

b.TWEEN 2005

Following Your Heart and Commercial Success



What I wanted to do with Broken Saints was to create storytelling space online, an area untainted by promotions and funded from our own pockets. The story's simple: four strangers from different cultural backgrounds see the same vision of the apocalypse. We wanted to use simple Flash to establish a serial mystery online. We're not full-on animators. We use bitmaps instead of vectors, we wanted to differentiate our style from what you would normally see online.

The front page is set up like a video game front act. My background is in games. I spent four years at Electronic Arts in Canada, the largest games publisher in the world where I made software for games like FIFA Soccer, SSX and the James Bond series. After a few years in the trenches of EA I got tired of cranking out the same franchised games every 9 to 18 months. My background was in narrative and what I really wanted to do was to tell stories. I had a degree in journalism, drama and English. I saw the potential for an interactive medium to touch people on a narrative level, on an emotional level, on a spiritual level. Games were reaching millions of people. 32 bit platforms were transitioning into 64 bit platforms. EA don't make story games in house, and eventually I told them I wanted out. They called my bluff and promoted me, but eventually I did leave.

I cashed in my stocks and went overseas for nine months to the South Pacific on a soul-searching journey. I was going to try to discover what I felt spiritually and emotionally. I had some pretty profound experiences, and formed a basic fusion of philosophies from the great texts of the world, be it Taoism, Buddhism, Sufism, Christianity. I came back with a set of views that I wanted to share in a narrative. It would be about the dissatisfaction of the modern techno-speak worker, the type of person who is feeling fractured about their spirituality.

I had some talented young friends. One was an artist, one taught himself how to use Photoshop and Illustrator and Mia at the age of 12, just for fun. He happened to be tinkering around with Flash at the time. Flash did basic banner-ads, Flash did really simple two-minute cartoons. No one was using it for long-form narratives because of the download sizes. Flash was good at manipulating text, images and audio, and that was what people were used to manipulating online.

So how about making a fusion of the three? A graphic novel, set to music, in serial pieces over time, with no advertising, to share my own philosophies of this fracture in modern life between technology and spirituality. Four strangers, different cultural backgrounds, receive a vision of the apocalypse. They're drawn to a city in the Pacific North West, and somehow their visions are tied to a global satellite network, a military chip implant project and a plan to bring God back to the world. That's when things start to get interesting.

I told my young guys that we'd be working on this for a year. It would be about three hours long, a prestige piece, we could put it on our portfolios. We started off quite humbly, with short chapters, around ten minutes long. As the series progressed they got longer. The finale, finished in July 2003 after we won the award at the Sundance Film Festival, was an hour and a half long in seven parts. It took four months to produce. We spent three years of our lives doing this. There was no revenue model. We didn't make money. This was a cause for us.

The Muslim mercenary in the piece was a protest against the continued sanctions and fly-through bombings in Iraq after the first Gulf War. US statistics show that 500 000 elderly and children have been killed by these fly-throughs. We didn't care. Then 2500 people died on 9/11: the greatest tragedy ever. This happens every month around the world to other cultures, but they don't look like us, so we don't care. I had something to say about how we are all common under the skin. I wanted to express this through these four characters: a North-American Roman Catholic programmer, a Japanese Shinto priest, a Muslim mercenary and a Pagan girl in the South Pacific, kind of a parallel to Moses.

What inspired the narrative itself? Back in '98 there was a story about Microsoft launching a low-flying network of satellites that would broadcast broadband wireless anywhere on earth by 2007. Then I remembered an experiment that was done in Canada back in 1988. Using magnetic resonance and electro-magnetic waves a professor was stimulating people's temporal lobes and giving them a divine experience. Every person, whether atheist, Jew, Muslim, Buddhist, Sufi, pagan. Didn't matter, they all experienced the presence of God through this simulation. What would happen if everyone on the planet experienced that at the same time?

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How did we spread the word? It won some awards, but to disseminate an idea at grassroots you have to involve the audience. We used screensavers and MP3s and ran a poster campaign where fans could download cryptic posters of Broken Saints, put them up in their cities and send photos in. We had a global fan base and our demographics range from 15 to 55, with the main spike in the 15 to 25 range. There's a 50/50 male to female split, because of the poetic nature of the story. We wanted to involve people in a playful way. I did monthly rants and we put up all the quotes from the series.

Creating a community is essential. We've been hearing how electronic tribes are being formed around ideas, around journalism, around narratives. That's what I wanted to do around Broken Saints. This was a safe oasis with no ads. This was a place for ideas and for expression. We have forums and guest books that have thousands of posts: over 15 000 entries in our online address book and nearly 100 000 posts in the forum. At our peak we received upwards of 150-200 personal mails a day, with 10 000 to 25 000 unique visitors per day.

I haven't spoken yet about commercial success. This was the surprising part. We finished the online series in July 2003 and won an award at the Sundance Film Festival. Telefilm Canada, a funding arm of the Canadian Government that works with film and new media producers, offered us funding, about two years too late! This had all been funded out of our own pockets, and the more popular you get, the more you pay in bandwidth costs. We were eating noodles for a year and a half, working out of a basement in the Flash guy's home, his mother coming down to offer us tea. We did make some sound tracks and T-shirts for fans, but we tried to be as anti-commerce as possible. By late 2003 we didn't need the funding.

Then the Canadian Government mentioned doing a DVD version. I said I would want to revamp the entire thing, make it comparable to Hollywood releases. It would be expensive. After a 300-page application it was reviewed as the best new media application in the country. We spent ten months working with a team of 30 professionals and volunteers and 50 voiceover people to make the DVD version. All the money went into the actual production process, so they were paid basically nothing, just enough to get by.

We wanted to show that the story would move happily from one medium to another and that its strengths would evolve. We took our key components and expanded them. We did 3D models of the faces to show that the characters have evolved. We put the Canadian Government's money to good use by revamping every single part of the Broken Saints universe, the original art, the effects, the audio. We brought in voices like William Lee Davis (Cancerman from the X Files), David Kay from Transformers and Scott McNeil (Wolverine from X-Men). They were passionate being able to speak the dialogue because of the poetic and mature nature of the piece. People wanted to be part of this because they realised they'd never be part of something like it again.

The future of the property is moving on from there. I'm currently in negotiations with both Dark Horse Comics and DC Vertigo to release a graphic novel version (the best offer wins) so there will be a traditional comic print version, which was one of my major influences. The Prisoner was another major influence. I was very passionate about that show. I was one of the few Canadians who actually got it, who understood what they were trying to say about society and the self and the nature of identity and individuality. I was also a huge fan of Twin Peaks, which was serial storytelling. Originally I envisaged Broken Saints as a television mini-series, but couldn't afford the means of production. It looks like that dream may come true: we're currently in negotiations to do a mini-series version.

Audience member: Can you talk a little bit about where the audience was coming from?

The audience was global. There was a passionate underground in Europe and South America for the piece. It took a little longer to catch on in the US. I think that in general the US will follow something everyone else says is good. It's even worse in Canada: creators aren't respected at all until they've made it big somewhere else.

Audience member: What about Asia?

There was a language barrier but now we've translated it with multiple subtitles for DVD, including Japanese. We're hoping to launch the new hub version of the original Flash series in ten languages to celebrate our five-year anniversary-actually taking the English out of the bubbles and replacing them with the other languages. We want to continue to share

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the series for free in multiple languages including several Asian languages, because I know that the manga style of storytelling is big there. We're also in negotiations with a Japanese company to do an anime series.

Audience member: *I'm pretty new to Broken Saints, but when you told the story about how you were frustrated with your job, it reminded me of the plot of Cypher. Was that deliberate?*

No, but it's a common thread in the modern information economy, especially with the dot.com bubble bursting. People were becoming very dissatisfied when they realised that either the bosses were getting all the stock and their jobs were falling by the wayside, or that their jobs felt really hollow. Here we are in a group of incredibly talented and creative and intelligent people, and I believe that people with those skills have a social responsibility to make the world a better place. On my deathbed, I don't care what I owned, who I slept with, what I drove; I care about how many good things I did, and how many people I was able to touch and uplift. I certainly hope I can spread that word.

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