DIRECTING VIDEO GAMES

101

TIPS FOR CREATIVE LEADERS

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Directing Video Games

101 Tips for Creative Leaders

Thank you!

I hope you enjoy this sample of the first 5 tips. It's been a long journey writing this book, and I'm thankful to have supporters like yourself, who have taken an interest in my work!

-Brian

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Suggested Reading & Bonus Tip

SECTION 1:
THE DIRECTOR'S ROLE

What does a creative director do?

That's a question I've often heard upon meeting people outside of the games business. After saying a director's role is to supervise the creative process, I'd often see raised eyebrows and hear, "*So you're not a programmer?*" Many people imagine that games are made by a few programmers in a garage rather than as multimillion-dollar projects with teams ranging from ten to more than four hundred people. Plus, the notion of someone focusing solely on the creative process in a primarily technical industry seemed absurd.

That said, when I first started working in games, the concept of *a few programmers in a garage* wasn't too far off the mark. Back in 1992, the role of a dedicated creative director was unheard of. Even within big companies, the teams that developed each game were tiny, and the project leader wore other "hats" as a programmer, designer, or artist. Developing games was more about creating new interactive "mechanics" and less about cohesive experiences with compelling stories.

In the early twenty-first century, advancements in technology led to more ambitious projects, with visual graphics, audio, and stories that

achieved a stylistic, cinematic flair. Games matured and were recognized as a medium of creative expression. ==They were more than just a collection of fun mechanics; they offered immersive worlds with dimensional characters and emotionally driven story lines.== Team sizes grew, and there were new leadership positions for programming, art, and design. Like film or television productions, games needed someone to lead both the team and the creative process.

==Directing this process means having a vision. Successful games have a unified and singular voice—all elements working in concert as a cohesive whole.== A project depends on the ==director's ability to communicate the vision== and give it a design and story structure, for both the interactive and emotional aspects of a player's journey.

Having established the structure, the director draws from their creative toolbox of experience, developing each moment of the game. ==Directors apply timeless principles, found in all forms of entertainment,== to craft emotional beats, guiding the player through an immersive and captivating experience.

But holding the vision and offering techniques is futile without effective leadership and communication. So much of developing a strong game means having a dedicated team made up of people who believe in the vision and are passionate about what they are making. ==Everyone needs to feel ownership;== the director is leading the team yet supporting a voice and vision that arises from the talents of the collective group.

And finally, the director needs to account for all the challenges of game development, in terms of schedule, technical constraints, and the demands of a publisher and audience.

To summarize, a director needs to:

1. **Hold the Vision**

2. **Provide Structure**

3. **Keep a Creative Toolbox**

4. **Lead Effectively**

5. **Know Production**

==These traits are necessary regardless of team size—whether you are leading a large team or a small indie project.== Understanding your vision, knowing how to implement it, and cultivating creative leadership are essential qualities for directing great games.

Directors see the big picture.

Vision begins as intangible—a growing and evolving cluster of ideas—not easily summed up in a single document or image. The creative vision drives all aspects of a game, from story to game design to how the game looks and sounds. Though the director may provide an initial call to action, like a vision statement, inspirational image, or impassioned speech, team members have their own unique interpretations which may not fit with what the director is imagining.

The director is not alone in creating the vision, yet it is their responsibility to know how all the pieces work together as a creative whole. The vision tends to change over the course of the project due to many factors, such as team feedback, a change in resources (like time or money), or a request from a major stakeholder. The creative director must continuously respond to these changes, reshape the vision, and communicate it to everyone.

MACRO PLAN

Directors give structure and context to ideas.

Once the vision and direction of the game is defined, a framework is needed to show how the individual components of the game fit together. The director works closely with the team leads, including the lead designer and writer, to develop key documents that help communicate the structure of the design and story.

These documents include a Macro Design, which shows the player's path and interactive elements throughout the game. There's also the Script and Story Documents that describe the scenes and where the emotional beats occur. These documents reference one another to help provide an accurate picture of how the story and design work together.

It's the director's job to always have a clear understanding of the game structure and be able to provide context to the team during discussions. When the team understands how all the pieces fit into the bigger picture, they have the information needed to do their best work.
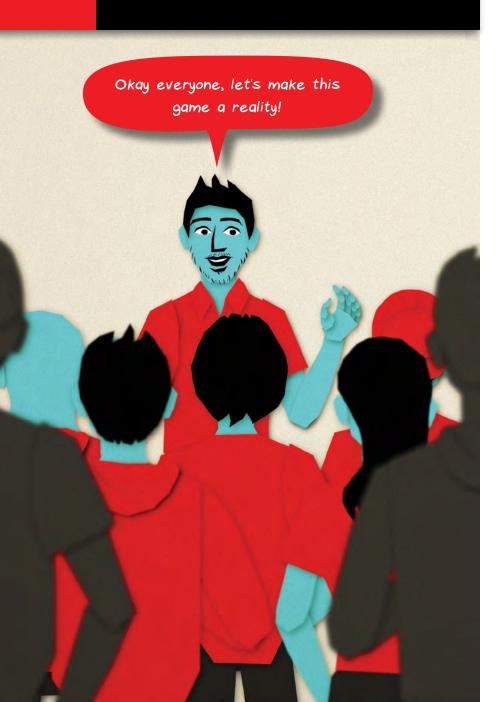
KEEP A CREATIVE TOOLBOX

Directors offer a large knowledge base of techniques.

Over the years, directors gather an arsenal of techniques to tackle creative problems. They learn them from studying games, films, and other media. They also discover them first-hand while making games.

This knowledge and experience is invaluable during discussions with team members and when attempting to solve creative problems. The director might share a technique on how to direct the player's attention or a method for delivering a particular story moment.

It helps if the director can reference games and other media to share examples with the team. Applying these techniques is how the director and team work together to craft the player's experience.

Directors lead by embracing the creative process.

Leading a creative team means walking the line between being a decisive leader who provides a clear vision and someone who is flexible and allows space for collaboration. The director can't come up with all the ideas alone, and the best games tend to come from a passionate team of creators riffing off of each other's ideas. It can be quite a balancing act to support concepts that evolve and grow organically from the team yet know when to be firm if an idea begins to fall outside the vision.

Directors need to have strong interpersonal skills that allow them to easily relate with team members and smooth over issues that naturally arise when people work together. They must resolve disagreements, explain the rationale behind tough decisions, and empower team members to tackle problems on their own.

The director communicates, inspires, and helps give confidence to everyone that the game is on the right path.

KNOW PRODUCTION

Directors understand how games get made.

The path of directing games can be fraught with disappointment. The realities of game production can chip away at the director's original dream until it's barely recognizable. Characters and scenes get cut, shortcuts need to be taken, and parts of the game don't come together as anticipated.

Seasoned directors learn from past projects and weigh the options when making decisions. They consider the risks, the technical hurdles, and the strengths of the team. Directors keep in mind the schedule and the overall scope of the project. They look at the trade-offs and how putting in a request for one ambitious feature might deny the request for another. As the saying goes, they must *pick their battles*.

Directors take all the production factors into account and figure out the best way to work within the constraints while leveraging the strengths of the team and technology. They also know how to pace themselves, avoid burnout, and ensure they have a healthy outlook throughout the long and arduous development process!

SECTION II:
CRAFTING THE VISION

All great ideas start somewhere.

The *Ratchet & Clank* series did not originally start out as an alien with a robotic sidekick. Back in 2001, Insomniac Games was developing the working title ==*Girl with a Stick*==, a fantasy adventure featuring a heroine with a long magical staff. We had a fully animated character who could swing, jump, and fight her way through beautiful levels with her magic stick.

Yet the idea never took off. For whatever reason, the vision of *Girl with a Stick* did not resonate with the team or our publisher. I'm sure in a parallel universe, another team might have made it into something exceptional, but we just weren't feeling it. Our CEO, Ted Price, saw the writing on the wall and decided to cancel the project.

Our previous games had been the successful *Spyro the Dragon* "platformer" series, and we thought it would be best to return to our action platformer roots. Insomniac's Brian Hastings then pitched this idea:

=="An alien that travels from planet to planet collecting weapons and gadgets."==

Now that was an idea we could buy into!

Thanks for checking out this excerpt!

The other 96 plus tips will be available in my full book launching May 6th!

Available on Amazon:

http://www.amazon.com/dp/B071Y7DNCZ/

Paperback and Hardback coming soon!

www.directingvideogames.com

Brian Allgeier has been working in the video games industry for more than twenty-five years. He is the co-creator and longtime director on the *Ratchet & Clank* series

He was the creative director on *Ratchet & Clank: Tools of Destruction* and *A Crack in Time*. He co-directed the *Ratchet & Clank* game for the Playstation®4 system, which was based on the *Ratchet & Clank* movie, which was itself based on the original game.

Brian is an early virtual reality developer, having directed the VR horror adventure *Edge of Nowhere*, a launch title for the Oculus Rift.

He lives with his wife and dog in Los Angeles, California.