



HELLO GAMES

One Man's Ambitions

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SYNOPSIS

Hello Games, is a video game development studio and publisher founded in February 2008 by Sean Murray and Grant Duncan along with Ryan Doyle and David Ream. At the current time of writing, they have released; Joe Danger Series (2010-2015), No Man's Sky (2016) and The Last Campfire (2020). (Hello Games, n.d.).

This case study will critically analyse Hello Games and the possible cause that led to the community blowback on release of their title No Man's Sky, it will cover their development, marketing, community management and reception as well as the leadership within the company and workplace culture.

Assumptions

It has been assumed that any statements made by any employee or former employee of Hello Games, both verbal and written, are the truth and have not been manipulated or changed in any way. Additionally, a vast majority of the information gathered in relation to Hello Games comes from GDC talks and interviews, so it is assumed to be accurate.

FINDINGS

Creation of Hello Games

Hello Games, was founded by 4 friends, Sean Murray as the Managing Director (Murray, n.d.), Grant Duncan as the Art Director (Duncan, n.d.), Ryan Doyle as the Technical Director (Doyle, n.d.) and finally David Ream as the Creative Director (Ream, n.d.). Each founder had been in the industry for many years at the founding of Hello Games, the founders were creating games from young ages, Sean Murrays crafted his first game at the age of 6, while the other founders ranged from ages 7-8. It was as if without knowing it, Hello Games formed 20 years ago and not in 2008, before they even knew each other, all because they developed games at such a young age (GDC, 2010, 2:37). In early 2008, the four banded together to found Hello Games, they got into game development, to, well, develop games, and founding Hello Games allowed them to achieve something they always wanted to do (Frushtick, 2020).

Hello Games', first project was Joe Danger, a side-scrolling video game with racing and platforming elements, it was published exclusively with Sony on the PlayStation 3 in 2010. Joe Danger ultimately was a huge success for the company, breaking even on the first day of sales (Funk, 2010). Due to the success of Joe Danger, in the following year "Joe Danger 2: The Movie" was announced and later released in 2012 for Xbox LIVE Arcade and PlayStation Network (Joe Danger - Hello Games, n.d.).

No Man's Sky Development

There is a multitude of reasons why developers leave their employment, for Sean Murray it was due to developing the same things over and over, which he spent many of his years at EA developing sequels. Sean Murray called his time developing these sequels "*a bit depressing in some ways*" (Frushtick, 2020). After the release of Joe Danger 2: The Movie, Sean found himself concerned for his future, causing something like a mid-life crisis (Ibid). He felt he was in a loop of always making sequels, he wanted to do something new, something different (Develop: Brighton, 2020, 8:00). Due to being worn down and frustration of things happening in the background of Joe Danger. He created a new project, wrote some code and that code would ultimately turn into a small demo of the grand vision of what No Man's Sky would hope to become (Ibid, 9:30). Thus, began No Man's Sky.

The team at Hello Games would spend 3 out of the 5 days a week working on No Man's Sky, over the course of development the team expanded from the original 4, to an average of 6 and on release there were 15 involved (Ibid, 11:15) (GDC, 2019, 14:40).

No Man's Sky is built within Hello Games' own engine (*no name for the engine could be found*), as the tools needed were not available in industry standard engines such as Unity and Unreal Engine, which a large majority of indie developers tend to use. Since Sean Murray has a strong background with programming, he didn't think much of

developing an engine, as he did the same with the Joe Danger Series (Game Informer, 2014, 12:10). Sean Murray goes on to say that No Man's Sky is the hardest thing he has ever done. It can be assumed that he means the project as a whole and not just the procedural generation technology used within the game (Ibid, 15:40).

Marketing started early for No Man's Sky; the first announcement of the game was in 2013 at the VGX Awards (Gaston, 2013), with an announcement trailer that has gathered 1.9 Million views to date (HelloGamesTube, 2013). Sony had a massive interest in the game, even offering to help fund development but Hello Games turned it down and only asked for financial aid for promotion and publication (Dring, 2015). In the following year Sony released a gameplay trailer for No Man's Sky which to date has 8.2 Million views (PlayStation, 2014).

In Sean Murray's own opinion, he feels that *"releasing a game is the lowest part of the development phase"* (GDC, 2019, 13:15). No Man's Sky rocked the industry on its release, it was one of, if not the most dramatic video game releases in the industry, not only that but it was the biggest selling new IP of all time (Ibid, 14:00).

Business Model

With the success that the Joe Danger series brought Hello Games, they used the funding from that series to develop No Man's Sky, which was released on multiple platforms, those being Personal Computer (PC) and Console. No Man's Sky has a one-time fee of £39.99, this form of distribution is a one-time-payment, a straightforward business model where the customer pays the set price and owns the product forever, along with the one-time-payment Hello Games have also opted for free Downloadable Content (DLC) (Chandler, 2020, pp. 16-17). No Man's Sky had both physical retail and digital platform distribution, making good use of the value chain to accommodate as much people as they could (Kerr, 2016, pp. 45).

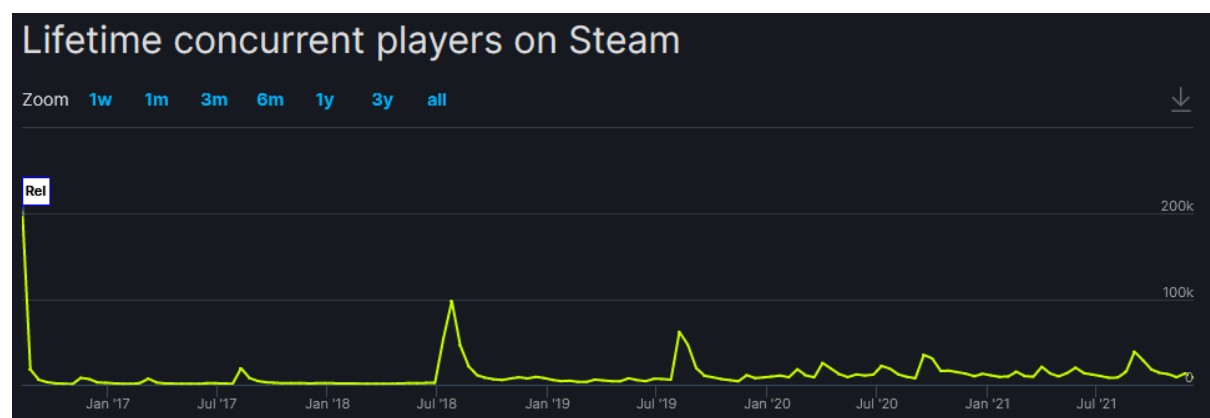


Figure 1, No Man's Sky Lifetime Concurrent Players from August 16th, 2016, to November 25th, 2021 (SteamBD, n.d.)

As can be seen in Figure 1, No Man's Sky reels in new players with each new update. An example of this is the spike seen in August of 2018, corresponding to the release of the free DLC "Next" (HelloGamesTube, 2018). In the following year "Beyond" was released,

resulting in another spike (HelloGamesTube, 2019). However, IGN believe they must be making diminishing returns through this method. Maybe they are just terrible businesspeople, but they do enjoy making these games, they enjoy the simplicity around them, Sean Murrays remarks around this can be summed up into "who cares" (IGN, 2018, 7:57).

Reception

In 2014, a year after being announced, it had already been nominated and even won awards at the Game Critic Awards (Best of E3 2014, 2014). No Man's Sky generated a lot of 'hype' thanks to its marketing, *"there was no other game like No Man's Sky that got so much pre-release hype, every time a new trailer was dropped, the press was immediately on it"* (Swearingen, 2016).

The game, originally planned for release in June of 2016, suffered a delay until August of the same year (McWhertor, 2016; Murray, 2016). Whilst it got huge viewership as seen earlier, players were not impressed with what they received-on release, during interviews or talks Sean Murray often spoke of features that were in development but wouldn't be ready or things that would end up being cancelled, but on release many of things he had said or even promised were not available, many people calling him a liar (IGN, 2018, 0:15). Although it was not received well, Hello Games were happy with what they had produced as it was what they initially envisioned. They were able to separate the bad from the good, and slowly but surely improve the game over time with new feature packed DLC to make up for the *"lies"* players had been promised in those early days (Develop: Brighton, 2020, 18:42-23:58).

COMPANY

Leadership

From the findings It is fair to assume that Sean Murray's approach to leadership has adopted mainly the Visionary leadership style with some Affiliative as well (Spaulding, 2009, pp. 117). The Visionary leadership style establishes a set goal, that everyone on the team can get behind. In the case of No Man's Sky, that is a procedurally generated galaxy with exploration and survival properties (About - No Man's Sky, n.d.). Affiliative leadership is focused on team moral and conflict resolution, but it can be used when the team is going through a stressful period, which will be discussed later (Spaulding, 2009, pp. 117) (Goleman, 2000, pp. 84-85).

Project Management

During the development of their Joe Danger series in the early days of the company, they kept the important things they had learned such as milestone delivery and a production pipeline (GDC, 2010, 9:40). Whilst developing Joe Danger, they had no set designer, so everyone was the designer and the engine was open for tweaking (Ibid, 17:00).

Hello Games development on No Man's Sky is very creatively driven (Develop: Brighton, 2020, 32:29), however, after the release of No Man's Sky, they knew things had to change with how they managed their updates. They planned out on a month-by-month basis on what they were going to do. As Sean Murray stated they split the development team into smaller micro-teams for future patches allowing them to develop freely and creatively. Whilst doing this the micro-teams kept communication up, effectively working as one team (Ibid, 34:00).

Sean Murray admits that whilst it may look professional and well thought out, that the reality is they are less planned than it they look, however, it seems to work for them, so they continued with this form of project management (Ibid, 34:40).

Community Management

Hello Games, after release went dark for several months, due to the overwhelming amount of attention the game had gathered leading up to its release and the ultimate blowback it received from the community and press. While all this was happening Sean Murray, wanted to at multiple stages to talk to his community, but he backed off each time. Finally, they settled on a direct form of communication through patch-notes, this allowed the team to prove themselves to the community with the new features provided in each update, letting the game speak for itself. Since doing this method of communication, they have kept to it and say it is something they will continue to do (GDC, 2019, 20:15).

Workplace Culture

Looking at Glassdoor for employee reviews, it can be assumed the work environment at Hello Games is positive, whilst the review count is small, only 6 employee reviews at the current time, it holds a 5-star rating with 100% recommendation and 100% approval rate of the CEO (Sean Murray). Multiple reviews mention how the team is great to work with and highly skilled as well as the communication within the teams being great (Glassdoor.co.uk. n.d.).

DISCUSSION

INDIE COMPANY

Founded in 2008 with 4 members, Hello Games is a private Indie Company with under 30 employees. Defining indie is rather difficult as Lipkin found, but it can be narrowed down to going against what is mainstream and not prioritizing money but rather creativity (Lipkin, 2012, pp. 9-10). Choosing to be an indie company allows them to have full control of what they develop and being flexible (GDC, 2010, 7:35). From the findings Sean has mentioned that he no longer wanted to be doing the same thing over and over, founding Hello Games allowed him to this. In addition, they did not have any funding, so Sean Murray sold his house to help fund their first project (White, 2016).

Sean Murray shows a list of the reality of starting a new games company, it shows that there are hundreds of new indies each year with only a small fraction of those start-ups surviving the first year, with an even lower amount surpassing the 3-year mark. However, none of this affected them, they knew the risks and went for it anyways (GDC, 2010, 4:45). It is unclear if these charts are the global market or UK only as it is not mentioned.

In 2010 after the release of Joe Danger, Hello Games won two Develop Awards (Elliott, 2010). After the announcement of No Man's Sky, in 2014 Hello Games were listed as a Top 100 in Games and Entertainment (Tech media | Invest 100, 2014).

COMPANY ORGANIZATION

With a total company size of under 30 people, Hello Games is considered a small company (Spaulding, 2008, pp. 24-30), with the organization overview Spaulding provides, at the founding of Hello Games, it would not have been like this with only 4 members, however in present time, it applies more, as each founder takes up a director role, allowing for new employees to report to them, in effect giving a good communication path. A small company allows for a positive feeling of community, everyone in the team is a part of. Spaulding also showcases a potential weakness in this community like company, that as the company grows subcultures may form, excluding new employees from a sort of inner circle (ibid, pp. 25). However, with this downside, from the findings it doesn't appear that this has or ever will happen at Hello Games, as Sean himself holds his team very close. Sean Murray called his development team a "little-family" during his GDC talk (GDC, 2019, 14:40).

The physical layout of Hello Games has changed as the company has grown and progressed, they started out in a small shed, borrowing internet and now have their own office space (Conditt, 2018). However, it is unclear on the worth of the furniture used by Hello Games as well as if everyone's Hardware is equal or not (Spaulding, 2008, pp. 26). Sean Murray has stated that in his opinion, "*the number of people working at companies is not a measurement of success*", Hello Games hired the people they think are the best fit, not solely for company growth (Develop: Brighton, 2020, 36:45-37:00).

DEVELOPMENT

No Man's Sky was not a planned project for the studio, it happened rather spontaneously as discovered in the findings, however the team were eager to jump onto this project with Sean Murray leading the development of it.

No Man's Sky was kept under wraps, with only a few people knowing about it, right up until its reveal at the VGX awards in 2013. During winter of 2013, their office experienced flooding hindering the development for a month, once development resumed, they began anew and started the hiring process (Tach, 2014). From the findings the team expanded over the course of the project, starting at 4 and ending with 15 involved in the process. During the years of No Man's Sky development, Kerr found that the overall employment rate in the UK games industry was dropping, however Hello Games has nearly doubled in size since these days (Kerr, 2016, pp. 97).

No Man's Sky also follows the industry trend of being a Game as a service, allowing for continued expansions and being accessible on multiple platforms networks such as Xbox Live and PlayStation Network (Ibid, pp. 46). With each new expansion of No Man's Sky a spike in active players is seen as shown in Figure 1, however, within a month of the new expansion the numbers drop back down to what they were before the expansion. It can be assumed therefore Hello Games re-thought their update life cycle and minimised the length between each new expansion, to keep the player retention up.

From the findings it was discovered that No Man's Sky runs within its own in-house custom-built engine. This engine allowed for development flexibility. Sean Murray has spoken about their engine multiple times, showcasing its effectiveness for their team and how easy it is for any member to implement new changes into the game through the engine (Game Informer, 2014, 21:10). O'Donnell interview on SM3's development showcases this, how throughout production new tools may be introduced to the engines and the artists in this example need to quickly grasp them, seemingly the engine Hello Games does a lot of work for the artist, as it can generate multiple different types of a base object, cutting down on production time and allowing for a quick learning process (O'Donnell, 2020, pp. 114).

No Man's Sky, whilst mostly falling under the Publishing Logic, does overlap with other types of production logics such as the Performance Logic, with regular live in-game community events which creates player-generated content such as videos and or livestreams of these events (Kerr, 2016, pp. 77-78, 133).

At the time of No Man's Sky release, it was being developed for the new generation of consoles (*Xbox One & PlayStation 4*). It has since then made its way to the latest generation (*Xbox Series X/S & PlayStation 5*) (Buy Now - No Man's Sky, n.d.).

MARKETING

From the findings it can be assumed that No Man's Sky marketing on many levels is what caused the backlash of the reception. As Kerr has found Marketing for many big

companies and titles with publishing deals start early (Kerr, 2016, pp. 113). However, Hello Games is not a big company, nor did they have any publishing funds, they did however get marketing and promotional help from Sony. From the findings, it can be assumed that this was a big mistake for the company to begin marketing so early for the game, Sean Murray has said on multiple occasions he never enjoyed talking with the press. With Sony's help they were at the forefront of the 2014 Sony E3 Conference (Square, 2014), where they promoted their game to an extremely large amount of viewership. No Man's Sky had "high intensity marketing" (Kerr, 2016, pp. 114), this form of marketing is like forms of blockbuster releases, with multiple trailers, cross-platform promotion, and billboards.

COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT

Sean Murray understood the importance of community, he knew he needed to inform them on everything that had happened but with the overwhelming amount of negativity flowing in it made it difficult to process it all. Since Sean Murray took on the role of talking to the community and was closely tied to development, he knew what was and was not available in the game, he failed to properly communicate with the consumers, on the reality of the game's development, he often failed at basic communication, by not keeping his answers brief or clear (Lemarchand, 2021, ch. 6). The unclear answers he would give caused confusion within the community, many people not knowing what would and would not be in the game. Things took a turn when the ASA got involved and investigated Hello Games for the possibility of misleading marketing, however they were cleared of any allegations by the ASA (Crecente, 2016). As seen in Figure 1, after the release the player base dropped from 200k+ down to sub 50k.

After the release Sean Murray had redirected all mail to himself, he calls it "*drinking from the fire hose*", he also brought in external help to review the comments they were receiving, some comments going to the extreme of death threats and more, causing the Scotland Yard to be involved on multiple occasions.

After reviewing the comments, they were able to find useful feedback within them, they found a new way to communicate with the community, a way that allows them to be truthful to their community by communicating through patch-notes anything being mentioned is within the game and no more false-promises being made.

LEADERSHIP

From the findings, it can be assumed that Sean Murray falls under the Visionary and Affiliative styles found within Spaulding and Goleman, from the founding of the company, it needed a clear direction or vision, that vision for Hello Games was unclear as they just wanted to create their own games. However, for No Man's Sky the vision was clear from the start, they knew what they wanted, and they made what they wanted, but due to the marketing mishaps this caused an unclear vision for the what the player's wanted the game to be. Along with the mishaps the team were hit hard emotionally,

Sean Murray as mentioned took the brunt of the negative comments, to avoid his team from having to be involved, he also set-up a Tumblr page to keep the team motivated, it was filled with all positive comments that Sean would come across, a good way to affiliate his team and keep morals high. Due to the small size throughout development, communication within the company was kept high, as found when the team split into micro-teams, they kept good communication allowing for an efficient workflow and direct communication being made to the leads.

CONCLUSION

From their previous indie release to arguably a AAA sized release, Hello Games truly pushed the bounds for what an independent company can achieve. Risking their livelihood to form a company, self-financing it with no help from external parties, allowing themselves to develop as they please whilst acknowledging the risks that they could fail at any moment truly shows just how much belief they had in themselves and Sean Murray to lead them. Whilst it was not perfect, they have certainly learnt from their past mistakes. No Man's Sky has gone beyond their initial vision, their use of visionary leadership and affiliative leadership helped them to progress and push through it all, gaining new like-minded members along the way. They managed to regain the trust of their community through direct communication with meaning and proof of word.

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