

# UFG INTERVIEWS KEVIN SCHARF OF ELASTIC GAMES ABOUT LAST YEAR

COMING SOON

AD SPACE

Coming Soon

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It's a great time to be a survival horror fan. That's the general consensus given the resurgence of the genre over the past seven or eight years. You know, since Amnesia darkened our PCs. I personally don't think that's the case though. Don't get me wrong, there are plenty of great titles being released left and right; Resident Evil 7 and Outlast II come to mind. No, I think the real reason to celebrate comes in the form of asymmetrical horror games – new experiences that try to emulate what inspired this genre in the first place. Horror films.

I suspect that most of the people who gravitated towards survival horror games did so because they liked their big screen counterparts. Speaking for myself, my adoration for George Romero's Night of the Living Dead is what propelled me towards early Resident Evil titles. What's interesting though, is that the game is nothing like the film. Very few are like the movies, despite sharing some of the same elements/themes. That's not the case with games like Last Year. Currently being developed by Elastic Games (a Montreal based, independent development team), Last Year is an asymmetrical game where five players play as a group of high school characters who must survive against one player playing as a killer. The setup is something straight out of an 80/90's slasher catalogue, complete with classic tropes like an omnipresent psycho and teenage angst. It's essentially a game made for me...a personal tribute to someone who knows to stay away from camp sites with shady pasts. At least that's the vibe I got when I spoke with Elastic Games' Marketing Director, Kevin Scharf.

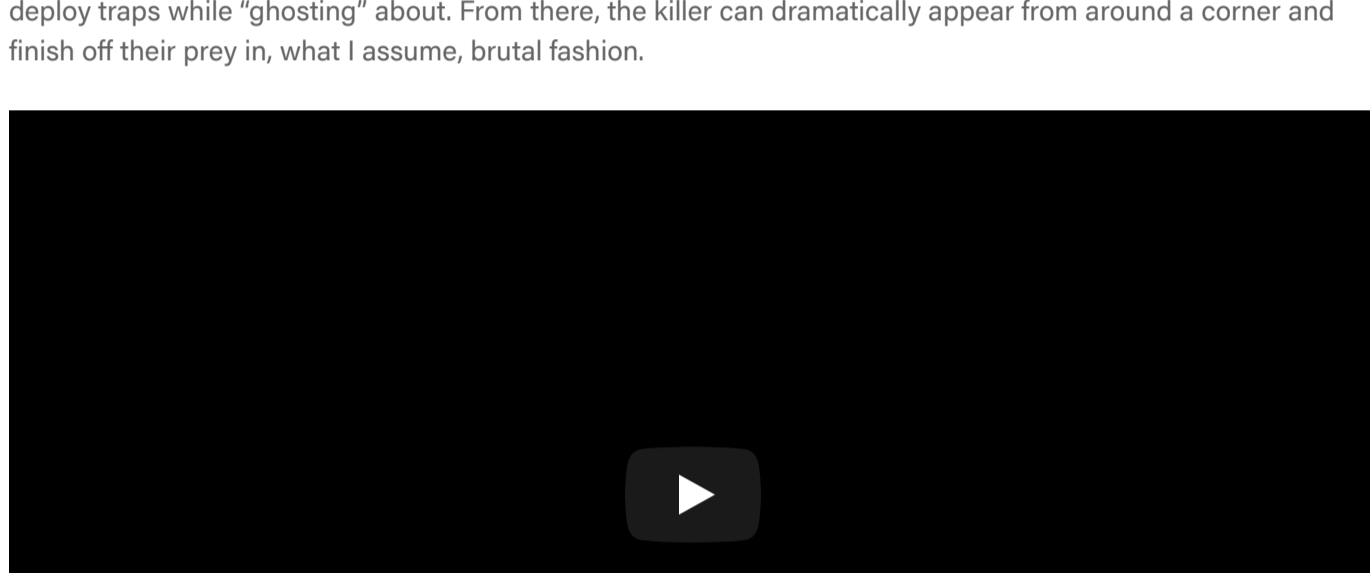


I first realized that Last Year was made for me when Kevin told me what inspired its creation. "It came heavily from horror movies. So things like, Evil Dead, Scream, I know What You Did Last Summer, The Faculty – those kind of movies." He also mentioned Cabin in the Woods, which seemed both out of place and appropriate given how it played on horror stereotypes. Explaining further, he mentioned how his team had "a conversation about [translating] that kind of experience into a game format. The killer has to be threatening, has to be powerful. But at the same time, the people playing against the killer have to have a chance of either escaping or winning."

It needed a human element that was missing before. Having a powerful AI controlled boss character can be great at times. On the other hand, they can prove to be a little too God-like. The xenomorph from Alien: Isolation is a perfect example. While it does track noise and possibly smell, it's knack for hunting isn't totally based on logic; its reluctance to leave an area you're hiding in despite not knowing you were ever there breaks the immersion. Allowing a player to don the shoes of this monster would have fixed that issue. Of course, that's not feasible for a story driven game. It works perfectly for a multiplayer based one though!

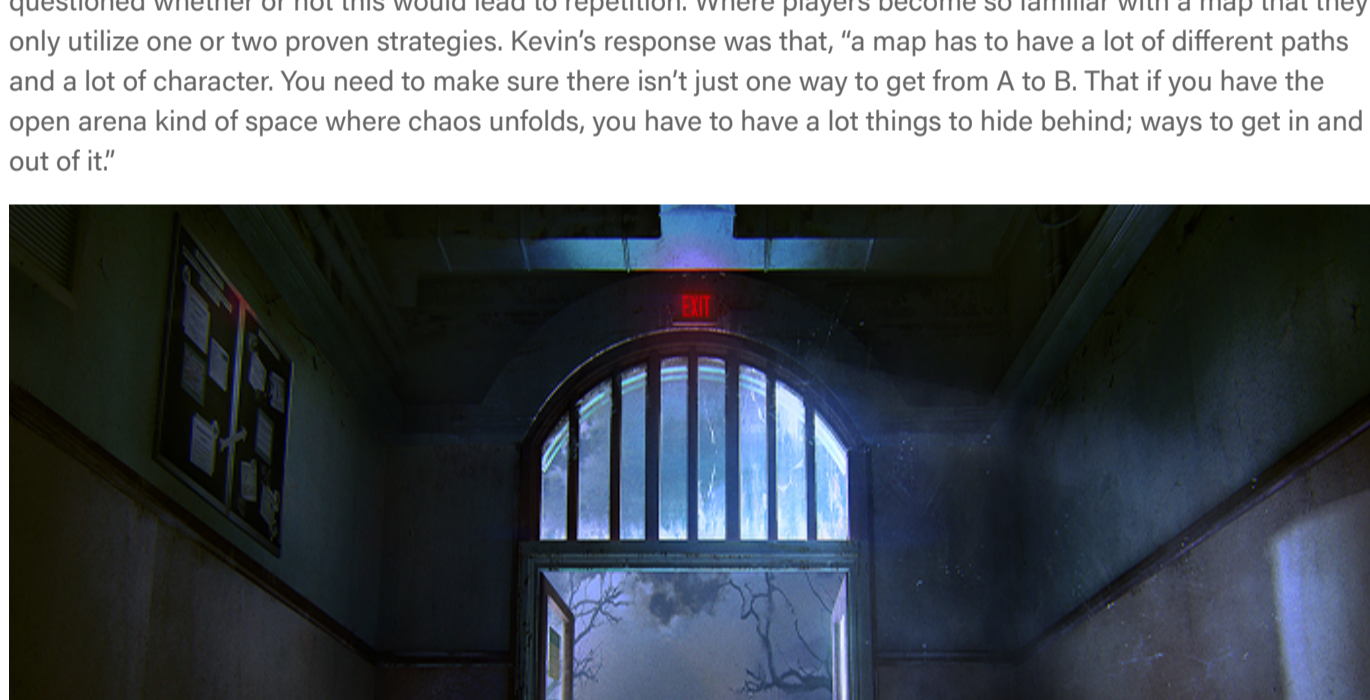


Another reason why Last Year was created for me and not you, is because of the movie-based mechanics. Take the aforementioned omnipresent killer – Elastic found an interesting way of making the player feel like their favorite slasher, popping up on unsuspecting victims at will. "Predator mode for us is to create the effect that the killer is always two steps ahead [like] in the movies." Kevin explained. "It allows the one player playing the killer to navigate the map quickly and plan their kills." This is done by "unspawning" before turning invisible. From this stand point, the killer can zoom about the map to better position him/herself before respawning. "There are limitations. You can't spawn within a certain area around the survivors. This keeps things balanced; players won't be able to just appear behind someone for an easy kill!" Kevin continued by saying that killers couldn't spawn in a survivor's line of sight. To help get the drop on the unsuspecting teenagers, they could deploy traps while "ghosting" about. From there, the killer can dramatically appear from around a corner and finish off their prey in, what I assume, brutal fashion.



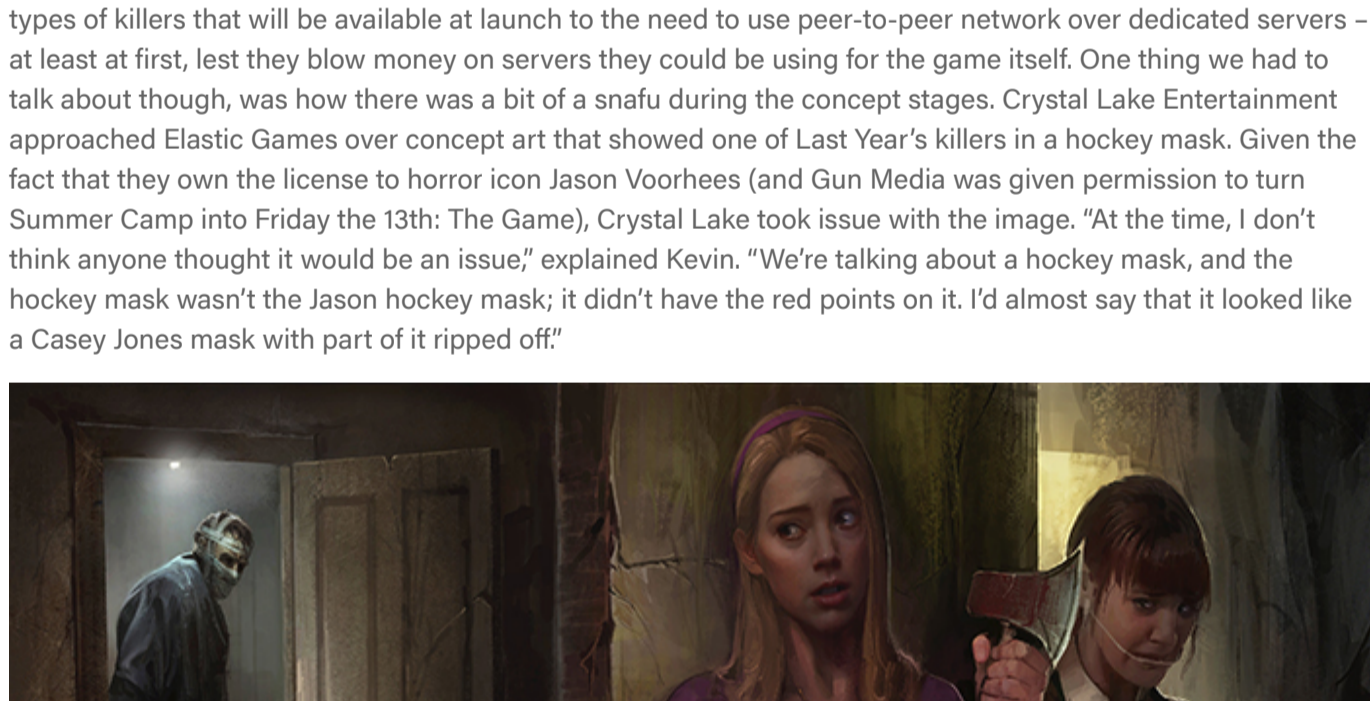
That's not to say that the survivors are easy pickings. At least not all of the time. Kevin told me that "the killer can be killed. We want the players to be able to fight back physically. [They] can get weapons and fight back but it's difficult." Unfortunately, he couldn't elaborate further. Something about not being able to talk about some of the strategies players will be able to use against the killer. He did say that they were going to release a survivor trailer soon that goes deeper into those details though. "...we have a lot of depth to our survivors, our classes. I think people are going to be surprised by that and some really great new stuff that hasn't been seen in the genre before."

I thought it was a little unfair to leave me hanging, considering who this game is for. That said, I was able to glean some information about Last Year's maps. "For us, we feel that your maps are as much as a character as the characters you have in the game," said Kevin. "So, we want you to know every nook and cranny; we want you to know that, that vent leads here. We want players who know shortcuts and then we want players to be in these mind games. Like if I know this shortcut, does the killer know the shortcut? And then we want the killer to be able to jump all over that." From what he was saying, I gathered that the maps are going to be static in nature (not procedural besides maybe weapon/item placement). Elastic's reasoning was sound. Still, I questioned whether or not this would lead to repetition. Where players become so familiar with a map that they only utilize one or two proven strategies. Kevin's response was that, "a map has to have a lot of different paths and a lot of character. You need to make sure there isn't just one way to get from A to B. That if you have the open arena kind of space where chaos unfolds, you have to have a lot things to hide behind; ways to get in and out of it."



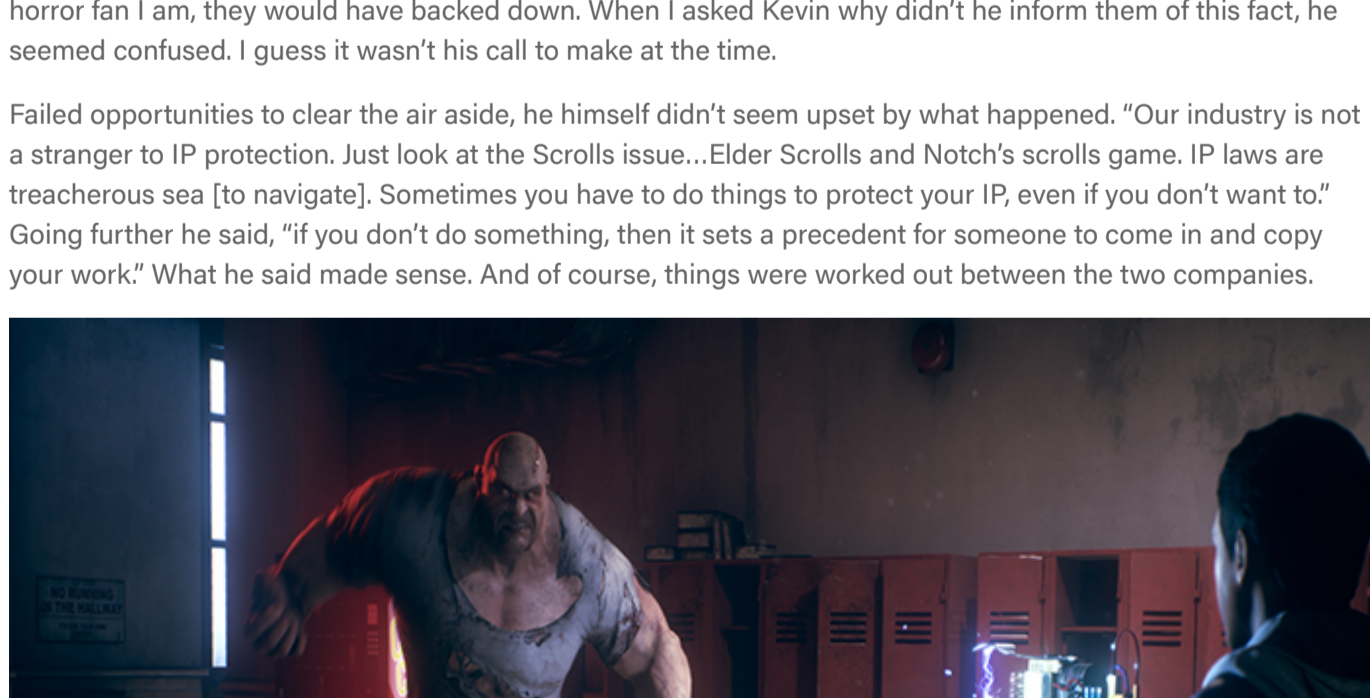
Last Year will feature multiple maps. Some large and some small. Regardless of size, the hope is that the environments will be detailed enough to encourage experimentation. Not only with the players acting as the killer but as the survivors as well. What was refreshing to hear was that all post-launch maps will be free. That's not to say that I got any sort of confirmation about extra content. When asked about it, Kevin stated that he couldn't get into any particulars. "What I can say is that we live in an age of DLC. There will be post[launch] content, a large section of it being stuff we want to polish up or new things the team is working on that might not make the game at launch." He did give one example of something that was being worked on. "One of the guys on the team is experimenting with a nail gun. Nothing may come of it. It's something that we're testing. But because we're still testing it, if it hits a point where this is what's shipping but [the nail gun] is something we're still working on, we'll [later] go 'ok guys, here is a nail gun, you can pick them up!'"

Kevin and I talked for what seemed like hours about Last Year. We went over everything from the different types of killers that will be available at launch to the need to use peer-to-peer network over dedicated servers – at least at first, lest they blow money on servers they could be using for the game itself. One thing we had to talk about though, was how there was a bit of a snafu during the concept stages. Crystal Lake Entertainment approached Elastic Games over concept art that showed one of Last Year's killers in a hockey mask. Given the fact that they own the license to horror icon Jason Voorhees (and Gun Media was given permission to turn Summer Camp into Friday the 13th: The Game), Crystal Lake took issue with the image. "At the time, I don't think anyone thought it would be an issue," explained Kevin. "We're talking about a hockey mask, and the hockey mask wasn't the Jason hockey mask; it didn't have the red points on it. I'd almost say that it looked like a Casey Jones mask with part of it ripped off."



It was supposed to be an homage. "There's so many examples of this in our industry. When you're doing a horror game, where are your references coming from? Their coming from horror movies. Let's take an element from here, take one from there. You're trying to build off of that stuff. Now we didn't have any animosity towards [them]. We thought it was a little bit unfair, but we didn't push it. We had no problem complying. There was no intent to copy something." I found it interesting that Crystal Lake was a bit miffed. I mean, there are plenty of examples of characters wearing a hockey mask as a homage to Jason. Like Namco's Splatterhouse. I chock it up to Crystal Lake not knowing that I was the game's intended recipient; once they realized how much of a horror fan I am, they would have backed down. When I asked Kevin why didn't he inform them of this fact, he seemed confused. I guess it wasn't his call to make at the time.

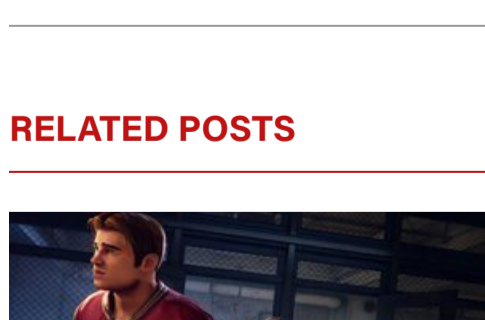
Failed opportunities to clear the air aside, he himself didn't seem upset by what happened. "Our industry is not a stranger to IP protection. Just look at the Scrolls issue...Elder Scrolls and Notch's scrolls game. IP laws are treacherous sea [to navigate]. Sometimes you have to do things to protect your IP, even if you don't want to." Going further he said, "if you don't do something, then it sets a precedent for someone to come in and copy your work." What he said made sense. And of course, things were worked out between the two companies.



I believe **Last Year** is going to be a great game. As long as Elastic does its due diligence when it comes to testing (a backer beta is scheduled for August) and there's enough content to keep players busy as the community grows, it's a shoe in – the unique way they're approaching this concept is worth the attention it's bound to get. As of right now, there's no release date. "We've been very clear to our backers," said Kevin. "We're from the Blizzard school of development; when it's done, it's done. We'd rather have you wait a little bit longer so you get the game that you deserve." Sounds good to me. Of course, I wouldn't be upset if they gave me a copy of Last Year a little early!

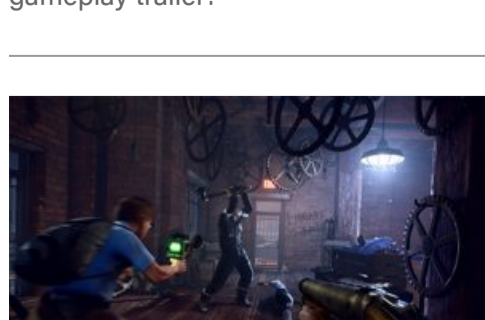
**Editor's Note:** Obviously, Elastic Games didn't risk their careers launching a Kickstarter just to make a game for Kenneth. Even if he is a big fan of the genre...

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