the Escapist

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EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

Have you ever had your boss come into your office and give you one week mandatory vacation? Neither had I ... until this morning. Let's unpack that statement. My Boss, for whom I work, came into my office, where I work and told me to not work for a week. "The decision's been made, so we can discuss it, but it's gonna happen," says he. "I'm not gonna call you, and you are not to check your email for a week."

One week not at work. I don't know what to do for a week not at work. After thinking about it for a few minutes, I realized I haven't taken off more than two days together since starting here over two years ago. Then I promptly realize I'm tired. And then I think about what I've been doing for the last two years.

Launching a magazine is hard work. Launching a weekly magazine that averages 8,000 words per issue is bordering on insanity. It causes things like two years of vacation-less-ness. (Hey! I'm an Editor, I can make up

words.) But the real issue here is, Do I regret it?

No. Why? Really, there are a lot of reasons.

I enjoy it. No, I don't play games all day; that is the myth among journalists covering games, just as it is among those that design games. But I do think about them most of the time in one way or another. And I hear about all kinds of new games from developers, or games I've missed in the past from our writers or editors. Then, there's the weird pleasure I get when an issue comes together really well and just feels good.

Also, and this may seem a stretch to some, I feel like I can **understand** what a developer goes through in making a game. I understand late nights and crunch time – it happens pretty much every Monday night 'round here. I understand on-demand creativity. I understand endless development cycles. Heck, we even use a form of Agile Development – something to do with clear crystals and burning charts? – here in the office to aid in project management.

Last, I think games are growing in significance to society everyday. Whether this importance is simply their rising ubiquity, or as issue 59 "Edu-Gaming" showed, their expanding usefulness, games are becoming the most important form of "entertainment" in the 21st century. As such, we try to cover games, and the stories and people behind them, in a way that befits this importance, and encourage others to do the same. I believe it's an important mission, worth the commitment it demands.

Thinking about my newly-required time off and my work over the past two years, I remember my mom's advice on labor: Do what you love and the compensation will come. This compensation is not always monetary, though. For some, it's an amazing game, critically and popularly acclaimed. For some, it's internal gratification at a project complete. For me, it's Cyril, Seth and Brandy approaching you after a panel to say "thank you" for inspiring them to work harder at writing or games design.

Cheers,

Julianne Greer

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the editor: I have to congratulate your last issue which detailed a variety of stories revolved around educational approaches to gaming. What a fresh, diverse approach to the subject matter. I consistently look to your articles to enlighten, educate and inspire me. So often in a gaming genre periodical the

subject matter only revolves around reviews of the art, gameplay or surface structure of any given game. I appreciate your approach to stepping outside the box to examine the more often overlooked.

Thanks for all the great writing,

- David

In Response to "D&D Therapy" from The Escapist Forum: This is a wonderful article. It demonstrates the incredible power of the anecdotal evidence on our side of the debate, which is probably the ideal counter to the equally anecdotal evidence on the other side of the debate. More, it does so with a balance and a measure that every voice on the anti-gaming side sorely lacks. It will be nice, someday, to have some statistics, but in the meantime it's as least as good to have talented writers like Ms. Lafferty to encourage us in the face of gaming's foes. Thank you, Ms. Lafferty.

- TinPeregrinus

In Response to "Purchase is Participation" from The Escapist Lounge: That's an interesting way to think of being a gamer.

Hmm, after looking at my own view on the subject I see this philosophy of purchase is participation as purchase puts one foot in the door to a community. Actually interacting with the community is what puts your other foot through the door. So while purchase may in some form be participation that person is missing out on the community he/she is claiming to be apart of.

So to someone who only believed in this philosophy I would say you have a lot of open doors waiting for you to walk through.

- Lex Darko

In Response to "Learning the Gaming Way" from The Escapist Forum: After reading this article and the Australian article linked in the text, I bought a DS Lite and copy of *Brain Age* for my mother. She is forgetful sometimes and is afraid of Alzheimer's

almost to the point of phobia. She likes playing Sudoku and word games, and she does some gaming of that nature on her iBook, but finds it a little heavy to be as portable as she'd like. I think the DS Lite with its bright screens and simple interface, will hit the spot.
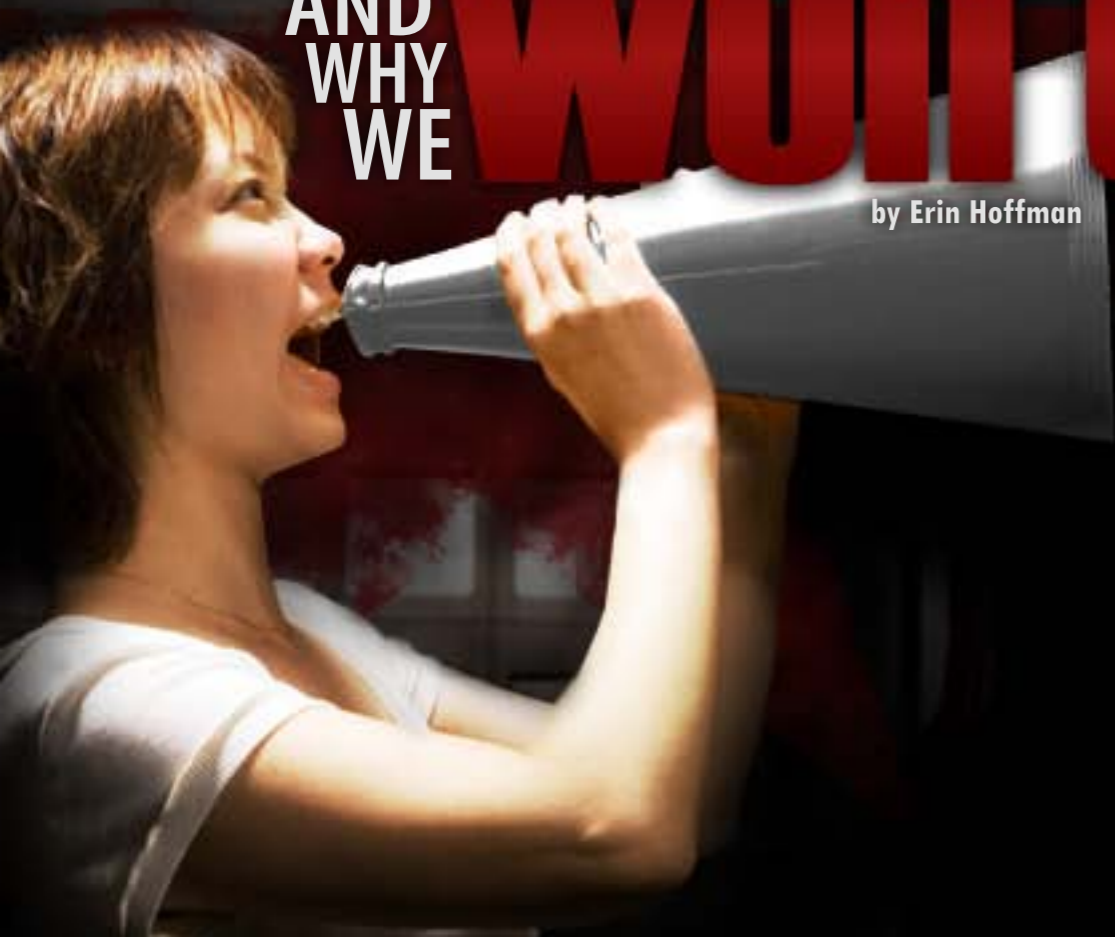
- Ajar

WHY WE HAVEN'T lapsed - AND WHY WE won't

by Erin Hoffman

Like any cultural phenom, the game industry waxes and wanes. Its attitude shifts, it grows older, gets pimples, passes some classes and fails others, grows, moves on. The past year, for whatever primal reason lurking in the dark waters of the collective ludological unconsciousness, has been one of intense cynicism, maybe even despair. And I have to say I'm getting damned tired of it.

Some of this is personal. I feel a bit of specific onus because my existential wail into the ether exposed one of the industry's most long-festering and serious ills, and it seemed that right after developers woke up from the deathmarch mindset and started to turn in a new direction – a really positive and terrific thing that's been a joy to observe – all of this gnashing of teeth kicked up again.

There was a gloom at this year's GDC that hadn't shown its face in years. Rather than being a rallying cry for growth and change, the "Game Developers' Rant" had too much genuine bitterness, too much fear, to spark drive or any real discussion. I heard veteran developers mutter that the industry really was on its way out. And don't even get me started on Chris Crawford. His reiteration of an old schtick about the death of videogames made me wonder where he was for *Katamari Damacy*, *Trauma Center* – or, hell, the entire Nintendo DS as a system – or *Shadow of the Colossus*. Was *Patton Versus Rommel* **really** embodying creative innovation in a way these games weren't? I get a little misty reminiscing on the *Zork* days of yore once in a while, too, but come on. I respect Crawford as an original gamemaker, a fine mind and a skillful game technician from ages past, but he's wrong. He's dead wrong.

The game industry is alive and well, and it ain't going anywhere. Neither, for that matter, are many of the developers. Some of the best and brightest people I have ever met work – present tense – in the game industry. The golden lure that yanked me away from graduate school and into games had nothing to do with the "glamour" or any idiotic pipe dream about fame and fortune – it had to do with the people.

But we are bleeding talent at a horrendous rate. This is the real

bogeyman for the actual development of games, and it is a big problem that brilliant, creative students are taking one look at industry working conditions and making a bee line for Microsoft. One of the caps on all of the recent doomsaying was another blog that hit the shared internet mind: Danc's "Joyful Life of a Lapsed Game Developer." Man, talk about a downer.

But it pissed me off, too. I'm more than familiar with all of this stuff. Cancelled projects, corporate espionage, vicious and psychotic publishers, unrealistic deadlines, nervous breakdowns, milestones squeaked by thanks entirely to chemical substances of questionable toxicity and legality – been there, done that. I have **seen shit**. And it isn't acceptable. But despite these crazy conditions, I'm not going anywhere, and I'm not alone. Like cinema, democracy and rock 'n' roll, we're here to stay, because the current age is one of the most exciting times for game development in all its brief history.

Acres and Acres
There is a saying in fiction writing that every would-be author has several

hundred pages of crap prose that has to be processed out of the mind before the "real" writing can begin. I think that this holds true for any creative practice and for every new medium. While it's certainly true that games of old have had more than a brush with greatness, they also provide a foundation for expansion into a true renaissance and awakening of the potential of games as a medium – a pixelated enlightenment, if you will.

A few major recent events have laid the groundwork: expanded game audiences, fertile environments for indie development and alternative vectors for game delivery.

Over the past three years, games have made amazing forays into new audiences. (**Dude**, you mean **women** can like **games**?) And the primary audience base is only expanding; games are predicted to reach 61 percent of American households by 2007. And they can only keep growing as the "gamer" generation advances into adulthood. Asia has already advanced ahead into the stratosphere of game demographic penetration, and cross-pollination of international development continues to increase.

As our audience expands and stabilizes, so too does our innovation. We are approaching the threshold where a game can have meaning, exhibit social context **and** be compelling. The fact is that innovation is not as simple as just doing something that's never been done before. That's where innovation **starts**. It blooms when the result is art, immersion and a firing of synapses rarely used. Our version of "compelling" is something no other media specializes in: We make things fun. Without relying on the sawing of heartstrings, games can convey ideas critical to the human condition. This is a unique and powerful thing! And it is a perfect breeding ground for innovation – **real** innovation.

Of the shockingly large American audience, over 40 percent play games online. This surge in online play is scaring Wall Street and invigorating developers. The growth of the mainstream lamented by Greg Costikyan in 2005 has opened the door for independents. Steam is shaking up the distribution world, and we live in a time where a Flash game can make a really big splash and a game development university senior thesis can become a

We are approaching the threshold where a game can have meaning, exhibit social context and be compelling.

the escapist

the escapist lounge

Kick back, share your thoughts and

experience even more of what you love

at the official blog for the magazine!

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cult phenomenon **and** Game of the Year. Life is good.

Add to all of this research that shows videogames can suppress pain, inspire hard work and heal the mind, even promote world peace, and, ladies and gentlemen, we are in good shape.

The "Lapse" Effect

Yet, the industry loses talent at a completely disgraceful rate. Most of these "lapsed" developers leave within their first year. While that's a testament to our need to provide greater preparation and more competitive working conditions, a quick reality check is also helpful.

The game industry isn't alone in workforce fluidity (or burnout, actually).

Games are creative. The creative process isn't for everyone. If developers are leaving within their first year, how many of those are doing so just because the work isn't right for them? Everybody's different, but I'd be willing to bet that many of those heading for the hills after only a single project cycle aren't doing so because of burnout; statistically, burnout tends to take somewhere around two to three years to kick in.

The game industry also isn't alone in workforce fluidity (or burnout, actually). The U.S. government boasts an average service length of 17 years, but acknowledges that even this number is decreasing in recent times. The private sector averages three years spent with a single company. Part of the point of trying out a new career is seeing if it fits. Sometimes it doesn't. The U.S. economy, at least, has adapted to a new standard where employees don't stick around for the long haul. This certainly has its ups and downs, and, again, games **do** need to do a much better job of retaining talent, but some of this is just normal.

Speaking to Danc's article, his 50,000-strong army of development ex-pats is indeed a scary number. But how many "lapsed" Hollywood actors are there in the U.S.? Could we even count them? "Lapsed" rock stars? The problem with taking a full headcount on the number of people that have left the industry is that many wind up in the game industry with stars in their eyes and have to go through a difficult period when their illusions are shattered. No one dreams of being an insurance salesman, so the disillusionment (though, by the numbers, not the workforce loss) is less.

Make no mistake, I'll be the last one to excuse the industry for its sins, but I'm also not going to stand for all-out mutiny founded on flimsy reasoning. If the industry is hurting, it's up to us to heal it, not shrug and start writing bank software for better pay. Sure, I'd love to be making the big bucks, and it's a choice I could have made. Some years back, I was offered the chance to apprentice under a stockbroker at a major investment firm. I turned it down, and as my uncle said, you can make money or you can be happy. And if you're in it for the money, what the hell are you doing attempting something creative, anyway?

Show me the Money

But we are a commercial enterprise. A big part of what's purchased the industry its expanded audience and great uplift of mass market – leaving those delicious innovation niches beneath to be filled by independent companies and hobbyists – is the industry's transition to a state that attracts the attention of the bulls and bears.

But all is not well on those gray pages. In recent months, economists have flooded the collective Wall Street mind with gloom and doom for the game industry.

I assert that we shouldn't care.

The astute might notice that I am not what you would call partial to the welfare of the game industry's respective Wal-Marts and Targets. However, I am fond of that undergrowth region they shade. Part of the curse and blessing of those

big companies is that it is highly unlikely that they could actually topple anytime soon. Some suits might lose money, but those monoliths aren't going anywhere. Trust me: They're big enough to take care of themselves. That stability leaves investors with secondary concerns: the console gap, the rise of downloadable and online games (those alternative vectors), and a slowdown in industry growth.

Let's replay that in slow motion: Investors are running scared **because of opportunity**. They're getting nervy because the big engine of repetitive content is slowing down, because even the big guys are starting to realize that gaming audiences want something new. They want better practices and better games. This might be a bad thing for Wall Street, but it sure as hell isn't for developers or gamers. And that brings us to ...

New Horizons

Fear not, I'm not going to go all Buddhist on you, but everything exists in a dualistic balance. Just when you think that it can't get any darker, the sun starts to rise.

And it's rising. We're slowly but surely starting to discover – you might want to sit down for this one – management science. We're starting to get a glimmer that we might want to put the same energy into learning people management that we put into developing cel shaders. This concept isn't new. But we're starting to listen at last. Personal Software Process, Team Software Process, Agile Development, advanced tools and automation; the new choir of angels to sing us on our way. Game development as a whole is now bringing in techniques from other industries, bending and realizing that we might be special, but we're not **that** special.

We also already have a lot to be thankful for. A good game industry job is one of the most flexible, rewarding, creative, efficient and energizing working opportunities on the planet. A lot of us work for the big guys, but just as many work for sleek and agile little companies that, when well-piloted, have the flexibility to switch on a dime, employ a new dev process, try a new idea, actually **listen** to employees (in fact, we kind of bridle at being called "employees" – we're "talent," thank you very much).

I am not what you would call partial to the welfare of the game industry's respective Wal-Marts and Targets. However, I am fond of that undergrowth region they shade.

Our maverick environment, one that rewards new ideas and gives quantitative and qualitative feedback for individual hard work, attracts some of the most brilliant, coppery-idealistic, good-hearted, strong-willed people in the world. I can look around my office and see radical tattoos, *Voltron* action figures, Duct Tape and Starbucks coffee cups – try finding **that** at IBM.

In fact, most of our quality of life problems actually come from the fact that working is generally so much damned fun. This, too, is a double-edged sword.

Lifeclocks
We can't leave the issue of life in the game industry without a treatment on quality of life. And it is critical that our energy continue to focus there, not for any flimsy rationale involving, you know, physical longevity and mental stability for developers – nothing so **minor** – but because games need to keep getting better. Our lifeblood is creativity, and creativity can't exist in a vacuum.

This means that we need to restrain our creative id and actually go outside once in awhile. We need to think, learn, absorb, grow. If you can't do it for your arteries, do it for the games.

In order to maintain innovation, we also need to stop treating our veterans so poorly. Remember that bit about hundreds of pages of crap? It's critical. The guys and gals who have gotten that out of their system are inexpressibly more efficient at solving problems and substantially more prone to come up with game designs that haven't been tried before. (OK, maybe it can be expressed: The IGDA Quality of Life White Paper estimates that a team with two years' average experience and 10 percent turnover costs the publisher 50 percent more and is 75 percent less likely to deliver on time than a team with 10 years' average experience and 2 percent turnover.) Ageism is a plague in this industry, and we need to stop driving out the bearers of hard-won wisdom. This, too, is a problem not limited to the game industry, but it is one we should be smart enough to solve.

Bright Futures
I understand the cynicism; believe me, I do. The world is becoming an increasingly frightening place. But I would argue that it is time for despair to end and for action to begin. We all need a boot to the head every once in awhile, a jolt to wake us up and remind us that the pendulum is ready to swing the other way. And baby, it is **swinging**.

So, buck up, my dears. Fix the problems, but remember why you're here. I'll see you next year at GDC; I'll be the one with the red palm jewel. `COMMENTS`

Erin Hoffman is a professional game designer, freelance writer, and hobbyist troublemaker. She moderates Gamewatch.org and fights crime on the streets by night.

Most of our quality of life problems actually come from the fact that working is generally so much damned fun.

The Wideload Way

Wideload Games makes a game of outsourcing

by Allen Varney

Game publishers offer an interesting incentive plan: "Work like a slave for two or three years to ship this game, and as a reward, we'll fire you." It's a morbid joke among artists, animators and quality assurance testers. The bulk of game production nowadays requires a large team of 90 to 150-plus people, but as soon as the game ships – or anyway, after the first couple of patches – there's seldom a good business reason to keep the team together. Did you break new ground, maybe help create an instant classic? Yeah, great job. Buh-bye!

Sure, if the company is lucky and foresighted enough to have another project well-along in development, at exactly the stage where it needs bodies, individual employees can move over. (That's assuming they're a good fit. Maybe the guys who just spent 18 months designing spaceships don't necessarily want to texture orc armor.)

But for a small studio, with only enough resources to handle one game at a time, "transition" equals "layoffs." The early stages of a new project – concept art, placeholder code, design docs and blue-sky brainstorming – work best with small teams. So the execs fire everyone else, until it's time to ramp up once more. If they try to reassemble the same bunch later, guess what? Everyone has scattered to other jobs. It's just one more way the industry is broken.

Yes, this does affect you, the player. It isn't a studio that makes the games you love, it's a studio team. Whether or not the studio stays in business, the practice of "ship and lay off" means the team, that irreplaceable combination of talent, is gone. Whether or not you know it, this has already affected you, and will again.

But there is another way to make games, one not only less disruptive than the current cut-and-run model, but also cheaper, faster and more efficient: the Wideload way.

In-House Design, Outsourced Production

Alexander Seropian co-founded Bungie Software with programmer Jason Jones in 1991, during his senior year as a Math major at the University of Chicago. Their early releases, the complicated multiplayer action fantasy game *Minotaur* and a spin-off called *Pathways*

into Darkness, were modest successes. With the *Marathon* and *Myth* series, Bungie became the leading Macintosh game developer, for what that's worth.

Actually, it turned out to be worth a lot: After starting *Halo*, the founders sold out to Microsoft in 2000. Flush with funds, Seropian left Microsoft in 2002, returned to Chicago and soon grew bored. In 2003, with half a dozen other Bungie alumni, he started Wideload Games.

From day one, from the ground up, Wideload was built to implement a new method for producing games. It sprang from a set of commandments Seropian outlined in a talk at the Game Developers Conference in March 2006:

1. Establish your own creative direction.
2. Own your intellectual property.
3. Be no one's bitch.
4. Keep your overhead low.

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Number 4 led to the Wideload approach: Design the game in-house, then outsource the entire production. In a *Newcity Chicago* interview with Mike Schramm in November 2005, Seropian explained:

"To make a game these days, if you want to do a console game with some story and depth to it, it takes a lot of people. And that's really where all the expense is." Most of the idea work (as opposed to the production) is done by "above-the-line" talent. "The big idea with Wideload is that that's who we are," says Seropian. "We're the above-the-line talent. We're the guys who are coming up with the idea, fleshing it out, getting the technology that's going to drive it, designing, prototyping, getting the project into production." And everyone else necessary to make the game is hired contractually. "And that's a very, very different way of doing a game than has ever really been done before."

The Wideload method's strength lies in its low burn rate. "If the team is small, the overhead is low," Seropian wrote in a *Game Developer* magazine postmortem. "Time equals money, so

low overhead gives you lots more time to experiment and prototype (good for originality). Additionally, every project starts small and ends big. But if you think of each project as a cycle of life, your company goes extinct pretty quickly when you have 75 people wrapping a project and then you only need ten or so to start the next one. Staying small was the key."

Wideload's first project was the comedy-horror Xbox game *Stubbs the Zombie in Rebel Without a Pulse*, released by Aspyr Media for Halloween 2005. Production took 18 months. Wideload's own 11-person staff handled the game code, level design and writing, but everything else was outsourced. Principal contractors included The Animation Farm in Austin, Texas; audio and post-production by Post Effects in Chicago; a motion capture studio in Chicago's Hoffman Estates; and an art production house in Bangalore, India. Aspyr created the inventive *Stubbs* soundtrack, which restyles '50s pop standards as acidulous modern rock. (The game also features a malevolent barbershop quartet.)

Seropian tells *The Escapist*, "We contracted out character modeling,

environment modeling, motion capture and animation, sound effects, music and voiceover, 2-D art for user interface, and the shell programming. Some of the contractors were individuals that we worked with previously at Bungie. Some were art outsourcing or post-production houses. Most were in the U.S., but two firms were overseas. In total, about 65 people [who were] not [full-time employees] of Wideload worked on *Stubbs*."

Does It Work?

Yes. An original and atmospheric game built on the Halo engine, *Stubbs the Zombie* received good reviews, though many thought it too short. *Stubbs* has sold well enough to fund Wideload's next project, as yet unannounced. The company will use the same method for that game.

"When I did the budget analysis prior to beginning production on *Stubbs*, I projected a 35 percent cost savings compared to staffing up with full-time positions," Seropian says. "However, we did have a schedule overrun of four months. Because of our low-overhead/

outsourced production approach, we were able to hit our budget in spite of the delays. In hindsight, I expect our model saved us 45 percent on the production budget." He expects to realize similar or greater benefits on the new project.

But the Wideload way has a learning curve. *Stubbs the Zombie* had no producer, and that caused trouble. They had trouble getting accurate bids from contractors, trouble with underperforming workers, trouble training artists to use the engine. "The big point here is that our model works best when the iteration process is as efficient as possible. That means the cycle of assignment-production-submission-review-revision is really clean and tight. When you start dividing that process among people in different places using different tools, it can get cumbersome. We gained great efficiency once we got everyone using the same communication tools, production tools and previewing tools.

"If you are going to have contributors spread out in different locations, it's

In total, about 65 people [who were] not [full-time employees] of Wideload worked on *Stubbs.*

critical to have communication and production tools optimized for non-face-to-face work flow. That means you need to be super-organized and over-communicate. You need tools to preview and share ideas and direction. The outsourced model also requires different skills. For instance, artistic talent alone will not get you good results. Managing contractors takes management and direction skills you can't afford to be lazy about."

History Doesn't Quite Repeat Itself, But It Rhymes
You know who's reading this and saying, "So what's new?" Everyone in the movie business.

Hollywood makes every theatrical release the way Wideload makes games. A relatively small production company conceives a film project, gets a studio to greenlight it and then assembles a production team on the instant, a whole special-purpose company with hundreds or even thousands of short-term contractors. The enterprise exists long enough to complete the one project, then disbands.

You know who's reading this and saying, "So what's new?" Everyone in the movie business.

The film industry enjoys a huge, free-floating population of highly skilled technicians as well as standardized working arrangements and a common culture. The game industry is still in early days in these respects, but it has key advantages over film: Few of a game's creators need be in the same location, and they are all, pretty much by definition, heavily networked. The Wideload way requires a broad spectrum of web tools. Seropian says, "We rely on IM [instant messaging], source control like Perforce or [Visual] SourceSafe, a visually-oriented game engine with easy previewing capability (i.e. artists can preview their work in-engine before

submitting) and also a Wiki for organizing and sharing ideas.

"I think our work flow, process and philosophy can work for both small and large projects. We've used it on a multi-million dollar project like *Stubbs* and also on smaller projects. The biggest hurdle for a developer or publisher to start working this way is simply culture. Groups with a DIY [do-it-yourself] mentality find it difficult to trust and respect outside contributors."

Now Seropian is trusting contributors from way outside the gaming field. As a partner in the media company Spectrum

MediaWorks, Seropian has helped create a multimedia property with the working title *X Quest. X Quest* is a reality TV show produced by Ron Howard's Imagine Entertainment airing next year on Fox TV, and *X Quest* is also an MMOG for next-gen consoles and mobile phones that ties into the TV show. Players will interact with cast members, and events in each medium will affect the other.

How does Seropian find time to run two companies? Does the efficiency of the Wideload way make it possible? "I am working with some really talented people at Wideload and Spectrum both. That makes things doable for me personally on a creative and production level. Yes, our production method at Wideload is efficient, but what makes it possible for me to be involved in multiple projects is the outstanding people I have the good fortune to be teamed with." [☞ COMMENTS]

Allen Varney designed the PARANOIA paper-and-dice roleplaying game (2004 edition) and has contributed to computer games from Sony Online, Origin, Interplay and Looking Glass.

Who really makes videogames

by John Szczepaniak

For some time now, I've dwelled on who actually makes the games we play. Because, despite being a videogame journalist, I don't always know who is responsible for them. (The same goes for several of my colleagues and friends.) But I'd never really felt so out of touch as I did when a colleague pointed out a Gamasutra interview with developers TOSE Software. As Gamasutra put it, they're "the biggest developer you've never heard of." It explained a great deal about the fantastic *Starfy* series (which regrettably seems destined to never be released in the Western hemisphere). My colleague explained that while he knew TOSE had been involved, he never realized to what extent, simply assuming it was "another fun Nintendo game."

TOSE's websites give little away, cryptically stating, "We've worked on more than 1,000 console titles for 26 years (TOSE Group). … We had always been in the shadow to support most main game publisher [*sic*] worldwide." They also have around 750 staff (more than 1,000 when you consider international studios). Some describe them as Japan's biggest developer and also a "ghost company" which bizarrely

doesn't want credit for work and refuses to divulge which games it has worked on.

After sending out explorative tentacles to discover more about their mysterious 1,000 games, I was greeted by an almost frantic email from another journalist who requested his name be kept secret. "I've been doing quite a bit of 'developer research' over the past year. There's a number of companies you've never heard of (like ISCO and Aisystem Tokyo) that have created numerous games you own." He then provided links to a Japanese website listing over 100 games associated with TOSE. Translating the list, I discovered they were connected to multiple *Final Fantasy*, *Biohazard* and *Dragon Quest* games (including *DQVIII*), not to mention *Metal Gear: Ghost Babel* on the Game Boy Color. My source was quick to point out, though, the list didn't state whether they were responsible for full development or only a section of the game (e.g.: art assets). Admittedly, most games were also cross-system ports; the PAL PS1 versions of *Final Fantasy IV* through *VI* even list "Porting: Tose Co., Ltd" in the manual. But this doesn't change the fact that TOSE has

left its mark on games **everyone** has played. Their clients include Nintendo, Sega, Sony, Capcom, Konami, Square-Enix and even EA.

It then dawned on me: Few know the real truth about who creates videogames.

This subject is bigger than and goes beyond just TOSE. Not knowing who makes our games has been (and I emphasize this) a **problem** since the Atari days. Warren Robinett's easter egg in *Adventure* was the only way he could take credit for his work, because publishers back then took sole credit for a game's creation; later on, he formed Activision to combat that mentality. And things began changing slowly: Companies like Electronic Arts originally championed those behind the games. As Trip Hawkins explained, "One of my mantras is, 'Creativity is the rearranging of the old in a new way.' My reference points for EA were Hollywood for product development, and the record business for promotion and distribution. **I wanted to treat developers as artists**."

Over the years, and with more games being developed in Japan, this mentality of public recognition dwindled. It must also be noted with bitter irony that for a medium which is forever debated as being "art," the people behind it seldom get the acknowledgement deserved. For example, take a big publisher like Rockstar. The *GTA* series is actually developed in Scotland, by Rockstar North. It is shocking how many people you'll find who think it's actually an American-developed series.

Such mistakes are constantly made. On a popular forum for classic games, someone posted a poll asking people who their favorite developers were. After several replies, most people had in fact been listing the publisher behind their favorite games; they embarrassingly admitted to not knowing who the developers were, and seldom paid attention to such details. Publisher names take prominence on box covers, and so unsurprisingly people often get confused and misplace their adulation. Magazines also make appalling errors. I recently read a reflective article on *Bushido Blade,* **developed by Light Weight** and **published by Square**. It was agonizing, since while the statistics box clearly stated the developer's name, the author of the piece bizarrely insisted

For a medium which is forever debated as being "art," the people behind it seldom get the acknowledgement deserved.

on writing about **Square** as if they were the **developer**.

There is an antithesis to this, though, in the form of independent videogames. These are mostly free of constraints and don't require massive publishers or sections of development to be outsourced to anonymous and "cost effective" third parties. I pitched questions on outsourcing and crediting to prolific indie figure Greg Costikyan, of Manifesto Games. "Outsourcing is more often used for ports, [but] the waters are somewhat muddied in cases when a publisher who owns the right to a franchise or license goes to a third party with a clear idea of what they want developed. Even in such cases, however, the point should be that people make games, not corporations. Games, like film, are created in a collaborative fashion by many talents. (Except, of course, in the case of products that are

[mostly] one-man operations, like, say, the original *Roller Coaster Tycoon*, or, at the indie fringe, Dan Marshall's *Gibbage*.) Thus, as with film, we need to develop a culture that understands the collaborative nature of the form. One of the things Manifesto will be doing at launch is, where we can discover the information, including with all listings the four talents I view as critical in

development: lead designer, technical lead, art director and lead producer."

A good example of farming out franchises is *Metroid Prime* – it wasn't developed by Nintendo, but rather Texas-based Retro Studios. But speak to the uninitiated, and they'll happily proclaim it as one of **Nintendo's** best. Another example is *Ecco the Dolphin* – it's not a classic Sega game at all! It was developed by Novotrade International (now Appaloosa Interactive), a company founded in Hungary; clearly listed on the title screen, but again, it's surprising how many don't realize this. Finally, how many paid attention to *Advance Wars* on the GBA and noticed that it was developed by Intelligent Systems? How

many also know that previously, Hudson Soft had been involved with making some iterations of Nintendo's *Wars* series, including the unreleased N64 version? Then, of course, there was the Gamecube version by U.K.-based Kuju Entertainment. This makes for around a dozen titles with at least four separate companies being involved! No wonder Joe Public has trouble keeping up.

Costikyan continued, "Surely the press has some responsibility in this matter? When you go to any random website, are they more likely to credit the developer or the publisher? Clearly, publishers have a common interest in not making 'stars' either of studios or individuals, since that gives them greater negotiating leverage; but it mystifies me why the game press doesn't try to get behind this more often. Attaching people to a story humanizes it and makes it more interesting, and for all the honors we heap on the likes of Wright or Meier or Miyamoto, there are plenty of interesting and articulate developers everywhere in the field. Mind you, PR reps certainly try to 'control the message' and avoid connecting journalists with actual people (other than publisher 'spokespersons'),

but perhaps our journalists should make more of an effort to penetrate the crap and get to the reality? If nothing else, a developer is less likely to be guarded and keen on perpetuating the usual wafflespeak that passes for marketing in this industry, and is therefore likelier to make better copy." Speaking to someone who on a daily basis has to wade through the swamp that is PR liaising, Costikyan makes a rousing point.

Having outside companies work with established intellectual property creating (or porting) **entire** games is nothing new - TOSE was formed in 1979, and most of its work deals with other companies' IP. But the outsourcing of separate project sections **is** relatively new, starting around the time when CDs were introduced, and suddenly games were requiring additional, not to mention expensive, audio and animation.

I was fortunate enough to speak with the always affable Dale DeSharone. Quite the pioneer, he not only dealt with Nintendo franchises when developing the *Link* and *Zelda* games for Philips' CDi, but he also dabbled extensively with outsourcing in Eastern Europe. I asked

him to explain the genesis of his Eastern connections, which formed in partnership with a Russian friend and colleague, Igor Razboff. "Igor and I got together and talked about what type of business we could start in St. Petersburg. I had seen numerous animated films coming out of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. So I thought, 'Well, we could probably do animation over there.'" At first, they simply brought half a dozen Russian animators over to Massachusetts in the U.S., put them up in an apartment and had them create the animated cinemas for the *Link* and *Zelda* games. This helped with the limited budget and worked so well, they expanded operations. "We formed Animation Magic. That was both U.S. and the studio in St. Petersburg, [which] grew to about 150 people. And we had not only animators, but engineers and 2-D game artists. We were also starting to get into 3-D animation. It worked out [to be] a pretty smooth process. Igor, of course, spoke Russian and would talk to them on the phone everyday. He and I would both travel over there once every two months. With that studio, we were working on *Warcraft Adventures: Lord of the Clan*.

Which was almost finished and then never published. Almost all of that was done in St. Petersburg."

With the setback of having a completed title go unreleased, DeSharone explained how he eventually moved on to creating solely art assets for other games. "The old studio in St. Petersburg was sold to the Blizzard guys, and I decided to start a new company by myself, without a partner, in 1997. So that's when I went to Kiev and started Boston Animation. The current studio is over in Kiev, and right now we're mostly creating artwork for other [companies'] games. We've done quite a bit of artwork for Sony Online, for their *EverQuest I* and *II*, and *Star Wars* games. And … we're doing a lot of work which I can't really talk about."

Behind such events, though, make for melancholy reading. "Games are just getting **huge**, and I think that's part of why our transition is concentrating mostly on artwork, in terms of our offshore studio. To put an entire triple-A game together … requires so much money and such a huge team these days." A common and sad tale in

videogames: It's more affordable to farm out development of games, or sections of them, to other smaller companies. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, and companies like TOSE and Boston Animation are successful, but that doesn't mean consumers should be lax when it comes to knowing who is responsible for games.

If the videogame medium is ever to be taken seriously, to evolve and develop to its full potential, to move beyond the "production line" image it has, it is imperative that people start taking an interest in who is actually responsible for the games they like. So, the next time you play one, look past the splash screen and read the credits, because someone, often anonymous, invested a huge chunk of their life into something you enjoy.

COMMENTS

John Szczepaniak is a South African freelance videogame writer with a preference for retro games. He is also a staff member on the Retro Survival project, which contains articles on retro gaming and is well worth investigating.

> "I had seen numerous animated films coming out of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. So I thought, 'Well, we could probably do animation over there.'"

Working in games

by Dana Massey

Television ads tell people they can make money playing videogames. Sounds like a dream job, right? The truth is, making games is a job like any other. It takes a lot of work and probably won't make you rich.

"Just because you talk about elves all day doesn't mean you aren't working - negotiating, documenting, planning and researching," said Sanya Weathers, the Director of Community Relations for Fairfax, Virginia's EA Mythic.

In recent years, the price of creating a videogame has skyrocketed. Like many industries, what was once a one-man job now requires dozens of full-time developers, the backing of major corporations and, according to a recent report on GameDaily BIZ, as much as a $25 million budget.

"Designer" is the most sought-after position. These are the people who invent games. At their core, designers are responsible for making things fun. Yet, getting there requires a lot of tedium.

"I don't play the game all day long while I'm at work," said Jen Ortiz, a designer on EA Mythic's *Dark Age of Camelot*.

"Seriously, I'm usually [too] buried in Excel sheets, product quality reports, poll results, team lead reports, emails and document writing of my own to even look at the game at work."

The computer science department of any university is chock-full of kids who say they would love to program games. Once again, the reality is not that different from any other job.

"A game company runs exactly the same as any software company," said Steve Pope, a Software Engineer at EA in Burnaby, British Columbia. He explained how only the end product differs. The work that goes in is much the same in any software field.

Sometimes, the role of producer is promoted as a good target for those who are not artists or programmers. The producers run the ship, keep things balanced and, while they may not be the masters of any aspect of gaming, they are often veterans who fully understand the realities and interplay of them all.

"I manage project senior staff to ensure high-level teamwork and effectiveness," explained Daron Stinnett, the Executive

Producer of Perpetual Entertainment's upcoming *Star Trek Online*. "I set overall project direction and, when necessary, make decisions between conflicting goals." Stinnett also explained how the producer must be aware of the market as a whole to make sure that the vision of his team stays in line with what the average gamer wants.

Despite the growth of the game industry over the last few years, paychecks are also not quite what people expect.

"People also think we're all rich. In reality, we make less money than we would [by] doing the same job anywhere else," said Weathers. She went on to explain how the sheer popularity of the industry means that game companies can offer candidates less money than competitors – such as the government – who have less desirable job descriptions. Most game industry professionals across all job categories echoed Weathers.

"I could make more money, live in areas with a better cost of living, and work less in another industry," says Stephen House, a Software Engineer who works for game titan EA in Los Angeles. "It's

Despite the growth of the game industry over the last few years, paychecks are not quite what people expect.

fair, no doubt, but I turned down money to be here."

The average entry-level programmer in 2005 was paid $52,989. According to a similar report on the mainstream from *Computerworld*, a low-level mainstream system programmer started at $59,658 in **2001**.

Programming is also far and away the highest paid entry-level position in the game industry. New artists can expect a salary of $45,675.

Game developers also have to deal with the reality of deadlines and large overtime demands.

Michael Kimball, an Emmy- and Academy Award-winning sound editor, currently serves as the Studio Audio Director for Midway Games Los Angeles. He explained how typically people at his

studio work 45-hour weeks, at least until "crunch time."

Crunch time is an industry term for the last few weeks, or months, before a product ships to stores. This is when the title has to be completed by a certain date no matter what. To ship an incomplete or bug-ridden product could sink a game. In an industry where many smaller studios rely on success to fund the next project, crunch time means job security.

"It takes what it takes to get it done," Kimball said simply.

While most developers would not say exactly how much extra time is typically required, Sanya Weathers summed it up. "Everyone puts in overtime. Sometimes a lot of overtime."

The amount of time the typical videogame production demands can be a major hurdle for new recruits. What's more, almost all industry jobs are salaried, with no extra dollars for those who stay late. All they earn is their continued employment.

In 2004, the issue of extreme work hours became national news when the

spouse of an EA employee posted an anonymous online blog that explained exactly what was expected of her husband. *[Read "EA Spouse" Erin Hoffman's followup on working in the industry in this week's Escapist]*

"The current mandatory hours are 9am to 10pm -- seven days a week -- with the occasional Saturday evening off for good behavior (at 6:30pm)," wrote the blogger who went by the pen-name "ea_spouse".

A few weeks before, EA had been accused of similar abuses in a class action lawsuit filed by some of its employees. The suit was eventually settled.

Despite the drawbacks, no one interviewed was unhappy with the career path they'd taken.

"It's work, and a lot of it, but Jesus, I talk about elves all day," laughed Weathers. "I'm surrounded by people who like all of the stuff I like."

COMMENTS

Dana "Lepidus" Massey is the Lead Content Editor for MMORPG.com and former Co-Lead Game Designer for Wish.

Back in the day

by Guy Stevens

My first exposure to a computer was an 8-bit micro called a Commodore 64. At 14, I owned what was considered a state of the art computer. This was no mere collection of wire, silicon and plastic; it was a gateway to another world. My magic box had sound, graphics and communication abilities that set it apart from the green-screened data terminals of its time.

Of course, you could write small programs in BASIC, buy a videogame from Child World or even animate a rudimentary movie. However, it was the unit's RS232 port that made computing come alive; by attaching a modem to the RS232, I was able to connect to the rest of the world.

The online world of the early 1980s was nothing like the internet of today. There were no web pages, streaming video sites, instant messenger clients or peer-to-peer file sharing. Instead, if you had a friend in the know, you could find your way to what was called an electronic bulletin board system, more commonly known as a BBS.

A BBS was where those in the know came to play. Armed with a 300 baud modem and 1541 disk drive, I was soon calling into computers and intermingling among phone phreaks, hackers, crackers and pirates. Suddenly, I knew people with names like The Improper Bostonian, Dr. Atomic and The Toxic Avenger. Just like the CB users of a decade before, BBS users went by handles.

Handles served a double purpose. By assuming another name, hackers afforded themselves a level of anonymity. After all, many of them participated in activities that fell into legal gray areas. Secondly, the prestige a cool alias could bring was better than anything Charles Atlas could offer in comic book ads.

The BBS of the 1980s was a primitive beast. It could handle just one user's phone call at a time! A relatively active BBS received 40 or more calls a day and had message boards and a download section.

The download section of many BBSes contained two areas: One for commoners, people who hadn't yet established themselves; the other for those users considered "elite" (cool) by the SYSOP, the proprietor of the BBS. This second area had all the latest pirated

> **Information could turn a humble BBS citizen into a member of the elite.**

games, utilities for hacking computer systems and text files describing how to break into all sorts of mainframes.

The BBS scene had two major commodities: pirated software (warez) and information. The newer the warez,

the more valuable it was as a commodity. It was actually possible to obtain one- or two-day-old software that had already been stripped of its copy protection; we called breaking through a program's security "cracking." A person earned his "elite" status by becoming the purveyor of the latest pirated software.

Information could turn a humble BBS citizen into a member of the elite. This information included instructions on how to hack programs and computer systems, guidelines on how to break copy protection schemes, or lists of phone numbers and access codes to other systems. The crown jewels of many download sections were special text files, called "G-Files," that were occasionally available for download, provided you knew where to look.

G-Files were little text files that taught you how to create bombs from household chemicals, hack UNIX systems and make free long distance calls. Little did I know that these files were often written by fellow adolescents who probably didn't even have a driver's license. However, the information contained in G-Files was occasionally legit. In fact, in college, I used UNIX

hacks from my BBS days to retrieve passwords on the campus mainframe!

In no time, I was using my new toys to re-enact scenes from the movie *WarGames*. I wasn't hacking into top military defense systems; I was dialing phone numbers in sequence, looking for other computers with modems in my area. Before long, I had found the computers for the local donut shop, the supermarket and a rival high school's heating system. As a power-hungry 14-year-old, I naturally cranked up the other school's temperature to a balmy 110 degrees Fahrenheit. I couldn't imagine why the phone number had been disconnected the next day.

Even back then, though, the most thrilling aspect of online life was meeting your friends in person for the first time. One hacker I met, who called himself The Culprit, was an extremely talented guy. He was a jack-of-all-trades type of person, good at pretty much anything he set his mind to.

In the wee hours of the morning, The Culprit and I would head into his car, crank up his favorite Bangles tune and seek out the trash dumpsters of high

tech companies, looking for hardware they'd discarded. He and I found all kinds of stuff: floppy disks (which were like gold), discarded hard drives and copies of Lotus 1,2,3. The Culprit ended up turning his dumpster-diving hobby into a thriving business reselling computer parts at trade shows.

When my fellow BBS-scene hackers and I turned 18, we gave up our outlaw ways. However, the skills I developed got me hired by an independent game studio. The company was staffed with the crackers, phone phreaks and hackers who had also learned to apply their skills to design the very games we used to steal. Nearly 15 years later, I was again among my own kind.

[COMMENTS]

Guy Stevens, author of College 101: The Book Your College Does Not Want You To Read*, is a working industry professional. He has a degree in computer engineering from a top gun engineering college. He has developed software for the following industries: publishing, telecommunications, mobile gaming, casual gaming and casino gaming.*

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