when taking on such a massive endeavor as putting PC game discoverability in the hands of customers. (Yikes.)