

# Knights Of The Round Table



**OR:**  
**HOW PUBLISHERS CAN MAKE THEIR DEVELOPERS CREATE  
GREAT GAMES ON TIME**

**OR:**  
**HOW DEVELOPERS CAN MAKE THEIR PUBLISHERS **LET**  
THEM CREATE GREAT GAMES ON TIME**

# About The Speaker



- Has been making games since '88.
- Worked on roughly a dozen titles as a developer in the trenches.
- Was responsible for more than a dozen others as Development Director at Blue Byte, JoWooD and Sunflowers.
- Best known titles:  
The Settlers 3 and 4, Gothic 2, Spellforce 1 and Anno 1701 (1701 A.D.)
- Now working as a freelance Game Production Consultant.

# About this talk



- This talk is independent of the project management methods that you use.
- It's not about project management. It's about **enabling** project management by laying out a project structure and a set of agreements between publisher and developer.
  - So, well, yeah, in a way it's too about project management ;-)
- Also, it'll feature some real world proven practical tips that are beneficial to any development cycle.
  - The time frames in this talk refer to AAA production cycles, but the introduced methods work with shorter projects just as well.
- In the end, this talk is about acknowledging some inconvenient truths and how to act accordingly.

# The Battle Field (Of Developer- Publisher Relationships)



- Historical and recent project failures shaped the relationship between Publishers / Financiers and Development Studios.
- Lack of experience made early game projects often run way over their time and money budget .
  - Today, the sprawling complexity of modern games makes even experienced developers struggle with hitting deadlines.
- Publishers tried to address these uncertainties by internal and external policies.
- This has led to an arms race of open and concealed procedures on both sides that are supposed to protect the respective interests.

# The Propaganda (Misconceptions On Both Sides)



The Prejudice		The Reaction		The Result
<i>“Developers lie about the project scope/deadline/cost.”</i>	→	<i>“Lets negotiate a smaller budget and keep an internal shadow budget.”</i>	→	Developer scrambles from the beginning on, wastes time on “smoke and mirrors”.
<i>“Publishers are cheap skates who won’t pay for the quality level that they order.”</i>	→	Lie about the project scope/deadline/cost. Renegotiate when Publisher investment is significant.	→	Publisher gets caught in their investment. Mistrustful relationship.
<i>“Without tight control a developer won’t meet deadlines.”</i>	→	Micro-managing the project, persisting on obsolete features.	→	Frustrated developer, lower product quality.

# The Propaganda (Misconceptions On Both Sides)



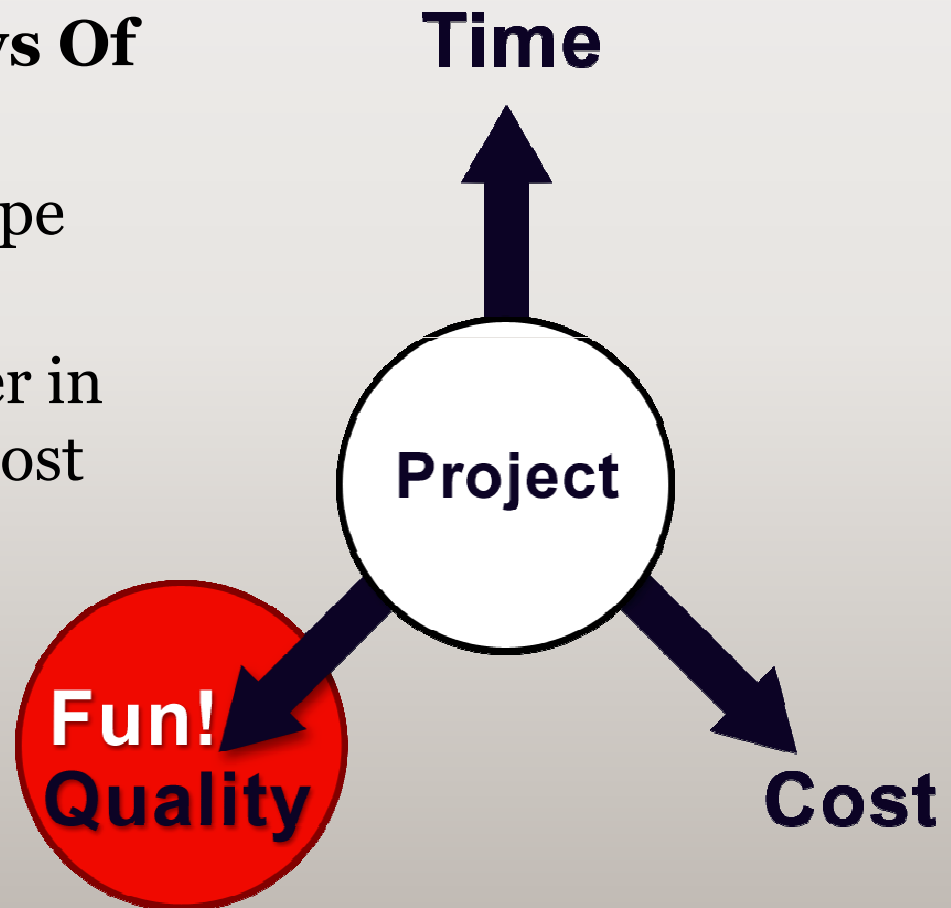
The Prejudice		The Reaction		The Result
<i>“Developers are creative slobs – they are prone to waste our money.”</i>	→	Publisher sets impossible goals in order to “maximize” efficiency.	→	Pressure and re-negotiations damage product quality severely.
<i>“We got to lure the publisher into the deal.”</i>	→	Developer makes promises that are impossible to keep.	→	Pressure and re-negotiations damage product quality severely.

# The Facts: Laws Of Project Nature



## You can't cheat the Laws Of (Project) Nature!

- Especially, you can't escape the "Magic Triangle".
- And the triangle is trickier in games projects than in most other software projects because of the fun factor.



# The Facts: Laws Of Project Nature

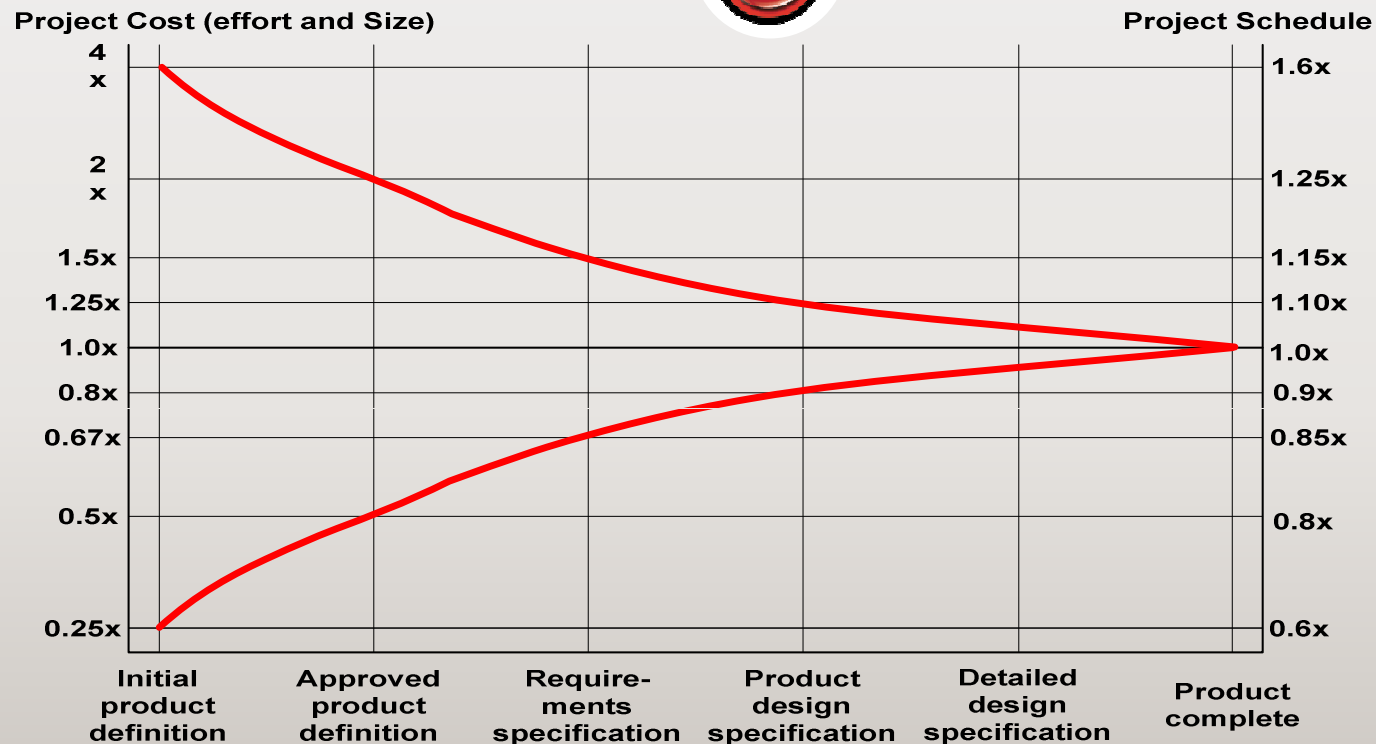


## Laws Of (Project) Nature

- Developers hardly ever strategically over-project a budget, it's more likely that they under-estimate the effort needed.
- “You can’t control what you can’t measure.” (Tom de Marco).
  - Publishers are a vital part of the measuring process!
- Modern games are so complex that they can’t be precisely estimated from Day 1!



# The Facts: Laws Of Project Nature



- “*The Cone Of Uncertainty* implies that it is not only difficult to estimate a project accurately in the early stages, it is *theoretically impossible*.”

Source: Software Project Survival Guide,  
Steve McConnell, Microsoft Press

# The Facts: Real World Experiences



## War Story Time!

- How a group of senior developers amounting to 80 years of experience underestimated Anno 1701 by more than 50%
- **Why** a group of senior developers amounting to 80 years of experience underestimated Anno 1701 by more than 50%
  - Initial project plan featured about 5000 tasks with < 5 days of work.
  - This amount of complexity cannot be estimated correctly.
- → Time needs to be allocated to define and collect all tasks.

# The Solution



- The Enemy: Wishful thinking and secret fallbacks.
- Project planning and -management is hard and every professional publisher makes sure that a developer is up to this task.
- However, the **foundation** which allows any project management method to work starts much earlier!
- When a deal is about to be signed, it's time to negotiate more than features, timeline and budget...

# Project Structure



- Negotiate a Project Structure at the beginning:
  - When can which project parameter be determined (and why)?
  - Defines project phases (pre-production, main production, alpha, beta and so on) and...
  - Top-level deliverables like prototypes, alpha, closed beta, open beta.
- Principle: Publisher gives developer time (and limited funds) for careful planning - Developer commits much stronger to the resulting schedule.

# Project Structure



## Project Structure

PPP	Preprod	Main Production	Alpha	B	
Basic Design	Prototype(s)	Milestones	Honing of main features	Debugging only	Gold!
Define risks and prototype	Detailed Design	Predefined Redesign of critical features	Debugging		
Design & plan prototype	Mutual, detailed feature specification	Goal: Alpha (feature complete)	Polishing		
ROUGH estimation time & cost budget	Project plan, top-level-milestones		Balancing		
	Final time & cost budget		Goal: beta (debugging only)		

# Project Structure



- Give enough time for feature polishing (alpha to beta) and debugging.
- Kill features if you must, but don't cut these stages too much.
- Write down and sign off definitions for “main production”, “alpha” and “beta” and a set of rules for these stages e.g.
  - No unplanned publisher requests for marketing material from a certain point on.
    - Do your best to get a detailed marketing asset plan. Sign off fallback plan if they don't deliver and make some assets up-front.
  - No major feature change requests from ALL sides in alpha to beta.

# The Preproduction: Key To Success



- The Preproduction is the most important development stage.
- The goal: A prototype that addresses the biggest project risk(s).
- Also, it gives a small team of experienced people the chance to figure out the project scope. It CAN'T be precisely guessed in a matter of weeks at the beginning.
- Go through the laborious process of designing and time estimating every task of the project before starting main production.
- I'm aware that these plans and documents WILL change. A lot. But you'll have the **quantity** of the work ahead defined and all changes will have a time guideline that way!
- Both parties know: the end of the preprod is a Go / No Go decision point.

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- The second key to success: The publisher as a part of the preproduction planning process. Get on the same page **early!**
  - Dedicated Producer signs off features on a **detailed** level (does not design, but decides between alternatives). Publishers should urgently try to assign and KEEP a good producer during the dev cycle.
- Many advantages
  - Much less discussion further down the road since Publisher is part of the feature decision process.
  - Publishing producer can feed PR/Marketing much better.
- Make the publisher part of vital studio decisions if possible (e.g. important personnel issues).
- An atmosphere of trust and mutual responsibility results.



# Main Production



- Milestones: Nail-biting or celebration time?
- Derive top-level milestones together with Publishing Producer.
  - Makes sure that the PR/Marketing needs are met.
  - No conflict about content of milestone deliverables.
- Finish milestone two weeks earlier, plan for polishing and some sparkles.
- Set up project plan strictly feature-oriented
  - No tasks that can't be checked off on-screen.
  - Allows for much more efficient derivation of documents like QA test plans.

# Invest Time Where It Counts



- Predetermined redesign time buffers:
- Identify most risky / complex / important features and assign extra time according to risk.
- Better than general time buffers because:
  - Quality improves because key features can be iterated.
  - Creates awareness that the majority of tasks need to be completed at the first go.
  - Risk of running out of time buffers is dramatically lower.
- Communicate these redesign buffers and the regarding features very well.

# Conclusion



- Our industry has learned to use a whole range of project management methods; if implemented stringently, they work.
- But the foundation that enables these methods to work often is missing.
  - Don't close your eyes to the obvious just because it doesn't conform to your current company policy. You will damage the game severely.
- Publishers: Give your developer time to determine the precise scope of the game and its budget.
- Developers: If you get that chance, commit **much** stronger to your schedule.
  - A missed milestone, if only by two weeks, is not "business as usual" anymore. It's a crisis and calls for a re-evaluation of the project.

# Conclusion



- All this could be called “The Power of Honesty”; against your business partner, but most importantly against yourself.
  - Don’t try to work against the “Laws Of Project Nature” - use them to your advantage.
  - Minimize hidden fallback policies if possible - they will ultimately damage the game’s quality.
  - Be prepared to pull the plug if you’ve done your homework and then things still get out of hand.
- If both partners, publisher and developer, play with open cards, a better relationship is, of course, the result. But more importantly:
- **A better game will be created.**

# Thank you!



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