Humorous Diatribe Aimed At Disenfranchised Romantics 25 And Up

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By Chris Pruett <c_pruett@efn.org>

A recent trip to Los Angeles got me thinking about the parallels between Hollywood and the game industry. Though the inner workings of these two industries are quite different, they both seem to struggle to find a balance between works that are profitable and those that are well crafted. Both Hollywood and the game industry produce a large number of products that are commercially viable but artistically trite, and I have often wondered if this characteristic common to these two very different industries is indicative of a larger cultural norm. To investigate this train of thought, I decided to take a closer look at a few films that were designed to sell to the same audience that many games target.

*I Know What You Did Last Summer* is a teen slasher flick that hit the theaters in 1997. Directed by Jim Gillespie, the film was designed to ride on the resurgence of interest in the teen slasher genre that Wes Craven's *Scream* had inspired the previous year. Like most teen slasher films, *Scream* and *I Know What You Did Last Summer* revolved around a group of teenagers who are killed one by one by a mysterious murderer. The teen slasher genre had been languishing in mediocrity for a number of years, but *Scream* managed to pique the interest of a new generation of teens with an interesting mechanic and a twist ending. *Scream* was no great cinematic masterwork, but its execution of the teen slasher genre was quite good. *I Know What You Did Last Summer*, on the other hand, was a knock-off of a movie that was not really worth knocking off to begin with, and suffered from all of the problems that regularly plague thrillers aimed at teens: gore and cheap suspense was used as a replacement for a thin plot and weak acting, with predictably terrible results. Despite its flaws, the film grossed $15 million dollars in its opening weekend and spawned a sequel, *I Still Know What You Did Last Summer*.

*I Know What You Did Last Summer* served exactly the purpose that its creators intended: it took advantage of another film’s success to generate a large profit from a relatively small initial investment. I am sure that the fairly low quality of the film was of little consequence to its producers, as they made quite a bit of money regardless. In fact, Hollywood makes these sort of
cash crop movies all the time, and the teen thriller genre seems to be right up there with the tasteless comedy genre on the easy money list. The secret to the success of this genre is that the audience has very low expectations. Smart producers know that if they market a movie in a certain way to a certain audience (in this case, young adults), a certain volume of ticket sales is guaranteed. Casting celebrities further increases the number of guaranteed sold tickets, so studios generally see this sort of film as a sound investment.

Of course, this approach leads to a lot of bad movies. If a film like *I Know What You Did Last Summer* can still turn a sizable profit, producers have no incentive to pay extra for higher quality content. There does not seem to be a strong correlation between content quality and ticket sales, as evidenced by both *I Know What You Did Last Summer* as well as highly regarded films that were commercial failures, such as The *English Patient*.

When a studio produces a low-cost low-quality film, it is ultimately the movie goers who receive the short end of the stick. Movie tickets cost the same regardless of quality, and many movie goers attend screenings half expecting to hate the film. Fortunately, movies are cheap and disposable, and they only cost us a few hours of our time. Even the worst movie is over fairly quickly, and we do not feel any great loss over the price of the ticket.

However, it is this very indifference that encourages the Hollywood machine to pump out awful movies. This year a horror film called *Alone in the Dark* was released to some of the harshest criticism in recent memory (the film now occupies the 29th slot on IMDB’s Worst Films of All Time list)[1]. Thankfully it was a commercial failure, but even that has not been enough to deter investors from funding more films by the same director. The problem with Hollywood is that it is too easy for producers to make a quick buck by sacrificing content quality for marketing dollars.

However, movies like *I Know What You Did Last Summer* might not be such sound investments if movie goers were more discerning. Perhaps we should blame the audience for its willingness to blindly spend money on films that have been very poorly received by critics. Or maybe a better target would be the marketing firms who make a business out of passing mediocre quality content off as exciting and trendy.

In fact, no one group is responsible for the abundant number of cash crop Hollywood bombs. The market for such films is ultimately a reflection of what our culture, or at least, segments of our culture, are interested in. In that sense, the high concentration of terrible movies aimed at teens is not difficult to understand: one might argue that the maturity of the medium is a reflection of the maturity of its target audience.

As much as some of us may hate to admit it, movies like *I Know What You Did Last Summer* are enjoyed by a fairly wide population. Teen slasher flicks are meant to be simple entertainment, and if the audience is entertained than we have no choice but to admit that the genre is successful. Those of us who are turned off by the low quality standards of some films are probably not part of the target audience anyway; the filmmakers behind most teen slasher films are speaking to an
audience that is not so demanding. And when a film is so bad that even the target audience hates it, it fails commercially, as *Alone in the Dark* and *Gigli* (#34 on the WFOAT list) did.

So if even cash crop films have an audience, what is the problem? Why do so many pundits lament the state of the American movie industry? If we admit that movies that we do not particularly enjoy may still be enjoyed by somebody else, how can we argue that something is wrong in the Los Angeles hills?

The issue, of course, is that for every teen slasher film that is made, another movie aimed at The Audience That Remembers When Hollywood Made Good Movies gets canned. Movie producers have a fixed amount of capital to invest, and since teen slasher flicks [2] (among others) provide such a solid investment, the riskier, less revenue-driven films simply do not get made. Sure, every once and a while somebody crazy will come along and fund a movie like *Being John Malkovich*, but such movies are rare exceptions to the rule.

Which brings us, finally, to video games. Hollywood is an excellent foil for the video game industry, as games suffer almost exactly the same problems despite extremely different economics. The difference is that games require a lot more investment from the viewer: just purchasing a new video game costs $50, and most games take hours to complete. Add in the requisite cost of a computer or video game system, and video games begin to look less and less like a form of entertainment that is as easily disposable as films.

With increased investment comes increased demand for quality. If a customer is going to sink some serious cash and time into a video game, they had better be having a good time. There is much less tolerance for mediocrity in areas that video game consumers view as important, and any game that fails to meet certain technological standards is instantly labeled a failure.

Further complicating the issue is the target audience’s idea of which elements are important to games. Just as a group of teens would likely reject a teen slasher flick that had too little actual slashing, a large percentage of video game consumers require games to have the best graphics and production value possible, even when the game itself is not very fun. Games are fundamentally a medium based around interaction, but often the quality of a game will be determined by how visually appealing the presentation of the game is rather than the quality of the interaction it provides.

The marketing of video games plays directly to this audience. Last month the annual Electronic Entertainment Expo (“E3”) was held in downtown Los Angeles, just a few short miles from Hollywood itself. E3 is an industry-only event where gamedevelopers get a chance to display their wares to the media, and this year the buzz was all about the new video game systems that will be hitting the market towards the end of this year. Sony, Microsoft, and Nintendo all have new hardware in development, and they all want you to know that their system will produce the best graphics ever. As I wrote in the last issue, realism is a valuable commodity in the video game world, and E3 2005 was so full of realism-related marketing that the conference center seemed
to be clouded in a think haze of hype.

The hardware makers know that there is an audience for games that have a high visual fidelity. They also know that this audience will accept mediocre games as long as the presentation is good, just like the teen slasher audience will accept a bad script as long as the body count is sufficiently high. And like the movie industry, the result is that the market is swamped with games that appeal heavily to one segment of the market while simultaneously disenfranchising another segment.

But unlike the movie industry, the effect this trend has had on the game industry has been devastating. The relatively high cost of entry to the video game market makes consumers timid and less willing to accept failure. If a casual gamer is burned once or twice on games made for an audience with very different tastes, she may simply find other forms of entertainment to spend her money on.

The market for video games has become focused on a small audience that has very specific tastes, and the overall quality of the content the game industry produces has consequently declined. The next generation of video game systems will narrow this focus even further while simultaneously increasing the cost of game development. There are huge untapped markets simply waiting for games that are not aimed at teenage boys, and unless those markets are tapped the game industry may quickly run itself into the ground.

The financial stakes are too high for the game industry to survive on interactive equivalents of I Know What You Did Last Summer. Boobs and explosions and car chases will only go so far before the cost of game development becomes greater than the relatively small audience can support. If the industry does not focus on expanding its market now it may very well find itself alone in the dark.

Endnotes

[1] Rottentomatoes.com, a site that displays review scores for movies in aggregate, gave Alone in the Dark a 1% rating: http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/alone_in_the_dark/

The IMDB page is here: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0369226/

[2] I’m picking on teen slasher flicks because they are an easy target. In reality, there is a large body of work in this genre that is subtle, thought-provoking, and all-around excellent cinema.
Ernesto on January 29, 2014 at 8:31 PM said:

Awesome post.

network ports on January 30, 2014 at 12:13 AM said:

Howdy great website! Does running a blog like this require a lot of work? I have absolutely no understanding of computer programming however I was hoping to start my own blog in the near future. Anyways, should you have any suggestions or tips for new blog owners please share. I know this is off subject but I simply had to ask. Many thanks!

success synonym on January 30, 2014 at 4:54 AM said:

Everything is very open with a precise clarification of the challenges. It was really informative. Your website is very useful. Thanks for sharing!

make money credit card on January 30, 2014 at 10:39 PM said:

Hello, Neat post. There’s an issue together with your web site in web explorer, might test this? IE nonetheless is the market chief and a huge portion of other folks will pass over your excellent writing because of this problem.
Hello! Would you mind if I share your blog with my facebook group? There’s a lot of folks that I think would really appreciate your content.

Please let me know. Many thanks.

wall street netflix
on January 31, 2014 at 1:24 AM said:

hello!,I like your writing very so much! proportion we keep in touch more approximately your article on AOL?
I require an expert on this house to solve my problem.
May be that’s you! Taking a look ahead to see you.

funny facebook quotes
on January 31, 2014 at 3:39 AM said:

It’s very easy to find out any topic on net as compared to textbooks, as I found this piece of writing at this web site.

Bernice
on January 31, 2014 at 2:58 PM said:

Good day! I could have sworn I’ve been to your blog before but after looking at a few of the articles I realized
it’s new to me. Anyhow, I’m definitely happy I found it and I’ll be bookmarking it and checking back regularly!

Trisha
A motivating discussion is worth comment. There’s no doubt that that you should write more on this subject matter, it might not be a taboo subject but usually people do not discuss such subjects. To the next! Kind regards!!

Francis
on February 1, 2014 at 5:56 AM said:

Having read this I thought it was very enlightening. I appreciate you finding the time and energy to put this informative article together. I once again find myself personally spending a lot of time both reading and leaving comments. But so what, it was still worthwhile!

Kaley
on February 1, 2014 at 5:58 PM said:

Hi, of course this piece of writing is really pleasant and I have learned lot of things from it concerning blogging. thanks.

Davis
on February 1, 2014 at 7:53 PM said:

Hmm it appears like your blog ate my first comment (it was super long) so I guess I’ll just sum it up what I had written and say, I’m thoroughly enjoying your blog.
I too am an aspiring blog blogger but I’m still new to everything. Do you have any suggestions for beginner blog writers?
I’d definitely appreciate it.
I really like your blog.. very nice colors & theme.
Did you create this website yourself or did you hire someone to
do it for you? Plz respond as I’m looking to construct my own blog and would like to find
out where u got this
from. kudos

Wow, this paragraph is pleasant, my sister is analyzing these
things, therefore I am going to let know her.

An impressive share! I’ve just forwarded this onto a colleague who has
been conducting a little research on this. And he
in fact ordered me breakfast due to the fact that
I stumbled upon it for him… lol. So let me reword
this…. Thank YOU for the meal!! But yeah, thanx for spending
the time to talk about this topic here on your blog.

Interesting blog! Is your theme custom made or did you download it
from somewhere? A theme like yours with a few simple adjustements would really
make my blog stand out. Please let me know where you got your theme.
Bless you

internet marketing companies
on February 4, 2014 at 7:18 AM said:

This post is truly a good one it assists new the web visitors, who are wishing in favor of blogging.

Ollie
on February 4, 2014 at 8:20 PM said:

Hi there it’s me, I am also visiting this web site regularly, this web site is really fastidious and the users are in fact sharing pleasant thoughts.

Todd
on February 5, 2014 at 4:01 AM said:

Way cool! Some extremely valid points! I appreciate you writing this post and the rest of the site is very good.