

Interview with Simone Bevilacqua - author of "BOH"

Sebastian Rosa

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Thank you that you agreed to have this interview.

My pleasure ;)

In first words, could you please introduce yourself, tell us what you do in our society.

I'm almost 33 and I live somewhere in the middle of Italy. Since October 2008 I'm unemployed, so, in the last months, I've been able to dedicate myself entirely to "BOH".

I may sound a bit ironic right now - I am not pleased to hear the former but the results of the latter might suggest that unemployment serves the Amiga society. After all "BOH" was born - one of not many non-ported games on AmigaOS 4.x (not only but let's focus on it). Could you tell us the story behind the conception of your child?

First I'd like to clarify that "BOH" would have been born anyway - it would just have taken a little longer. In fact - and this answers your question - it was started when and precisely because I was employed. This is quite complicated to explain, so please bear with me. Basically, I hate developing. It drives me nuts for a lot of reasons. But when it comes to creating things that spring from my heart, then it's just the opposite: hate naturally becomes love. Now, back in 2007 I was working as a programmer and that job was really killing me (it's a bit of a miracle that I managed to stay where I was for 8 months in a row). At some point, I really couldn't keep jailed my repressed creativity anymore. One evening, after returning home from that mind-consuming job (65 km away), I decided to start implementing an idea that initially took shape in 2003 and kept lingering in my mind ever since. That idea, which involves the basic mechanisms of rendering and of dungeons, was a mix of things I had seen in some old games like Shadowlands, Tail to Nose, Wizard of Wor and maze-based games in general. In a nutshell, everything started for the pure pleasure of experimenting.

So it was not just killing time experience but something that was inside you and eagerly wanted to get out. Let's start with the name then. Why such name? What does it really mean? Is it some kind of abbreviation? The ones I could find and in some way fit into the game are "Bad on Hand" or "Badge of Honor". Am I even close in deciphering it?

You got them right. Both! That's because "BOH" has only a meta-meaning and lends itself well to be used as a three-letter acronym. As I shortly mentioned in the manual, it is an Italian interjection that means "I don't know". I chose it on day 1 because it was impossible to find a meaningful name for the drawer where I stored the first products of the experimentation: the project was rather shapeless and I didn't have a clear idea of where I was heading to. Later, even when the project was clearly definite, I decided to leave it because themes have a great impact on the game's identity. And also because I thought it was kind of funny to let people unroll - like you and others already did - that acronym (now that I think of it, I should have taken note of those titles). For sure, it is definitely funny to answer fellow Italians who ask "What's your game name?".

And who says that the senseless titles do not have the meaning, hah? ;-)) Going back to the genesis of the game. On the website of the project, in the FAQ, it says that, apart from C64 titles, "BOH" was influenced by Amiga smash megahits like "Alien Breed", "Chaos Engine" and "Ambermoon". I guess you are a fan of the mentioned titles. What do you like the most in them and you have conveyed into "BOH"? I am particularly interested in things which can not be seen at first glance.

Well, there's very little I dislike about those titles, so I'll pass directly to the second part of your question - but please keep in mind that it's hard to talk comprehensively about influences because there's only so much one can rationally recognize.

"Alien Breed" has had a general influence on "BOH" because it's one of the games I love that put you in mazes infested by monsters. But, you see, it isn't the only game of that kind: the same goes for "The Chaos Engine", Wizard of Wor and who knows how many other titles that share the same concept. However, there is a couple of specific aspects inspired by "Alien Breed". The first is the absence of bullets: I just love that, because, in reality, bullets hardly can be seen and travel short distances practically immediately; so, when I was thinking about how shooting would work, the first idea that came to mind was precisely to show only the effects of hits - "Just like in 'Alien Breed'", was the thought that crossed my mind at the same time. The second can be spotted in the design of an enemy of the default theme: before pixelling the sprites, one of the vague pictures of the enemies I had in my mind was terribly similar to typical foes found in "Alien Breed" (and, of course, in the movie "Alien") - although not original, still it was something I badly wanted to be there.

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As regards "The Chaos Engine", besides its general influence (as said above), it's hard to spot particular aspects. One could be tempted to think of (the mechanisms that operate) the passages and the concept of having mazes with puzzling passages in general, but that's indeed something I borrowed from "The Amazing Spider-Man" (I owned the C64 version, although it was available on the Amiga as well). Maybe - just maybe - the hidden passages have their roots in "The Chaos Engine" (similarly, the passages that require keys derive perhaps from "Alien Breed"). What I can say for sure is that "The Chaos Engine" - or better, Dan Malone - had an impact on some graphics. While drawing the pipes present in the default theme, I couldn't help but think all the time of the large pipes seen in "The Chaos Engine"'s World 2 (my favourite) - the result is quite different both because my skills are nowhere near to Dan's and because "BOH"'s graphics have to be drawn under severe constraints, as regards lighting. Also, some elements fade in and out by means of dithering, just like in "The Chaos Engine".

Finally, "Ambermoon". This is easy, instead. I think I borrowed from it only the automapper. Actually it's something I realized only after the game was released, in one of the discussions about "BOH" that can be found on various forums around the net - in fact, "Ambermoon" isn't mentioned in the user's manual included in the box.

This answer is already very long, but I have to add "Shadowlands", which inspired the lighting engine: in the user's manual it's mentioned as an MS-DOS game because that's the platform I saw it running on (at a friend's house), but it exists also on the Amiga.

Was there anything you had implemented but had to exclude from the game? Or maybe there was something you wanted to implement but couldn't?

Yes, there's one thing I really fancy which had to be excluded for performance's sake: leftovers of dead enemies (blood stains, traces of explosions, and stuff like that, depending on the kind of enemy and on the theme). Unfortunately, that sort of thing doesn't really get on well with tile-based engines, and all the more so with "BOH"'s, due to the rotation of the playfield, the field of vision and the various "height" of tiles. However, since it basically comes for free, a similar effect does appear in the game: after exploding, static objects like crates, barrels, etc. do leave burns on the floors (well, the actual effects depend on the theme, but you get the idea).

There is indeed another thing that has been excluded, but for different reasons altogether. When I started thinking about what kind of game to build on the engine development started from, one of the first ideas was that two players would face each other over the net: one would play normally, the other would act as a dungeon master - in practice, playing the role of the Evil Master. I had even started the implementation but at some point I stopped the development of the whole game because, well, programming that kind of stuff is one of those things that I dislike so much that the disgust eventually drives me crazy. Moreover, such feature was not something I badly wanted: I thought that people might like it and it was quite OK with me too, but definitely not something I strongly desired. This happened in the last quarter of 2007. Still, I felt very creative, so I decided to make another game that I could finish in about one month just for the fun of it. And so "KOG" (some of you maybe remember it) was born. Once I was done with "KOG", my attention returned to "BOH" and, of course, I was extremely unhappy - I'd go as far as to say "angry" - with the halt it came to. So, I decided to remove all the network-related stuff and I implemented the Evil Master AI - and finally development resumed.

Now the subject will be a bit harsh. What about graphics? There are some comments that it could have been done better. Have you considered some cooperation with someone who could slightly improve it in that matter? Or maybe it was supposed to be like this?

I'd really like to know exactly why people think graphics are bad. I'm sure most of the answers wouldn't be about the quality of the pixel art itself, but rather about the low resolution or the fact that graphics aren't ray-traced/realistic/whatever. Well, sorry, but that's only because people don't know or have forgotten the beauty of pixel art.

That said, for sure there are lots of graphicicians around that would have done a better job. But, in the past, every time I tried to search for self-motivated, committed, capable collaborators, it all ended up in an irritating waste of time and energies. Had I had the cash to pay upfront, it would have been easier - but I didn't have it. Moreover, there's a technical

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aspect that has to be considered (this is explained also in the developer's manual). In "BOH" lighting is dynamic: at any time, there can be any number of light sources of different intensity, hue and position. That isn't suitable at all for pre-rendered 2D graphics (and viceversa), because graphics, not to be flat and dull, need to have an own lighting - in case what I mean isn't clear, have a look at "The Chaos Engine"'s graphics (which are universally regarded excellent): they are painted as if they were lit by a light coming from the top-left. Still, I strongly wanted both dynamic lighting and pre-rendered graphics. The only solution was to make the "embedded" lighting of graphics as much neutral as possible: since the view is from above, the lighting is, except in minor cases where the result would have been just too bad, perfectly perpendicular, in order to give graphics the necessary depth. Such lighting, however, is very limiting and has the side effect of making graphics look boring and, as commonly said by specialists, "pillow-shaded". I bet Dan Malone himself wouldn't be able to match the quality of his graphics if he was forced to work under such a constraint.

Anyway, the game is fully themeable, so I'm eagerly awaiting for brave pixelers to produce better themes! - on the website there is a developer's manual that explains how to do it.

What about adding support for higher resolutions?

No way. The low resolution has been chosen on purpose for the sake and the love of pixel art: none of them exists without the other. And, just in case it wasn't clear enough: higher resolution doesn't automatically mean that graphics are more beautiful (I'm talking in general).

How many people are involved in the project? Is it true that everything was done all by yourself?

Most of the French, German, Spanish and Swedish translations were made by others (acknowledged in the manual and directly in the translation files). A couple of Italian fellows also helped with the music of the additional themes released lately: the one found in the theme "C64" was made by a namesake of mine, while another Italian guy composed the music for the theme "castle" as a MIDI tune (which then I tracked, seizing the chance to arrange the percussions and retouch bits here and there).

And what about coding?

I did everything myself.

The game is in pure C, right?

Yes, correct.

Did you have some obstacles doing "hard work"?

Well, some things have been easy, some others a bit hard, but there's nothing specific that was too hard per se. I guess the biggest challenge was to get everything done by the CPU without compromising the performance also on slower Amigas. By the way, for those who are wondering why I do everything with the CPU, the answer is twofold: the first reason is that I just enjoy coding certain things (f.ex. the graphics engine, as it should be obvious from what I said before) - and, remember, without personal enjoyment, "BOH" wouldn't have existed; the second is that porting across several platforms becomes very easy (that is, provided that the code is designed to be portable, which requires a little extra effort) - and portability was fundamental for the project to have at least some commercial hopes.

Speaking of which, weren't you worried that your product will not have any commercial future?

Oh, sure I was! "BOH" is culturally outside of today's market (except for retrogaming niches) and has to face both the giants of the industry and tons of other indie games (also within the aforementioned retrogaming markets).

On one hand it is said that this day & age amigans will buy everything that is new...

Well, don't believe that - not even for a second.

... but on the other hand this market is a niche - very limited to potential buyers and you had even narrowed the selection to AmigaOS 4.x users? Am I guessing correct that Windows version was priority and AmigaOS 4.x version is just an upshot?

No, you aren't. "BOH" has been developed on and for AmigaOS (as also the choices made to allow also less powerful Amigas to run the game acceptably and the costly decision to give the Amiga community a boxed product prove). But, indeed, no version has had a priority: in practice, I developed all of them at the same time - what allowed me to do this is SDL, a certain framework I've built during the years and constant attention to portability issues. Before going on, let me clarify that I chose AmigaOS 4 simply because that's the system I own. Had I had the machines (and enough space for

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them - you see, "BOH" is really a product of bedroom coding) to port the game to other Amiga-like OSES, I would have done it. But the last word hasn't been said yet, as there are slight chances that "BOH" will land on AROS and maybe also on MorphOS (but I'm making no promises) - so, dear Amigans, if you are interested, let your voice be heard.

We are slightly entering into the future part. What is (if there is any) the roadmap for "BOH"? What can we expect in the future? What are your plans concerning the game?

I have a few ideas for a future version of "BOH", but I have also plenty of ideas for other games (and the thought of developing something new is more stimulating than sticking to "BOH" forever). But everything depends on the sales of "BOH": for sure, my current situation won't allow me to try again with another project.

It sounds like you are a bit disappointed with the sales volume of "BOH". Or maybe I am wrong?

You are right.

Is "BOH" more popular among Windows or AmigaOS users?

Funny, I'm being asked the same question on an Italian forum right now. The answer is that, speaking of sales figures, at the moment there's an almost perfect balance.

What are the comments of Windows users about the game they play and which is created on AmigaOS?

Nobody has ever made a comment about the fact that the game has been made on an Amiga. The majority of the comments - regardless of the platform - are about the thick atmosphere created by the field of vision, the lighting and the spawning of enemies.

Did you have any prior knowledge about the online level editor which was about to come? Did you have any involvement into it? What are your opinions about it?

Yes, I did know about it. It has been made by Mark Ashley, one of the first customers (he is also the author of the review found on Amiga.org). He did a very nice job. My involvement has been limited to explaining him how mission descriptors work - at that time, the developer's manual wasn't complete enough. I think that it's very easy and effective: a very nice tool indeed. Personally I don't like the idea - because it basically goes against the "BOH's" philosophy that a text editor is sufficient to create missions -, but for sure I understand that others, like Mark, prefer a dedicated editor. So, Mark has all my admiration, gratitude and support. On a side note, Mark has been very busy lately, so he hasn't had the time to make the editor compliant to the changes introduced by update3; however, the editor can still be used to create the layouts of maps.

Simone, it was great pleasure to have this interview with you. Thank you for answering so widely on all my questions. I wish you all the best with your projects and hope that the sales volume of "BOH" will increase and you will manage to achieve the full joy out of it. Last word is yours and that'll be...

Thanks for everything, it was a pleasure for me as well. I'm undecided about whether to close this interview with "Pixels are beautiful" or with "Don't play 'BOH' as if it were a shoot'em-up", so I guess I'll... woops, I've already said both!