Forces in Play: The Business and Culture of Videogame Production

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ABSTRACT
This paper is a cultural analysis of the business of videogame production, the industry's personalities, its development practices and market influences. It is a critique of the 'I' methodology of game design and its influence on game content, especially characterization. It provides insight into the impact of US publishers and markets on Australian game development 2004-2009. Results of related studies and literature are reviewed and supplemented with anecdotal reports to construct a picture of the current forces in play in videogame production. While it may be fun to play games, it is often far from fun to make them.

Categories and Subject Descriptors
K.7.4 [**The Computing Milieux**]: The Computing Profession – *Professional Ethics*

General Terms
Design, Human Factors

Keywords
Videogame Production, Cultural Analysis, 'I' Methodology, Game Design, Character Design

1. INTRODUCTION
The cost of producing a top PlayStation 2 game in Australia in 2004 was about AUD12 million[1]. By 2007, Australian developer Auran had spent AUD15 million on its online PC game *Fury* [1]. The 2010 release of *LA Noire*, a PlayStation 3 adventure game by Australian game studio Team Bondi is purported to cost USD50 million to make[2].

Fun and Games 2010, September 15-17, 2010, Leuven, Belgium.

[1] Estimate given by industry panelist Dr Mike Cooper 'Games as Docos' seminar, Australian International Documentary Conference, Adelaide, Feb 2007

Videogames are big business. Sales were predicted to reach USD20 billion in 2009 [2], the majority of which would be game sales (software), not the consoles (hardware) that run them. If we compare US games revenue to games sales in Australia for 2008 – AUD1.96 billion (about USD1.3 billion at that time) [3], Australia is a drop in the ocean of the games market.

With the majority of game sales being overseas, over 80% of Australia's game production is for the export market [4]. Australian game development studios work for US publishers who pay for the game's production. These publishers 'call the shots'; Australian developers have little say over what type of game they make or what story or characters are in it [5].

In my experience as a game producer, the high cost of production, predominantly funded by publishers from the United States, puts considerable pressure on videogame development studios in Australia to produce high quality games on time and to budget. If their products drop in perceived quality, are delivered late or over budget, the studios risk closure. One of Australia's longest running, largest independent game developers, Krome, allegedly cut its staff from 400 to 285 between November 2009 and April 2010[3] after receiving poor reviews of its game *Star Wars Clone Wars: Republic Heroes* (Lucas Arts 2009). Officially the lay-offs were attributed to world-wide declining game sales and the poor USD to AUD dollar conversion[4]. In addition to sharing content and quality of life issues with their northern hemisphere colleagues, as reported by the International Games Developer Association in 2004, the Australians have their own unique set of challenges to deal with as international 'players' on the videogame development market.

Stuart Hall [6] in his encoding/decoding theory of media production and reception believed encoding a media message occurs during its production and that the production itself shapes the audience's reading of that message. Ideologies arise from practices of production and become entrenched in the workplace.

[2] 'Top ten video game budgets ever' http://www.digitalbattle.com/tag/video-game-budget/

[3] http://www.kotaku.com.au/2009/11/krome-boss-confirms-job-cuts/;http://www.tsumea.com/australasia/australia/news/220410/krome-studios-sheds-another-50-employees

[4] http://www.co-optimus.com/article/3018/Krome_Studios_Lays_Off_Staff_Due_to_Poor_Dollar_Conversion.html;

There are pressures and pleasures in game production. This paper peeks behind the closed and confidential[5] studio doors of game development studios to determine just how much the business and culture of game development influences the products that derive from it.

2. ROLLER-COASTER RIDE OF PRODUCTION

According to games industry recruiter Vicky Cairns "games offers a rollercoaster job; there are more highs and lows than any other industry I have ever seen" [7]. A game can be halfway through its production when its story and gameplay are changed, seemingly on the whim and predilection of the publisher. Sometimes it is a change for the better, sometimes it is not. If the developer is an independent fee-for-service studio, their contract with the publisher will include penalties for late delivery, such as a loss in royalties. So the studio cuts features and makes its staff work longer hours to maintain the timeline and accommodate the change in scope. Film and game writers Flint Dille and John Zuur Platten sum it up neatly: "In game development, everything always changes" [8]:

> Games, like most creative works, go through many changes on the road to fruition. However, a unique aspect of the videogame business is that it embraces the process of iteration. That means the development of a title doesn't necessarily have a gradual ramp upward to completion. Instead, there will be starts and stops, wrong turns, missteps, reversals and retreats, a refocusing of ideas, features-sets that are abandoned, levels that are cut, and new ideas that come flying in at the last minute, which makes everything better, but may also make everything that much harder. [8]

According to the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) over 80% of surveyed developers worked on projects that underwent changes during development [9]. Dille and Zuur Platten were especially skeptical about production schedules which they label as fabrications: "Almost every game development suffers from over-optimistic projections about schedule, budget, features – you name it" [8]. The IGDA's findings back up this perception. A third of developers surveyed thought schedules represented "wishful thinking that will only fit into reality if no unforeseen problems arise" [9].

The problem with scheduling arises from a confluence of issues: a lack of mature, experienced production staff and professionally trained managers and an iterative production methodology that encourages change and therefore uncertainty. These will be discussed shortly, but first let us examine the market forces in play.

3. SALES CONVENTION, MARKETING RULES

It is likely the developer's contract with the publisher will have bonuses or a percentage of royalties tied to a specified ranking on a videogame review website as an incentive for the developer to produce a high quality product[6]. There is a perceived correlation between game reviews, rankings and sales. To give an example of the ranking system, *Star Wars Clone Wars: Republic Heroes* on PS3 received a 43 on Metacritic (www.metacritic.com) which is considered 'unfavorable'. In the reviews, the game was criticized for its gameplay, content and control.

Publishers are predominantly concerned with what will sell best in large family retail chains such as in Walmart – the biggest retailer of console videogames in the United States. Sydney game studio CEO Luke Carruthers confirmed this is his June 2007 podcast on the business of gaming. He goes on to say that innovation is limited in this economic development environment. For example, game sales show 'shooters' are very popular. In 2007, the top-selling videogames in the US were shooting games *Halo 3* (2007) and *Call of Duty 4* (2007) [10]. While non-shooting Nintendo Wii games contended for the top spots in 2008 in Australia [3], sales figures in the first quarter of 2009 reported *Killzone 2* (2008) and *Halo Wars* (2008) in the top positions and Wii Fit (2007) in third place [10]. Even Nintendo, a traditionally family console publisher, recognizes the popularity and profitability of violent games. Their game *House of the Dead: Overkill* (2008) climbed the charts within a few months of its release to ninth place in Australia [11].

As long as 'shooters' continue to attract a large percentage of console game sales (at the time of the podcast, Carruthers estimated it was 40%), publishers will continue to make them and that is all they will want to make. In 2006 Cifaldi reported in *Gamasutra*, a videogame business and development website, that first-person shooters were a "growing and highly attractive genre" that contributed to a significant portion of videogame revenue (USD1.5 billion) in 2005 [12]. Referencing a report by software research analysts Jason Kraft and Chris Kwak, the *Gamasutra* journalist said publishers were attracted to the FPS genre due to its instant appeal and satisfaction for players.

Economics does not encourage diversity in the games industry. Publishers spend their money and resources on titles that promise to be strong sellers [13]. Games scholar Aphra Kerr believes that this is typical of media industries that start out with small-scale production and rapidly grow to corporations. "The move to create economies of scale in the games industry is being driven by the increasing costs of producing and marketing games, especially console games, the increasing power of retailers and other distribution gatekeepers…" [14]. Publishers deploy economies of scope, she says, "to reduce uncertainty of demand" [14]. Publishers pay for a game's production costs yet only a small percentage of games will make a profit. Kerr deduces that publishers have to broaden their selection of titles across a range of genres "to ensure they have at least one successful title" [14].

I would argue that games publishers have tended to cluster their titles in the most popular genres, such as action-shooters, and replicated games instead of innovating them. Australian game developer and educator Paul Callaghan presented an analysis of 107 videogames developed by Melbourne studios between 2000 and 2009 [15]. While original titles dominated in the early years,

[5] Game developers are required to sign non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) about the production of their products.

[6] Confidential discussion with Ubisoft publisher in 2004 which is further substantiated by a March 2009 article in *Edge* magazine called 'Quantifying quality' on page 9.

ports[7] and licensed titles increased dramatically from 2006, accounting for over three-quarters of games published in the past three years. The sheer volume of unoriginal games being produced indicates publishers and developers are focusing on low-risk titles in the videogame marketplace. Ironically, Callaghan concluded that the few original titles produced attracted higher review scores while reviews for sequels and ported games declined.

4. HOME IS WHERE THE GAME IS

In Australia, development studios do not have access to a huge bank of designers, artists or programmers experienced in games production. Importing developers from overseas costs money and takes at least three months. Three months is critical when you are less than a year away from beta[8]. So the studios train up existing staff. An employee can be a tester one month and a level designer the next in this industry. And they can be burnt out. The toll of long hours on staff and their families was well documented and publicized in 2004 by 'EA Spouse' [16] and in the IGDA's *Quality of Life White Paper* [9].

The IGDA reported that complaints from spouses about their partners working overtime and the associated stress affected over 60% of developers [9]. Originally writing online as an 'anonymous spouse' of a developer at Electronic Arts (EA), games designer Erin Hoffman labeled EA, known for its plethora of sports games, a 'money farm':

> To any EA executive that happens to read this, I have a good challenge for you: how about safe and sane labor practices for the people on whose backs you walk for your millions? [16]

Also a games industry journalist, Hoffman reported that within months after starting development on a game her partner was working six days a week even though the project was 'on schedule'. The producers scheduled 'crunch time' – overtime to meet milestone commitments for which the developers were not being paid, for example, working seven days a week and/or over eight hours a day. Crunch time is common in the industry but in 2004 in the US and Australia developers started to publicly question why they were not being paid for it and why each production period had it. Some studios provide extra time off at the end of a project as compensation for the unpaid labor but in the case of EA this did not happen. It was not until after a multimillion dollar court case two years later that work practices changed at EA. The programmers who collectively sued the games publisher were awarded USD14.9 million in compensation and casual employees were reclassified at an hourly rate [17].

According to the IGDA [9], 47% of game developers surveyed believed they were under significant pressure to release at a certain date, usually October in time for the Christmas market, and 38% of workers said they couldn't afford not to. Over 90% reported that they worked crunch time either before every milestone, at beta or monthly and that crunch time comprised between 65-80 hours per week. Work days often started at 6.30 AM and 1.00 AM finishes were common. One tester in the US reported not even going home. I worked with testers who napped on sofas in the office overnight and I myself rarely left the office before midnight.

Four years later, the work hours do not appear to have improved. Mia Consalvo's interviews with game developers revealed that "crunch time was so ingrained in the work culture that most individuals report 'feeling lucky' if they only have to work a standard 40-50 hour week" [18]. Consalvo said between 50 to 100 hours per week (for several weeks to several months) was much more common during the average 18-24 month production cycle:

> The work is project-based, and most often planned to conclude with the game's release during the most important buying time for any seller: the fourth quarter Christmas rush. Game development is then a continual battle between what is (the majority of the time) a hard deadline for launch, a series of creative, technical, and social challenges to meet in the process of developing a game. The result is an industry that often relies on 'crunch time' and 'passion' to shape artistic endeavors into business-shaped bottles. [18]

It is both ironic and unfortunate that, after months, if not years of crunch time on a project, production staff are let go and studios are closed around Christmas time, shortly after the release of their game and before the end of the northern hemisphere financial year. Adelaide game studio Ratbag was closed by Midway mid-December 2005. Brisbane developer Auran went into voluntary administration mid-December 2007. Krome reduced its staff by over one-third after November 2009. All three independent Australian game studios were established in the 1990s.

Hoffman blames the games development work ethic on large game conglomerates absorbing smaller studios and out-performing those studios that do not sell out. The smaller independent studios cannot compete against teams with accelerated development schedules resulting from continuous unpaid 'crunch time' and fold. The alternative is to accept and incorporate crunch time in a project's development which became common in independent studios across the world. The IGDA reported that half the studios surveyed believed overtime and crunch time was "a normal part of doing business" [9].

5. MASTERMINDS IN THE WORKPLACE

Scheduling is problematic when new technology is being developed and is further exacerbated by changing scope. What a designer thinks is simple to code, a programmer does not. The programmer may add a few weeks of padding to their time estimate to develop a feature and fully intend to use it only to have the producer cut out those weeks to make it fit in the timeline. The IGDA reported that management-developer rivalry arises out of a misunderstanding of roles and distrust.

> We asked developers to point out the specific failings of the people they thought were "bad" examples of other professions. A number of programmers and designers said that "bad" producers lack practical knowledge of how to run a project and harbor an unfounded conviction that they know

[7] The transfer of content and gameplay to another gaming platform

[8] Games like most software products have three major outcomes of production described as 'alpha' (a working product with sections unfinished), 'beta' (a working product with sections finished but unpolished and with errors or 'bugs') and 'gold master' (a finished, polished and presumably bug-free product).

> how to design a game. Producers thought "bad" programmers were overambitious and unable to comprehend the importance of deadlines. [9]

Interestingly, the IGDA attributes this workplace dysfunction to an imbalance of personalities, saying psychometric testing and comprehensive interviews are rare in the games industries. The Myers-Briggs organization identifies 16 personality types. Games designer Chris Bateman identified one of the personality types, INTJ – strategist, vision-holder and mastermind, as one of two personalities best suited for designing games. Using temperament theory, another personality classification system investigated by Bateman, the same person could be identified as a 'rationalist':

> Those who express the Rational temperament as their primary pattern generally display a strong desire for autonomy, tending towards libertarian or even anarchistic political beliefs, or at the very least a desire to be **their own master** [my emphasis] in their workplaces. [19]

Bateman's hypothesis about game designer personalities is based on anecdotal evidence and not quantitative analysis but the subject is worthy of further research, especially as effort has already gone into identifying player personality types, notably the Brainhex and Bartle tests.

Most developers, including programmers, artists and producers, contribute to the design of a game or believe they have a right to. Dille and Zuur Platten devote two chapters to advising external writers on how to cope with the group decision-making in games development:

> Video games, more than just about any other entertainment medium, are a collaborative art form. You'll never hear the key grip comment on an actor's performance on a film set, but in games, the 3D modelers are more than willing (and, in fact, encouraged) to comment on the creative elements of the game, whether it directly affects their department or not. [8]

Fullerton stipulates that collaboration is a given for any successful game project: "The end result should be that everyone who works on the game should have a sense of authorship in the final product…" [13]. While Dille and Zuur Platten and Fullerton prefer the term 'collaborative' to describe the authoring process in game development, I propose the collaboration arises out of an inherent controlling trait in the personality types of the developers themselves. The authoring process of game production is a process of mediation between multiple masterminds.

6. MACHISMO ON THE PRODUCTION FLOOR

Game development is one of the last bastions of male predominance in the commercial entertainment world. According to a 2005 IGDA demographics survey with over 6400 world-wide responses, 88.5% were male, 83.5% were white and the average age was 31 [20]. Women comprised 11.5% of game developers. Media training researcher Lizzie Haines found it was more like 16-17% in the UK, but almost three-quarters of those women were not involved in creating games [21]. They were predominantly administrative and marketing staff. In her report 'Why are there so few women in games?', Haines concluded that areas of design, programming and audio had the least female representation and female production staff and artists still represented less than 10% of the total personnel in those roles. *Gamasutra* does not name one woman in its top game developers list.[9]

The *Game Career Guide Fall 2009* provides 2008 US, Canadian and European statistics on gender and salary breakdown across the disciplines. Women represented only 9% of the 2725 developers surveyed: 3% of programmers, 10% of artists/animators, 6% of designers, and 21% of producers [22]. Surprisingly the number of women in quality assurance and testing had risen from 6% in 2007 to 14% in 2008 [23, 22]. In 2004 level designer Katie Lea spoke of her experience of being one of six females in a UK team of 80 developers [7]. At one stage in my game production career I was the only female on the production floor in a development team of 60.

The fact is more males create 3D models of female game characters than female developers do. They make them in the mould of their fantasy bikini-clad blond or buxom stripper, no matter how ridiculous this might look in gameplay or unfeasible in reality. Size 36 C-cup Angelina Jolie, who played Lara Croft in the *Tombraider* movies, had to wear a padded bra and still did not come close to the triple D proportions of the game character she was portraying. [24] Real-life model Rhona Mitra had her breasts surgically enhanced to better approximate the size of the game figure she represented in *Tombraider* marketing campaigns. [24] 'Boob motion' has even been turned into a game mechanic for the action game *Ninja Gaiden Sigma 2* (Tecmo 2009) and is used as a 'point of difference' to market the game. One online viral marketing campaign[10] shows male game players nodding trancelike until it is finally revealed that they are using the PlayStation controller to move a female character's breasts up and down.

Abnormal sexual representations of the female game figure cannot totally be blamed on their male creators. As game scholar Taylor reports in a conversation with game designer Brad McQuaid about the human female characters in the massive online multiplayer role-playing game *EverQuest*, the female art director (Rosie Rappaport) at the company that developed *EverQuest* "felt strongly that the male and female characters should be 'exaggerated' or, more precisely 'glamourized'… sort of like 'Barbie and Ken' ... The result was the somewhat controversial appearance of many of the female characters, they being voluptuous and often scantily clad…" [25]. Stereotyped portrayals of female characters in games are inherent in the industry.

Females who work in games production either choose to stay and support the stereotypes they and their male counterparts create or leave the industry. According to the IGDA, they are more likely to leave. If they stay, they will encounter behaviors considered unacceptable in other industries. For example, at my workplace it was a normal procedure for staff to have detailed photographs taken of their bodies as a contribution to the texture libraries in the studio's archives. The process of taking the photos can be quite invasive, with a camera held only inches away from exposed

[9] 'The Game Developer 50' *Gamasutra* http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/4323/the_game_developer_50.php

[10] http://www.gametrailers.com/video/japanese-bounce-ninja-gaiden/56118

areas such as the arms and cleavage. This attention towards a co-worker's body can be argued as being 'strictly professional'. The artist is only interested in how he or she can apply the skin texture and shape to a current character model. But what most artists do is exaggerate the real-world body into a highly fantasized one. A female developer will be aware of this every time she encounters her character in the game.

In 'Hegemony of Play' the authors discuss how "the game industry [has] free reign to exercise a wide variety of gender and racially discriminatory practices and stereotyping, in both the workplace and in the content they create, that would be unacceptable in any other field" [26]. They blame it on the industry's chosen market demographic of young males: "…it is often a struggle to create content that is outside the current definitions of successful game products" [26] because 'success' is defined by white males. Games producer Nour Pollini could not convince her team to dress a female player character in baggy pants instead of a string bikini [26].

Female objectification is as prevalent on the production floor and in the players' homes as it is in the games themselves. The controversy surrounding Ubisoft producer Jade Raymond is a case in point. Ubisoft used the attractive and articulate young woman to promote the game *Assassin's Creed* (2007). Jade's image appears in marketing material, she hosts the developer diary videos and she appears in numerous interviews such as those for game print and online magazines *IGN* and *NextGen*.[11] The gaming public's backlash against her was based on their sexist reaction to an attractive female game developer.

The fact that Jade has a programming and graphic design background held little sway. The fact that a male creative director and a male level designer were also interviewed and hosted the developer diary videos was overlooked.[12] It was generally believed that she was only hired for her looks. Ubisoft capitalized on the novelty of having a young attractive female games producer. When I produced a game for Ubisoft in 2004, I was the first female producer the publisher's representative had ever encountered. I was filmed for the game's own version of a developer diary and interviewed for TV. I would like to think that I was a role model, but women in the videogames industry were, and still are, so rare that I was merely a curiosity.

Anecdotal reports from women in game development suggest that games studios can encourage sexual discrimination towards women. One woman on the IGDA's 'women in game development' email list reported overhearing an executive producer at her studio complaining that he would have to fire a young attractive female animator because she was distracting her male co-workers, many of whom were flirting with her.[13] Sexuality is integral to the business of games. Closing game deals at strip clubs is not unusual. I was asked to attend 'meetings' at strip clubs on several occasions both in the US and Australia.

Controversy around female game developers is not restricted to the inner sanctum of the game studio. It spills out into the gaming community, as in the situation with Jade Raymond, stirs the game development community and shocks the public media. Adelaide-based writer and co-producer Holly Owen and technical director and co-producer Karyn Lanthois attended the Australian Games Developer Conference for the first time in 2007 to promote their mobile RPG game *Coolest Girl in School* (2008). The game's goal is to "Lie, bitch, and flirt your way to the top of the high school ladder". Owen and Lanthois said they were all but ignored by the other game developers at the conference for producing a 'girl game' until news of the game hit the media before it was released.[14] Suddenly they went from invisibility to ignominy. The game was condemned by the Australian Family Association. The developers were accused of warping young girl's minds and encouraging teens to take drugs and have sex [27, 28]. Morally questionable games and films are produced for teenage consumption every year. What made *Coolest Girl* so outrageous: that it was pitched to young females or that it was created by women?

US game designers Heather Kelley and Erin Robinson attracted similar controversy at the Games Developer Conference (GDC) in the US in 2009. They were the first women to win the GDC game design challenge. That year it was autobiographically themed. The two women designed a two-level dating simulation incorporating a series of mini-games based on losing one's virginity. Feedback from fellow developers ranged from 'laughable, insulting and unrealistic' to it being seen as a classily pitched and sexually revolutionary game.[15] The controversial game design even made it onto CNN news [29]. Why did the game design elicit such strong reactions? Was it the content or the game's creators?

Stepping away from public opinion and returning to the industry workplace, Haines reported in her 2004 UK survey that a quarter of women in games felt it was not a good work environment for women citing crunch time, sexism in the workplace, unequal treatment/pay and the lack of female colleagues as some of the reasons. Krotoski also reported that women game developers had a substantially lower starting salary than their male counterparts. As of 2008 women game developers received salaries that were on average $12,000 below their male counterparts [22]. Strangely, other women in Haines' survey gave the opposite reason for why they liked working in games: flexible hours, respect from male colleagues, equal treatment and females in senior roles.

[11] Video clips can be viewed on YouTube, eg http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oDWabHnSxtg for a developer diary video and http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OoUp1Cg0-fE&feature=related for an IGN interview called '*Assassin's Creed* TGS 2007: Jade Raymond IGN Interview'.

[12] The Creative Director of the game, Patrice Desilets, an attractive male, was also featured in the developer diary video clips. A male level designer was interviewed in the French video clip 'Jade Raymond interview: *Assassin's Creed*: The Pixel Queen' http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FFz8-RNx818&feature=related.

[13] Email subject thread 'Hostile Environments' women_dev Digest 24-28 January 2009 Vol. 54 Issues 32-36

[14] As reported by Owen and Lanthois who presented at a Mega09 seminar 12 March 2009 Adelaide Australia

[15] Subject thread 'Game on Losing One's Viginity' women_dev Digest 30 March 2009 Vol. 56 Issues 25-27

Every woman that I have worked with in games production has left the industry. The primary reason, according to Consalvo, is not sexism in the workplace. Consalvo interviewed ten women in games development to discover what makes them want to stay or go. She identified a passion for games keeps women and their male counterparts in the industry and the long hours force them to leave. My greatest challenge when I worked full-time in games development was being creative and even-tempered while working 12-hour days, six days a week, for months at a time. One of Consalvo's interviewees, a game designer, left the large game development company she worked for after continuous 12-14 hour days: "They let us out one Sunday after eight hours, and told us we should be grateful we didn't have to stay for twelve" [18].

If long hours drive women as well as men away from games development, passion may be what attracts them to the industry and keeps them there. According to games recruiter Vicky Cairns, "despite the insecurity of many projects, the team still works with dedication and passion for what they do" [7]. Consalvo cites numerous job descriptions that list 'a passion for games' as a position criterion. Three of her interviewees said they had tried to quit, have quit and returned, or plan to return because they are addicted to working on games and are unable to not think about game design. The only way I could justify my decision to exit the industry was to study it full-time and contribute to game concepts and content part-time. Despite the long hours (or perhaps because them), I was on a creative 'high' and didn't want to give it up. According to Consalvo, game studios use this passion to maintain work practices that ultimately kill it. She cites one recruiter: "the game industry is far more exploitative of its talent than any other entertainment discipline that I've ever seen" [18].

The consequences to having passionate and experienced people leave the industry in what can only be described as an excessively high turnover rate is that this practice sustains a work culture that valourises "youth, passion and long hours over maturity and experience" and "institutional knowledge is constantly being lost" [18]. While a passion for games may be a driving force in game creation, games might be better budgeted, scheduled and managed by experienced professionals from more established and stable media industries.

7. PLAY TO GET PAID

Despite the games industry purportedly being more exploitative of its creative talent, its production model has a lot in common with the film industry, especially when it comes to producing an animated cut scene. Game developers can learn from their more entrenched media colleagues. Film and TV writers are employed to raise the quality of story and dialogue in games, yet many still lack the skill to deliver game-ready scripts. Game technology and gameplay have a huge impact on how a script is written and rewritten. The game designer will cut a line of dialogue in a game if it is too long for an action to take place. In the words of one Australian lead game programmer: "Gameplay always wins in a face off against story or graphics."[16] Game designer-writer Deborah Todd is emphatic – "Story is NOT king" – the game mechanics, art and sound are what is important. [30] In my experience, the work of external scriptwriters requires heavy editing to integrate it into a game. That editing is usually performed by a games designer who is largely inexperienced in creative writing. Designer Clint Hocking reported he had to cut a massive 75% of cinematic scripts written by a traditional scriptwriter because they were outside of the scope of the games budget to implement. [31]

It is a prerequisite that game designers, level designers, testers and writers play the types of games their studio is making. The *Game Career Guide Fall 2009* advocates that designers play games to enter the industry. Games academic Frans Mayra confirms that engaging in gameplay is crucial to understanding the "structural" and "thematic" elements of games [32]. A common emphasis of game design guides reviewed by Olli Sotamaa was on the importance of playing to acquire understanding and expertise [33]. Developers need to be familiar with similar games on the market, analyse the graphics, the gameplay and the story to make a better and/or differentiated product. According to game writer Wendy Despain:

> …to be a good writer, you have to read a lot and you have to write a lot. This is just as true for game writing as long as you also include playing a lot. Playing videogames should be a regular habit. [34]

Game scholars Hayot and Wesop's interview with *Everquest* games designer Brad McQuaid revealed that developers need to play their game in order to experience it how the players experience it [35]. Personal tastes and skill set should not be an impediment to play, but with sometimes it is. For example, some developers dislike the violence in shooting games and find them difficult to play. An aversion to playing violent games would be a problem in an environment that makes them. It would be difficult to check the gameplay in one's own and competitors' games. When an aspiring female programmer voiced her distaste for the violent game she was working on, she was advised by another female game developer to "suck it up and take the work with a smile".[17]

Game Developer Carruthers believes keeping the same development teams on different types of games is an economic model that is not conducive to the best game design or game story. A person who writes or designs good comedy may not make an equivalently good action thriller. Yet development companies will have the same narrative and/or games designer work on a number of different game genres. While there are similarities in script production between film/TV and games, there are technical skills that once learned are invaluable to the studio who 'trained' the writer-designer. It is not in the economic interest of the studio to let go of their investment.

8. "I" METHODOLOGY

There is a correlation between the predominance of young white males represented in games and young white males making games. Statistics from a character survey of games published in 2005-06 indicate white males represent over 85% of player-characters [38]. "We really set out to make the game we wanted to play… we set out to make the game we wanted to make" [35], said games designer Brad McQuaid in an interview about

[16] Industry panelist (Lead Programmer Krome Adelaide) Dr Mike Cooper "Games as Docos" seminar, Australian International Documentary Conference Feb 2007

[17] women_dev Digest Vol 57 Issue 1 on 1 April 2009

Everquest. Most developers play games before becoming game-makers and make games they like to play – games with heroes in their own, often idealized, image.

Figure 1 *Left*: Clint Hocking wins 2003 Excellence in Writing award for *Splinter Cell*. *Right*: Player-character Sam Fisher from *Splinter Cell* games (2006, 2002).

According to Taylor, the designers' technique of representing users as themselves, or 'I' methodology, is the most widely used one in games development [36]. While Brad McQuaid claims color- and gender-blindness permeate his game designs [36], he like other white male developers is perhaps merely blind to his own bias. In a self-perpetuating cycle, game characters reflect the aspirations of game makers and in turn inspire game players:

> …games and gender work as a cycle: games feature more males and so attract more young males to play. Those males grow up and are more likely to become gamemakers than women, perpetuating the role of males in game creation… [37]

The result has been not only cloned games but cloned creators, cloned characters and attempts to clone players. According to *Everquest*'s designer, "our core demographic, not by design but simply by fact, were approximately 18-30 year old males" [25]. This is consistent with my experience in the industry. The concepts I wrote for console games were almost always aimed at the 18-35 male demographic. None specified race. It was presumed our audience was white. Williams, et al, surmised: "the stereotype of game players as only young, white males who want to be powerful white adults may be driving the content-creation process, even as the player base becomes older and more diverse" [37]. *Everquest*'s audience eventually became more popular with older females than young males. [38]

Racial representation across media in the US, especially television, shows similar results, eg over-representation of white characters in comparison to US population statistics [37]. However, videogames are unique in their extreme gender disparity. No other media under-represents the female population to such a degree as games. The under-representation, however, is comparable with that of women in the industry. Of the 8725 characters surveyed in 'The Virtual Census' only 15% were female and less than 11% of player-characters were female [37].

9. GAMES REFLECT THE LIVES OF THEIR COLLECTIVE CREATORS

The people who make the games we play and influence their content are:

- Studio Producers
- Publishing Producers
- Games Designers
- Level Designers
- Writers
- Art Directors
- 3D Artists and 2D artists
- Animators
- Programmers
- Testers

Studio producers project manage the development team and are responsible for keeping the game on budget and to schedule. They deal with high level issues and liaise with the publisher and the leads on the project. The publishing producer plays a similar role for the game's publisher in that he or she is responsible for the high level schedule and budget of the game including production, post-production, marketing and distribution. Publishing producers sign off on milestone deliverables and ensure the studio is paid. If a variety of SKUs are being produced across a range of studios, eg one studio might be responsible for Xbox development and another Nintendo Wii, the publishing producer looks after all of them for the game. While a studio producer has a high level overview of the game on a particular platform, the publishing producer has an even higher overview, not only across multiple platforms, but also multiple regions and, importantly, broader aspects of the game's marketing and distribution campaign. It is easy to see how much influence they can have over a game's direction. I have seen one publishing producer make a player-character a baseball player simply because he liked the ball game. The videogame was not about baseball.

"Much like film directors are to movies, designers are known for having a large influence (creative or otherwise) on the direction a game takes, from the early concept stage to final release" [23]. Game designers hold the overall vision of a video game and "are responsible for the play experience" [13]. They and level designers, make sure the "gameplay works at all levels" [13]. Whereas a game designer works at a macro-level, level designers work on the micro-details of gameplay. Game designers write the game design documentation which outlines key features and gameplay. Level designers work under the game designer on specific levels or missions of the game.

Writers, or narrative designers as they are being called now, are mainly responsible for the story and dialogue in game. Scriptwriters might focus on writing a story treatment or cut scene script and writer-designers attend to story progression within gameplay. The former are usually outsourced and the latter are in-house. Interestingly, the *Game Career Guide Fall 2008* makes no mention of writers, which possibly reflects the established practice in games development for the design team to write the story. The *Fall 2009* version of the guide included game writers in the design section but did not specify what they do. At the very least writers create the story premise for a game which contributes to the creative vision of it.

Artists headed by the most senior of visual creatives, the Art Director, followed by leads in 3D, 2D and animation are responsible for making the game assets such as characters, props, special effects and the gameworld itself. Their talents might combine modeling, illustration and animation skills using graphic technical software. Their influence over a game's narrative is

subtle but pervasive. An artist's graphic portrayal of a character has the same effect as an illustrator's work in a children's book. The audience takes its cue from the images. That is not to say the words or 'voice' of the character do not have impact. Indeed, voiceover from a professional actor can lift and differentiate an otherwise clichéd character.

Programmers implement the designers' features and the artists' assets. They make the game function as a work of playable software. Programmers may fail to implement a feature or change a feature to make its inclusion achievable, thereby influencing the way story and gameplay are expressed in a game.

Quality assurance (QA) testers systematically detect problems with a game and are the first point of feedback on a game's appeal and its "last line of defence" before the game hits the market shelves [23]. Testers hold 'veto' or 'editing' rights on a game's features which include cut scenes and dialogue. If something does not work, the testers will recommend removing or changing it.

Games reflect the lives of their collective creators, be they developers or publishers. Market and economic forces, as well as 'public opinion', affect the types of games that are made and not made. Fullerton, et al and Consalvo agree: "As with any creative industry, it is important to understand how industry and professional constraints, biases, affordances and practices all shape…the products that are created…" [18].

To analyze a game in all its complexity involves going beyond the game text itself and studying the game's production. Some developers are open to making this process transparent. *Half Life 2* (2004) featured a 'behind the scenes' look at what went into and was left out of the game's cut scenes. Other publishers produce 'developer diaries' similar to the ones that featured Jade Raymond for *Assassin's Creed*. While this represents an edited and promotional version of one aspect of the game's story development, it at least provides insight into the process.

Insight into what goes on behind the closed and confidential doors of development studios is more problematic. Ethnographic surveys can only go so far towards revealing the reasons behind game content and mechanics. Surveys do not reveal that a particular 3D modeler prefers unnaturally voluptuous female characters, that a programmer could not deliver a feature on time so it was cut from the game, that the player character carries a bat because the publisher likes baseball, that the writer was instructed to write a cheesy hot tub scene by a manager who spent far too much time making deals in strip clubs, or that a level is disappointing because a freshly promoted tester made it.

The environment in which Australian games are created is a highly innovative, resourceful, collaborative, masculine and turbulent workplace subject to the whims of erratic and far-away publishing direction, masterminds jockeying for their 'say' in the design and a diminishing budget. While the impact of the creators' environment may appear irrelevant to a content analysis of the game, it is vital to the process of designing the game.

Diversity in the workplace and innovation in game content is as much about professionalism as it is creativity. Perhaps it is not so much a question of including more women in development but including people that are not traditional game players. Holly Owen, writer-producer of *Coolest Girl in School* (2006) is a self-confessed non-gamer. Owen made a social game for teen-age girls that did not reinforce traditional game stereotypes. She is a successful writer-producer in other forms of media.

Including game production in academic qualifications such as media degrees demonstrates to students that games is just as professional a career option as film, television, print, web and multimedia. According to Fullerton et al, "Academics are in a unique position of training the next generation game professionals and can potentially influence all their students both male and female to critique, reconsider and possibly reconstruct the status quo of male-domination in the games industry" [13].

Innovation beyond gender issues, however, may lie in the personality of the player and therefore the game creator. While play continues to be a determining factor in game development employment, the same behaviors will perpetuate in the videogame industry.

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