Interview with Double Fine Producer

Cole Pergerson 02/03/2021

This is a paraphrased version of a longer video interview with Michael Tucker, a producer at Double Fine. Based in San Francisco, CA, Double Fine Productions is a game development studio that is best known for making Psychonauts, a classic action/adventure platformer. The original interview with Michael was held in June 2020 to help James, Tom, and Cole teach SJSU students about project management in game development.

Here is a link to the full video interview: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cGjyi71H6NY

Interview with Michael Tucker

Cole: Should we do introductions??

James: Yea, that would be a good idea!

Tom Austin: I'm Tom Austin, I teach modeling and I'm the BFA modeling advisor for most years.

James Morgan: I'm a James Morgan I teach in the digital media arts I'm also the advisor for the game development Club and I teach a class in game studies.

Cole Pergerson: I'm Cole Pergerson, I'm a student at SSU and my major is Digital Media Art and I've been making games for about three years and trying to learn more.

Michael Tucker: I'm Michael Tucker I'm a producer at Double Fine productions and San Jose State Alumni of the animation illustration program.

Tom: I'm an advisor for Animation BFA projects and there is a recurring problem where artists can't understand or work with programmers and vice versa. How do you get different disciplines to work together effectively? Are there any tools that you recommend for managing teams?

Michael: At Double Fine, we use a product management tool called JIRA, which is an obtuse and standard tool in the industry. For a smaller team, I recommend using Trello because JIRA is best for large teams. Using Trello is much more similar, it's like digital sticky notes that you would place on a SCRUM board. For those who don't know, SCRUM is a software development process that would be valuable for any student to understand when working with others. It's a way to get different groups to work together, quickly review their work, and make next-step decisions that are appropriate at that time. With Trello, you can create a list of to-dos that you and your team agree to do over a course of time which is what we call a sprint.

James: What does a SCRUM sprint look like for programmers and artists?

Michael: Typically every team has their own goals and are working together to meet deadlines. To get to that point can be very difficult during the beginning stages of production. For instance, you can't test much until the programmers build the features and you still have no idea if those features will be fun when they're made. At the same time, you have artists working on assets and those need to be put into the game and tested. If there is a problem, there never is a clear solution which leads to teams butting heads. Once all the core features are created, then at that point, you're just playing the game and choosing things to improve. Managing that process is much easier. I often read dev logs or post mortems to see how other studios handle problems. Gamasutra.com is a great resource and I recently read a blog from a playstation studio developing Astro Bot. They explained how they design one of their boss battles which involve lots of iteration. First the designers and artists would sketch out an idea and then the programmers would take that and make a playable prototype. Once the sprint ended, they would review the prototype and decide what they would do next. They continued that iterative cycle until they were happy with the boss battle. That's how, ideally, different disciplines would work together in a sprint.

James: When you're talking about the end of a sprint, what's the evaluation process?

Michael: So the sprint is kind of like a smaller breakdown of a larger goal called milestones. We layout milestones months apart with keystone goals. It's not common that these milestones change since it's unknown how long features will take to finish at the beginning of production. So if we were making a 3D platformer, the first milestone might be just getting a play character walking and jumping around an empty environment with animations. Once we layout the milestones, we split the time between milestones into manageable steps called sprints. When a team finishes a sprint, their team lead will tell them whether what they made will or not work. If there is a problem, then that means future sprints need to be readjusted but that's ok.

Tom: Let's say you need a character for your 3D platformer, well the artists need to make everything and a character model could take months to create. So for a sprint, maybe the artists could give the programmers a prebuilt player model with animations that they can test. That could be fine right? They can just replace it later.

Michael: Yea definitely! So if a sprint goal is to get the player model working in game, then you would break down all the tasks that need to be done in order to do that. You might use a generic player model and not the actual finished model. The goal is to see something 3D moving in a level using controller input. Sprint two could be getting animations playing on the model. In the meantime, the artists could have been working on the player model, so by sprint three, the team can try to transfer the finished model into the game. This process can get complicated pretty quickly because of issues that I ran into in school and still run into work. When different disciplines start relying on each other, then you have to shift pieces around if someone ends up taking longer than expected because of other issues. People quickly become blocked. Like if an artist needs to model a character but the concept team hasn't decided what the character will look like, then the character modeler is just sitting there, doing nothing. The first half of the project is constantly dealing with that, but getting time estimates from everyone is incredibly helpful.

Tom: One thing that I found useful for managing was getting those time estimates from team members. I would ask how long would it take to do A, B, C, and D. So as they break down each task, they start to see all the complexities and may realize that a particular task will take longer than expected. Typically, If that team member has done the task before, then I would trust their estimate, if not, then I would double the estimate.

Michael: Yea, we tend to pick like 30% to 50% of padding on all our estimates. You know 50 seems like a lot but oftentimes that has been almost exactly accurate. It does take a certain amount of trust from them because you're basically asking them how good they are at their job. You need to be clear that you aren't trying to be judgemental, you're just trying to put the task on schedule. A task is going to take as long as it takes so there is no pretending. People start to appreciate what you do because you're trying to make sure everyone is moving as smoothly as possible and no one is blocked.

Cole: Is there anything that other people take for granted for what a producer does or maybe does it appreciate what a producer does?

Michael: I'm not super knowledgeable in a particular subject and I have to sit down with people and have them explain what they need to do so I can write something in JIRA with a clear description. That gets people to think about any possible hiccups early that they didn't think at first. Running meetings is another important thing that a producer will do because it's easy for team members to go off in tangents. A meeting can go on for hours with addressing the core problem that brought the meeting together originally. So making sure people are focused on the right thing saves time. One thing I didn't like at first but is now something I find really important is

note taking. While the meeting is going on, I will be writing down what has been said, what has been agreed on, what are the problems, etc. We often forget what we said so having notes to look at for a reference is super helpful for a team. Using Google doc allows team members to go back after the meeting and leave questions.

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