

# Rantings of a Game Designer

Presented by: Albert Liao  
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# So...who is this guy?

- UCSD Alumni Class of 2002
- 9 Years ago I took this exact class
- I went on to work at:
  - Microsoft - Program Manager
    - SQL Server 2005
  - ArenaNet - Game Designer
    - Guild Wars: Factions
    - Guild Wars: Nightfall
    - Guild Wars: Eye of the North
    - Guild Wars 2
  - Red 5 Studios - Senior Game Designer
    - Firefall

# Shameless Video Plug?

<http://www.guildwars2.com/en/media/videos/>

# Today's Global Agenda

- Game Studio 101
  - CEO's to Localization and everyone in between
- Game Development Process
  - From concept to game to feature cuts to MAYBE shipping
- A Day in the Life of a Game Designer
  - AKA "How to tighten the graphics on level 3"
  - <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-7675519043804402267#>
- Making Games for a Living
  - Tips and tricks about getting your foot in the door
- Q&A on whatever you want to know



# Game Studio 101

"You are going to be the dominant creative medium of the century, and you should be confident and proud of that." - Tom Watson

# What makes up a studio?

- Well it depends...
  - What size is the studio?
  - What platform?
    - PC/Console/Mobile
  - What phase of development?
    - Testers and localization can come later
  - What type of game?
    - MMORPGs need a lot more writers than a shooter

# Typical Departments

- Production
- Programming
- Art
- Audio
- Design
- Writing
- QA
- Business
- HR
- IT

# Production

- The title "Producer" can vary quite a bit
  - Schedule Monkeys
  - Help set milestones and goals
  - Prevent bottlenecks and watch for dependencies
  - Organize Asset requests
  - Aid communication across disciplines
  - Cheerleaders
  - PR
- 
- Tools: Outlook, Excel, Project, Fogbugz



# Programming

- Lots of different stuff to work on
  - Graphics
  - Physics
  - AI
  - Audio
  - Server
  - Gameplay
  - Tools
  - Website
- Assumes designers are idiots
- Despises QA
- Can be tough to communicate with
- Tools: Visual Studio, C++, C#, LUA, Havoc, etc...

# Art

- Concept
- Modeling
  - Environmental
  - Character
- Animation
- Level / Environmental Art
- Known to be sensitive, so be careful with feedback
- Communicate well or you might get crazy results
- Tools: 3DS Max, Maya, Morpheme, Photoshop

# Audio

- Records sounds
- Synthesizes and tweaks sounds
- Oversees any voice overs needed
- Possibly works with contracted composers
- Personally performs temporary voices
- Works with programmers and designers to understand sound needs and implements them into the game
- Known to hang out all day in their sound booth behind closed doors
- Tools: Protocols, lots of mics, lots of foam

# Design

- Writes design specs
- Writes in game dialog and text
- Designs combat, story, game modes, UI
- Implements game objects and logic using in house tools or scripting
- Holds playtests and reviews feedback
- Designs level layouts and may block out basic layouts in level editor
- Known to have long, augmentative meetings
- Known to request features that cannot be completed within the scope of the project
- Tools: Outlook, Word, Photoshop, Level editors, Scripting tools



# Writing

- Develops World Story and Lore
  - In-game Text
  - Website Content
  - Game Manual
  - Strategy Guides
  - Novels or Comics
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- Known to have a quirky affinity for grammar
  - Tools: MS Word, Chicago Manual of Style

# Quality Assurance

- Finds and reports bugs in the game
  - Internal tools testing
  - May develop scripts for automation
  - Gives feedback to developers
  - Monitors new builds and features
  - Organizes play tests
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- Known to sit in their own part of the office or even a separate building, isolated from devs
  - Bad bug writers are despised by all development teams
  - Bugs should be relevant with clear repro steps
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- Tools: Fogbuz, Outlook

# Business

- CEO's and Founders
- Marketing
- Lawyers
- Basically keep these guys happy, they control your paycheck!
- Pro-tip: Good business guys know games and know their audience. Bad business guys only care about numbers.

# HR

- Recruiters
- Accountants
- Office Managers
- They hire you, make sure you get paid and get benefits, and try to plan fun events.



# IT

- Keeps your computers running
- Maintains the build servers
- Keeps the game servers running
- Fixes network lag
- These guys work late and come in at odd hours, just so everyone else can watch youtube and check facebook while they work.

# How does it all fit together?

- Company Org Chart
- Publishers and Retail

# Game Development Process

"Prepare for unforeseen  
consequences" - G-man

# Game Dev Timeline

- Idea
- Recruit a team
- Prototyping
- Funding
- Pre-production
- Staff Up
- Production
- Crunch!
- Ship :)
- Bug fix and content patches
- Sit back and enjoy profit-sharing



# Getting it fun

- Iteration is key!
- Come up with a vision and quickly prototype
- A get a playable version ASAP
- Playtest and review feedback
- Iterate, iterate, iterate...
- Alpha and Beta Tests
- Data mining and surveys
- Polish is what separates okay games from great games

# Getting it Done

- Realistic Scheduling
- Leave a few weeks padding for polish and testing
- Set regular milestone goals
- Enable ownership and decision makers, democracy slows things down and dilutes the vision
- Consider Strike Teams for tough problems or rapid prototyping
- Cut features early if need be, but cut carefully to maintain the quality of the game.

# Design Tips

- Simplify whenever possible.
- Make the common use case really friendly, with the option for advance use cases.
- Prototype and iterate quickly to get to the fun.
- Understand the technology so you create realistic designs within limits.
- Know your audience and design with them in mind, don't fall prey to your own biases.
- Show, don't tell.
- Listen to feedback and know how to filter it.
- Communicate requirements and vision to other teams very carefully.
- Make sure senior management is on the same page as you.

# A Day in the Life of a Game Designer

"Video games are bad for you?  
That's what they said about rock-  
n-roll." - Shigeru Miyamoto



# What's work really like?

- Just a bunch of gamers
- 95% male
- flexible work hours
- free soda (or even beer!)
- free food and/or candy
- cool art on walls
- casual environment
- games are played at lunch and after hours
- board game nights
- gossip
- complaining
- office politics

# What's crunch really like?

- ArenaNet wasn't that bad
- Old school Blizzard was
- Heard of people sleeping under desks
- Mandatory 12 hour days
- Crunch week once a month
- Catered food!
- Team camaraderie
- Online games need to crunch less to avoid burnout

# Typical Day Walkthrough

- Is there a typical day?
- What are designer tools like?

# Time for another video?

<http://www.firefallthegame.com/media/>



# Making Games for a Living

"You can't give it up! Triumph or  
Die!" - Announcer, Street Fighter  
Alpha 3

# Are you sure?

- Very competitive industry
- Limited number of cities and companies
  - LA, SD, SF, Seattle, Austin, Boston
- Lower starting salaries
  - Especially for programmers
- Unstable Companies
  - Small studios shutdown all the time
- Working on Mediocre Games
  - Like Princess Barbie's Magical Horse Show...
- Long work hours
  - Crunch is a regular thing in the industry

# How to get in?

- Simple Answer: Anyway you can.
- Make a list of companies
  - Search online or use trade show lists
- Send out resumes and custom cover letters to everyone
  - Follow up and do any required tests
- Network and talk to friends in the industry
  - Most hires are referrals
- Play in alpha/beta tests and give extensive feedback
- Specialize in relevant skill sets
- Consider segue jobs like QA
- Have a kick-ass portfolio / make indy games
- Keep trying!

# Career Development (for design)

- No well defined paths
- No guidance from manager usually
- Learn on the job, gain as many useful skills as you can
- Be proactive
- Be a good communicator
- Try to ship big name quality titles
- You will be judged on the games you ship
- Give talks, write papers and books
- Identify when you stagnate on a project and move on
- Keep good life balance



# How to make the big bucks

- Have an extensive list of shipped AAA titles and referrals and obtain a lead or managerial role.
- Be the very best in your particular skill set, and have it be known.
- Make a successful start-up and get a rich company to buy you out.
- Create the latest and greatest mobile/facebook game

# Career Resources

- <http://gamasutra.com/jobs/>
- E3, Game Developer's Conference, Penny Arcade Expo
- Game Developer Magazine
- <http://www.glassdoor.com/index.htm> - salary info
- <http://www.flcdatacenter.com/CaseH1B.aspx> - H1B salaries
- <http://www.sloperama.com/advice.html> - game design advice
- Recruiters
- Game Schools - Digipen, Full Sail
- Craigslist
- Books
  - Universal Principles of Design
  - The Art of Game Design: A Book of Lenses

# What's Ahead?

- Gamers are getting older
  - Less time, prefer quality over quantity
  - Bite-sized content on phones
- Free-to-Play Micro-transactions Model
  - Asia's been using it for years
  - Will let players demo games first
  - Money players spend isn't capped
- Cutting out the middle-man retailer
  - More direct sales through online delivery
- Indy Games
  - Facebook
  - Mobile
  - Xbox Live Arcade
- Tablet Games, 3D Glasses

# Q&A

- Thanks for listening!
- Make sure to try out:
  - Guild Wars 2 <http://www.guildwars2.com/en/>
  - Firefall <http://www.firefallthegame.com/>
- Any topics I didn't cover? Want the dirt or inside scoop on something?
- Further questions?
  - Email: [albertliao@gmail.com](mailto:albertliao@gmail.com)