

## Postmortem: Cutler Creative's *Last Call*

By John Cutler

In 1995 I drafted the original concept document for *Last Call* ( it was known as *Bartender USA* at the time). The original concept was a traveling game. The player would start bartending at the local Howard Johnson's and by earning tips would move progressively to a swank New York City bar. At the time I had absolutely NO experience in multimedia production or game design. But one question persisted: "Why can't I learn to bartend on a computer?"

Cutler Creative was officially born with a trip to Sears, credit card in hand, to buy a computer. With this purchase, I began to contemplate how I would produce a demo of the game. One exercise which to this day I have found very valuable was writing our "Book of Questions." I posed myself over 300 questions and spent the next couple weeks answering them one by one. Some examples included: "How will you eat while the game gets made?" "Why will someone play this game?" "What happens if your publisher bails out?" "How will the player shake the shaker?" I attended E3 in Atlanta, staying at the appropriately named "Dream" Hostel, attending seminars, and walking the convention floor. This world was completely foreign! For some reason I gravitated to the other non-industry



newbies -- people hawking soap opera games, head-to-head sewing simulators, and other ultra-niche products. The experience was both intimidating and encouraging. Also, staying at the hostel was a group of European developers with a killer futuristic driving game. I forget the exact details, but the game sported some insane frame rate. In comparison, a bartending game seemed tame and not in keeping with the general trend of the industry. On the flip side, the convention was littered with other niche products. Finally, for some real-life experience, I got a job at a bar waiting tables and politely asking the drug-dealers in the bathroom to relocate.

After some networking (with designers, not dealers), I found a Macromedia Director programmer with some experience. Joel Hamburger would turn out to be an invaluable asset for the project -- eventually co-producing the title, composing the music, and handling countless technical problems. I assembled a 3D modeler (to model bottles, bar exteriors for the cutscenes, and the interface), a 2D artist (Peter Fink), and a scriptwriter (Patrick Rhody). The demo was completed in three months. We actually filmed ourselves pouring different colored liquids for a photorealistic "pouring window." This photoreal approach never made it into the game, but it was a learning experience. One character would approach the bar at a time, and invariably we ended up doing the VO. The demo featured some nice cutscenes thanks to Erik Borzi, an experienced 3D modeler. Finally, some much needed industry insight was provided by Dan Feinstein -- former Acclaim producer -- and friend of a friend.



**A still from the pitch video cut scene. Note, these were eventually abandoned in the final version, but they helped sell the demo.**

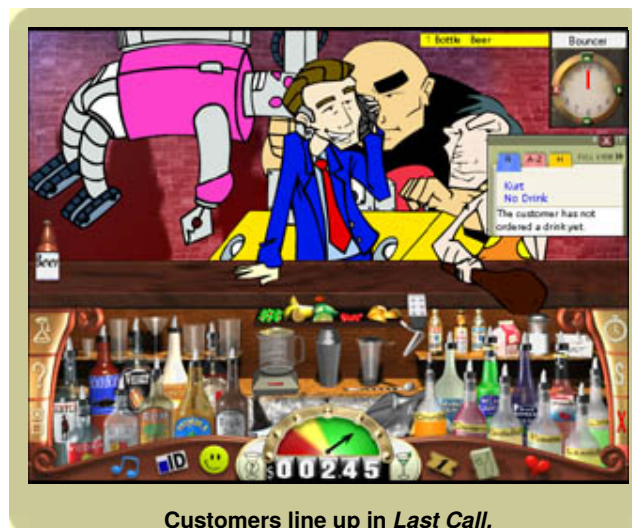
We incorporated these cut/splash screens into a promotional video. This video was shopped with little success to various publishers. To make the pitch more professional, we hired Paul Palumbo (frequent Gamasutra columnist) to write a short, sweet sell document. This instantly upped our credibility. For most, the content was a little risqué. Simon & Schuster had recently published *Deer Avenger* -- a spoof of the popular franchise *Deer Hunter*. *Deer Avenger* was timed perfectly. We fit into SSI's current strategy, and they agreed to publish the game

for Christmas. In retrospect, there was an instant mismatch of expectations. With a functioning demo, we seemed well on our way to completing the title with time to spare. While we weren't about to admit it, we had bigger plans for *Last Call*.

The team and office were assembled quickly. We cut costs whenever possible. Many of our machines were donated. We also purchased computers and monitors from a corporate fire-sale. We shared our workspace with two crazy French designers. We made our furniture out of plywood.

Euralis Weeks, an SVA graduate, was our first hire. As art director, she started work on mocking up the new interface and designing characters. Equally important was her recruitment effort. Without her contributions we would have not finished the title. For animation talent, we worked primarily with SVA students who had recently graduated, or were working during the summer. They completed the bulk of the character animation. Our writers stumbled onto our doorstep by accident. During my stint as a cocktail boy, I had been lucky enough to bring a laptop with demo to work. Susie Felber, author of Comedy Central's Karma Central was emceeding a comedy night and was very kind to check out the demo with her friends. I stayed in touch with Susie and eventually contacted her when we began to work on the character bible. Susie dragged her brother Adam into the fray, and our writing staff was complete. For many team members, this was their first project as well. We were definitely naive, but this fresh perspective pushed us to create a game WE would want play -- a quirky, unconventional, thought-provoking, and funny title. Our animators were fresh out of art school, and friends and family chipped in to test and tweak. *Last Call* was an organic group effort. When people ask, "Are you a developer?" I normally respond, "No, we are a gang of non-gamoids." Could we develop a 3D first-person shooter?... No. Did we make a "game"?... Yes.

The team remained motivated throughout the project. Our staff braved 100-plus-degree days with no AC, the remnants of a hurricane, a flood, and raging tempers. In the final analysis -- despite all the money and time lost, the dedication of our staff will stand out as bright spot in the project.



Customers line up in *Last Call*.

One of our biggest challenges was the unknown. We didn't have a much of a design model from which to base our product. This was a game that "I would like to play." For much of the design and development process we were continuously rethinking game design assumptions -- designing as we went. This process, unfortunately, was not compatible with the standard time frame for mass-market titles. We had a general idea of our target market: gamers who would play the game for kicks and a diversion, and nongamers who would gravitate toward a topic more familiar (burp) to them. Our goal was to create a game that taught drink mixing in an entertaining way -- the kind of game that you could play at a party or with friends,. How could you ever make a "fun" game about bartending, people would ask. Visions of bottle spinning, bar fights (we have those), and flaming shots spun in people's heads. We guessed right on some points and wandered astray in other areas.

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## What Went Right

**1. Director.** Although *Last Call* is known to many as a "Director" game, our choice of authoring software made a mammoth task easier. The ability to incorporate Flash assets gave us an instant ability to create character animation assets quickly and effectively, as well as positioned us for future reuse of the assets in a web environment. Working with Bruce Epstein, who worked off-site, let us address many of the issues plaguing Director games from the outset of the project. Bruce has done dozens of commercial CD-ROM titles, hundreds of Director-related projects, and is a world-renowned Director expert and author. The two books on Director and Lingo that he wrote for O'Reilly are considered the definitive works on the subject and were even chosen by the instructors at Macromedia's 1999 User Conference over the books from Macromedia Press. He has shipped over 3 million, yes million, CD-ROMs for companies such as Lucas, Chrysler, Dun and Bradstreet, Nestle, and many other Fortune 500 companies. Bruce's experience was invaluable.

Director was the only tool capable of handling so many assets in so little time. We simply didn't have the resources to build the game from scratch. Our original deadline called for a Christmas 1999 release, meaning we were shooting for a September GM. After months of testing, the product shipped March 2000. The fact that the game was authored in Director has made it more difficult to gain legitimacy in the game


developer community. A closer look at the product, however, reveals a complexity almost unheard of in Director titles. At E3, an Eidos producer blamed *Last Call* for a work slowdown. Not bad for a Director title.

**2. Time-saving tools.** The "Character Action Database" let us refer to frames in the separate Flash movies by name (Approach, Greet, Drink, and so on). This allowed animators to combine "actions" in a simple language [#ANIM:"Walk" #ANIM: "Talk"]. This information was stored in Access and eventually imported into Director. The ability for student animators to interface directly with the game engine simplified the operation and allowed anyone with a free moment to add to the game narrative. Hilarious combinations of dialogue (recited with the character in base position), and actions (animations in Flash), resulted from the process. As bar patrons drink more, they progress (or digress, depending on how you look at) to more outrageous mannerisms. The eventual result was over 1,500 unique combinations -- a major accomplishment on such a small budget. Most were entered by people with absolutely no game-making experience.

The "tagger," our lip-synch software, saved us time and money. The 2D cartoonlike characters looked great when we applied a volume sensitive tagging system. Many development groups create such a tool, but luckily we figured this out on our first try.

**3. Characters.** Our goal when developing characters for *Last Call* was to create atypical computer game people. It may have been lucrative to stick with stereotypical T&A meat-head characters, but this didn't reflect the morals and humor of the team. Instead, we opted for less traditional characters: graduate students, gay robots, Bacchus the God Of Wine, etc. The writers were instrumental in taking our "ideas" and turning them into a deliverable. Most people who reviewed the game mentioned Cynthia, the whip wielding dominatrix with the slave attendant. Few noted the coke snorting fashion model, the orgasmic couple with a penchant for small hedgehogs, or the grad student with projectile vomit. We took special care to make the game as intricately sick, engaging, and funny as possible.





An original sketch of Cynthia, the dominatrix, lunching on a rat.

**4. Online marketing.** Negotiating the rights to sell *Last Call* directly from a web site ([www.lastcallgame.com](http://www.lastcallgame.com)), and the initiative to create the official *Last Call* site, have paid off. Orders come in each day (not many, but some), and we have been able to salvage a long-term strategy from poor retail performance.

**5. Some QA was fun! (what we can remember of it).** The Recipe QA party was a success. Although we did not manage to try all the recipes from A to Z, we got through the Ss with consciousness intact (barely). The Recipe QA party is a great story because it is really what people want to hear about. The sad fact is that I had managed to get out only twice in the five months preceding the tasting party, and my post-party snooze outside a Chase Manhattan bank, subsequent harassing by a security guard, and five-mile walk back to the office encouraged me to stay off the bottle during development! Bottom line: we had fun.

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## What Went Wrong

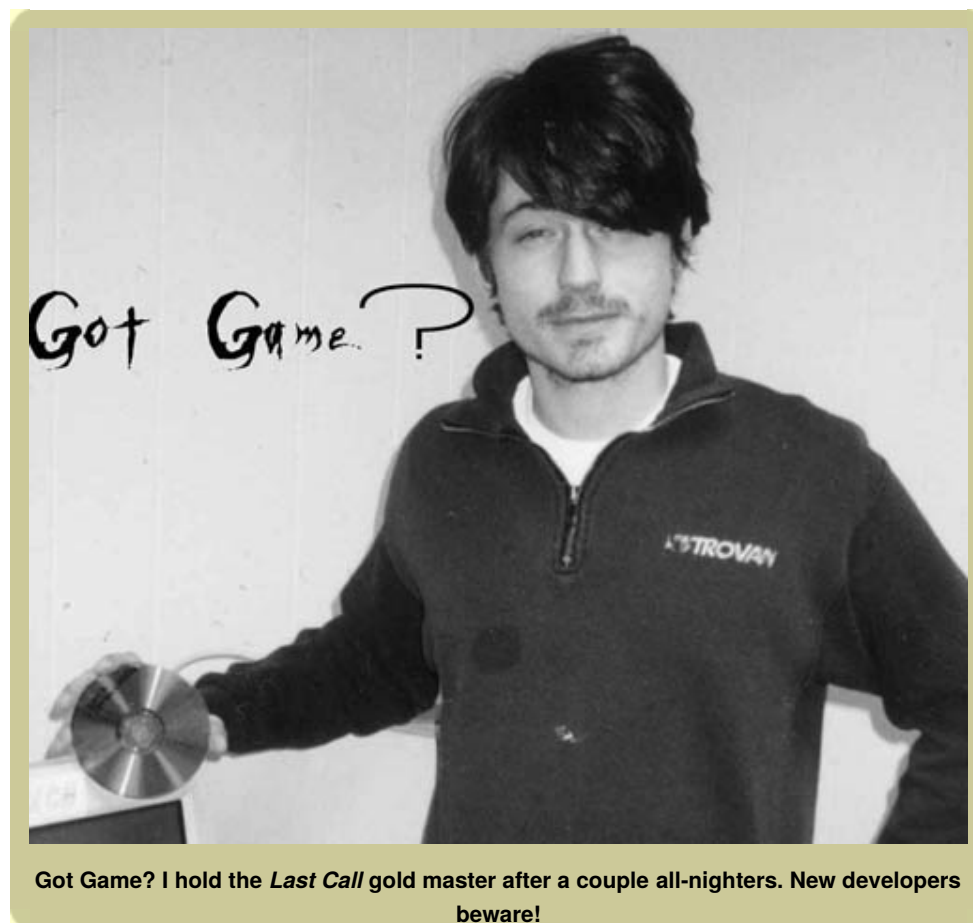
**1. Feature creep ruled our roost.** We were continually adding features to *Last Call* as we refined the game in response to tester feedback. As it became increasingly clear that the game had taken on a life of its own -- exceeding our expectations, and certainly exceeding SSI's expectations -- we became perfectionists. Had the title been produced independently, working at a slower pace with a smaller team, this would have been par for the course. However, we had a deadline and milestones, and eventually had to contend with an angry publisher. *Last Call* was relatively complicated considering the budget for the project. Users interacted with the bar environment in ways we did not expect. Even the metaphor of drink pouring was highly scrutinized and debated -- our target customer did not play games, and was not likely to pick up strange, unnatural actions.

**2. Adversarial relationship with the testing company.** Over the course of the project, we built an adversarial relationship with the company hired by SSI to test *Last Call*. CutlerCreative LLC did not have the resources to test the title internally. Often, deliverables were sent to testing with "see if it starts up" testing. Our inability to simply delay the deliverable and to conduct half a day of testing on a stable version cost us weeks answering (and writing) angry e-mails from all parties. These are all standard beginner mistakes, but as the project spun out of control, tempers flared, pride reared its ugly head, and time was lost. A clear understanding from the outset of our publisher's expectations would have helped somewhat. However, as mentioned, the scope of the project was ever-changing based on player feedback, tester remarks, and the like.

**3. Controversy, and lack thereof.** Due to the "mature" nature of *Last Call* we knew from the outset that it may be difficult to sell the game in Wal-Mart or Best Buy. We also expected the game to generate some controversy. Unfortunately, neither happened. To date, we have yet to receive a single complaint regarding the content of *Last Call*. Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. In the months leading up to the signing of the contract, I went out of my way to address content issues -- contacting MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving) and other public advocacy groups. The general consensus among the groups (MADD never replied) was: you seem to be making something fun with a strong emphasis on responsible serving. Even if we had gotten this in writing it would have done little to temper the fears of the budget chains! I'll admit it: I even wrote a fake letter to my congressman to no avail.



**4. Lack of scope.** Many reviewers remarked that the game lacked scope, and their observations were entirely valid. We concentrated 100 percent on making the game -- which consists entirely of characters approaching the bar, waiting, ordering, talking, and retreating -- interesting within the defined game world. Bar patrons become drunker as the night progresses. The bartender is able to flirt with the customers. Bad drinks can send a customer into a puking spell. All things considered, we might have benefited from spending less time on game nuances, and more time on adding some different activities, environments, level goals, and other elements.



**5. Inexperience.** In retrospect we made many classic beginner mistakes. We were not realistic about the project's timeframe. We underestimated the duration many small tasks -- culminating in a lengthy delay. We did not press for change orders when appropriate (probably because we were changing the title daily).

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## Since Release

By all accounts, *Last Call* has been a retail flop. The title failed to gain positive momentum among retailers despite a strong PR blitz. I participated in radio interviews around the country. SSI secured great coverage in Entertainment Weekly, Maxim, Time magazine, The Washington Post, and numerous game magazines. In the sea of products, *Last Call* did not stand out. We had always intended a nontraditional retailer effort -- targeting stores such as Urban Outfitters, Virgin Megastore, and college bookstores. But as we would soon learn, the bulk of sales go to the big software and budget chains.

Still, orders have streamed in to the web site from over 40 countries and all 50 states. On average, the site gets 200 or 300 visitors daily, and we sell two or three CDs daily. In the past, when the game was featured on a demo CD (MacAddict, for example), the order/customer ratio increased tenfold to about 10 percent. Surprisingly, many of our customers are women (about a 55 percent male, 45 percent female split).

In addition to creating the *Last Call* game web site, completing a side project for Comedy Central Partners, and developing the downloadable LC demo, we recently finished a localization project for Monte Cristo Multimedia in France. *Last Call* will now be released in France as Happy Hour (with French VO), in the U.K. as Happy Hour, and in Germany as On the Rocks. These projects will probably never generate additional royalty revenue, but we were paid to localize our own product -- and learned something in the process.

We started the project in May 1999 and completed our work in February 2000. During the last two months of the project, our necessary staff shrunk from 15 to three, and finally two (myself and programmer Bruce Epstein). Many key players were working on spec, or were taking a modest pasta-buying rent-paying salary. Our budget, \$100,000, would have covered our programmer's fee had he not worked on spec, but was stretched (with the addition of a \$30,000 loan), to employ over 20 individuals. When taken into context, *Last Call* was a labor of love,

learning experience, and major achievement.

## Other Lessons Learned

Especially with niche-type titles whose basic design premise have no market track-record, do anything possible to test your assumptions while keeping costs low. Document the game flow in intricate detail. Don't just create flowcharts: live the game, play with dolls, annoy your friends with annoying questions. Consider all possibilities. You will be launching into uncharted waters, so be prepared the scope of work to expand dramatically. Very quickly, our design document became a relic. Instead, budget permitting, this document should be a current snapshot of the title, its game flow, technical and design assumptions. On a shoestring, this is close to impossible: either you start with something solid and stick to it, or wander into the unknown.

Bring diversity to your team -- student artists, comedy writers without game experience, and the like, and give them the power to influence the game narrative. Many of *Last Call*'s funniest moments and characters originated and/or were enhanced by people who had never played a game.

Always know your ESRB rating!

Consider your price point and your publisher's expectations. Sure, a 3D bar with customizable recipes, a character editor, and other features would have made a great game -- but at \$19.95 the expectation for a shoestring title is considerably less ambitious.

Consider other funding options for niche products. With some extra time we may have been able to pitch *Last Call* as a hospitality training tool, or spirit promo tool. We could have made an online version with less functionality but more promotional appeal. Research alternatives for your product and get some feedback from potential customers. I initially sent *Last Call* to all the major liquor companies cold turkey, and even got some first-person feedback from the director of marketing for Absolut.

In general, the saying "One game does not a company make" holds true for all but the largest game franchises. If you intend to start a "company," be prepared to start pitching new projects immediately after the completion of your first title. You might be lucky if one out of ten titles actually earns royalties. Keep this in mind when negotiating your deals and pitching new work. If you want to build a company around a single niche title, then be prepared to diversify your product offering and fund derivative titles internally. Most smaller developers fund their efforts with less exciting but more profitable projects. If you don't see yourself as a "salesman" -- pitching development work -- then consider how you will survive moving forward.

On a personal level, consider your individual future in the game's business. Gamasutra had to poke and prod me for this article, so I certainly haven't done everything possible to leverage my game-making career! Keep in mind that starting your own game company doesn't necessarily qualify you for a job with another company -- especially if your role was nontechnical. You may (like yours truly) need to start again from the bottom. You might be better off interning for zero pay.

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