Interview with Amanda Fitch, Amaranth Games

by Joel Brodie on Sep 14, 2006 at 3:20pm   👁 7 min read

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The story of Amanda Fitch (also known as Amanda Fae) and Aveyond is as unlikely as any in casual games. A female (if you have ever been to a game conference, you will understand this is a rarity) with a college degree in English creates a role-playing game (RPG) that becomes one of the most popular casual games of 2006 so far.

How'd she do it? The answer: by creating a RPG accessible to everyone with great depth and storyline (with over 250 pages worth, in fact!) We sat down with Amanda Fitch to discuss her unique background, the secret to the success of Aveyond, and the role of female developers in casual games.

How did you come up with the name Amaranth Games?

I was reading a book about ancient symbols and I saw a reference to Amaranth. In ancient

Greece, Amaranth (chrusanthemon) symbolized immortality. I liked the name and the meaning, so I used it.

What games have you developed that you're especially fond of?

Aveyond and Ahriman's Prophecy. I love Aveyond, but Ahriman's Prophecy is still my favorite. Ahriman's Prophecy is the prequel to Aveyond, and my first RPG. The resolution isn't that great, but there is something about the atmosphere that really makes you feel like you are there.

What about other developers' games? Anything new and interesting that has caught your attention recently?

Cute Knight. The graphics are simple, but the game play is charming. I've put it on my site, and I've found that lots of my players like it too. It's not as polished as most casual games today, but it's well… cute!

Your story is very unique in that you do not have a computer programming background per se. Can you tell us about your background and how ended up a successful game developer?

I've been making games on cardboard since I was a kid. I graduated with an English degree, got a job as a writer, and was really bored. After college, I suddenly had time to do things again, so I decided to play a game. I walked into a store and couldn't find a game that looked like fun, so I decided to try and make one. I learned as much as I could about programming and even built a simple 2D game engine in C. Things were moving too slowly though, and I wanted to work on the game logic, not the engine logic. I searched online for pre-built, pre-tested engines. I found one called Adventure Game Studio that had a huge underground following. I loved working with it! It let me focus on building my story, levels, and art. It also gave me my first introduction to scripting. When RPG Maker XP came out, I was ecstatic. It gave me a chance to learn about object-oriented programming with RUBY, and become a better scripter.

Aveyond has been a huge casual game hit the year but it's also much different most casual

games out there. Instead of gems and Mahjong tiles, Aveyond has quests and mazes. What do you think accounts for its success?

I think Aveyond is a good start, but that there is still a mountain to climb. I think people like it because it's cute, has a good story, and you can do lots of dynamic things like marry your characters, join guilds, buy pets, etc. It's also different from most of the games offered to players on the major game portals. It gives players chance to experience something new (or something long gone that has come back).

Can you give us a few insights into the creative process behind the development of Aveyond?

This game took 1 Â½ years, part-time. I used RPG Maker XP, which was perfect for this type of game. I divided my time between writing (250 pages!), level building, scripting, and painting. I got help from an experienced artist (Jim Moore) who helped with the difficult art, and from a musician (Aaron Walz) who put together a live soundtrack for the game.

As for the story, I wrote it like one would write a novel. I wrote down ideas for a couple of months as they came to me. Then I outlined it, made a rough-draft, and filled in the gaps with each revision. My writing background definitely helped me through this part. The writing itself took about three months.

One of the unique features in Aveyond is the level of detail in the storyline (it's interesting that you describe it as a "novel"). What was your inspiration for the story and how important do you believe storyline is to game design?

The inspiration came from my last game, Ahriman's Prophecy. I needed to find a way to bring the *evil* Ahriman back into the picture. I wanted him to fight the child of a character from Ahriman's Prophecy. I wanted the protagonist and antagonist to fall in love. It was a slow process and I rewrote the storyline over and over again for several months before I was happy with it.

The story is central to my adventure/RPG games. Everything that you do is focused around the

story. The story is the compass that tells you where to go. You solve puzzles so that you can get the next piece in the story.

The success of role-playing games ("RPG's") as Aveyond and Fate prove that casual gamers will play more sophisticated role-playing games if the experience is compelling. What do you think is the appeal of RPG's to the casual game audience? What other genres (if any) currently unexploited do you think developers should explore that would appeal to the casual game audience?

I think the appeal of RPGs to the casual game audience is the puzzle-solving and exploration. In addition, these sorts of story-puzzle games give players an opportunity to share ideas and build friendships over the game on the net.

As for what's next? I think adventure games are due for a comeback. In the gaming underground there is a huge following for them. 🙂

The grand irony of casual games is whereas a lot of women enjoy playing casual games, very few women actually create them. How does being a female game designer help you create games for the casual game audience? What needs to happen for more women to get involved in creating casual games? Does it even matter?

It helps that I am part of the female audience. I can't speak for all women, but it's probably easier for me to understand what women want.

I think most women don't see entering the gaming industry as an option. From a distance, it looks impossible and frightening. I wish I knew the remedy for this problem. I think that as the next generation of computer-loving girls grows up, we may see a change.

Who do you think is the ideal player for your games? Do you think that will change in the future?

Players like me! 😃

I focus on people who like adventure stories. I don't focus on gender or age, which is probably why most of the people who play my games don't belong to one gender or age group.

What are your plans (if any) to develop and launch multiplayer games in the future?

There could be one on the horizon…

Ten years from now (God willing), I'm playing one of your games? What will this game experience be like?

I have no idea! For now, the plan is to stay small, make story-driven games, and have fun. It would be nice to develop games for consoles, but I'm sure that the investment would be worth it. I have a LOT of research to do. I'm also looking at multiplayer games. Over and over again, players have ask me to build them a game where they can play with each other online. I'm plotting out a way to do this.

Can you give us any hints of your upcoming games?

I'm working on a cute, casual simulation game that involves pets. I'm also working on Aveyond 2: Ean's Quest. One of the biggest changes that players will notice from my previous games is the graphics. The new art is really amazing!

Finally, any closing words for your fans out there?

Thank you so much for playing Aveyond! I'm using the proceeds to build you more games. If you want to see how your contributions are being used for the next games, please visit the Amaranth Games website.

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