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# The myth of the video game auteur

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**F**orget the breaking news. Flip past the features, the tips, tricks, and top ten lists. No, the true joy of old gaming magazines lies in the advertising. After all, video game advertisements offer a window into how the industry understands its products, its audience, and itself at a specific moment – timestamped snapshots of the medium’s prevailing attitudes and values. Of course, sometimes you stumble across a vintage ad that’s so peculiar it merits further attention. That was certainly the case when I recently encountered a 1999 advertisement for Interplay Entertainment.

At the time, Interplay was enjoying the success of titles like *Fallout* and *Baldur’s Gate*, and I imagine this advert was intended as a victory lap. It features a photo of twelve male game designers sitting around a swimming pool at a palatial estate, purporting to be “Interplay Worldwide Headquarters.” The men are styled and posed identically – wearing all black with matching sunglasses, feet exposed, elbows on their knees, holding bottles of water. In the background, standing poolside with their backs to the camera, are nine blonde, bikini-clad models. Captions identify each of the designers by his latest hit and his next big project. To drive the message home, a banner proclaims, “And on the seventh day, they rested...”

While the swimsuit models are a questionable choice from the vantage point of 2019, their presence in the ad isn’t entirely surprising. After all, if turn-of-the-millennium game advertising was known to dial up the sexualisation and objectification of women, 1999 was arguably the industry’s annus horribilis. It’s also worth noting this was the era of the booth babe, transplanted poolside for this ad from the convention halls of E3 and CES. Even the bizarre, all-in-black styling of the designers – conjuring images of some ritualistic SoCal cult – doesn’t seem so terribly out of place when *The Matrix* was one of the year’s biggest blockbusters.

Instead, what struck me most about the advert was its underlying message about video game authorship.



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Years earlier, Interplay had adopted the corporate philosophy of creating products “by gamers, for gamers,” and that motto appears prominently in the ad. Yet, everything else about the campaign seems to communicate precisely the opposite.

Game designers aren’t like you. They’re rock stars. They’re rich. They live in mansions and hang out by the pool with models. By 1999, an industry that once refused to even credit its developers was now portraying them like gods.

Of course, the idea of the triple-A game designer as an auteur, wholly responsible for the driving vision behind a particular title, is alive and well in 2019. For evidence, look no further than the recent discourse surrounding this controversial (and perhaps mistranslated) tweet from *Metal Gear* designer Hideo Kojima: “A HIDEO KOJIMA GAME means the declaration of me doing concept, produce, original story, script, setting, game design, casting, dealing, directing, difficulty adjustments, promoting, visual design, editing, supervising the merch.” The elevation of game designers to the status of auteurs, while perhaps valuable from a marketing standpoint, downplays the contributions of the dozens or even hundreds of developers working behind the scenes on all aspects of game production. In doing so, we also tend to shine an even brighter spotlight on already powerful men in the industry.

In reality, we know auteurs like Kojima spend about as much time poring over new merchandise designs as the team at Interplay once spent partying with swimsuit models. Yet, the myth of the auteur continues to shape popular perceptions of the game industry, overshadowing the teams of crunching developers still waiting for their day of rest. 🤖



## #26

