Creating a Culture of Game Design:
Trial and Error

...and error...

...and error...

...and error...

Bernard Yee

What's this talk about?

- How did I get here?
- 4 case studies, 1 with specific details

What's this talk about?

And how I failed (mostly).

What is this talk **not** about?

- Pointing fingers at organizations
- "I told you so."
- Excuses

A bit of background on me:

INFOCOM™

DISNEY INTERACTIVE

SOE® SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT

ATARI

CS@CU

HARMONIX®

A bit of background on me:

My dirty secret

DUKE LAW

It's relevant, I promise.

Working on a game is like marriage.

And I wanted to date.

So I became... a consultant.
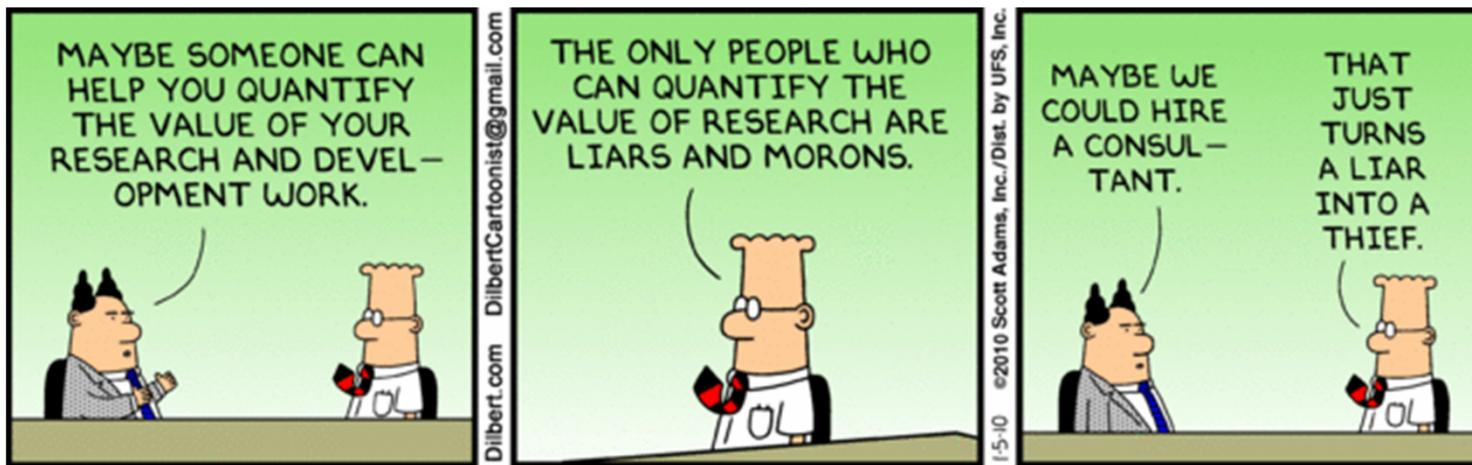
Look, games are everywhere. *Finally.*

More teams, making deeper games, coming at the problem from different perspectives.

What did this mean?

To a 'seasoned game developer' like me?

N00bs!

- New money
- New projects (virtual worlds, now social games)
- New teams
  - Traditional game developers
  - 'First time' game developers
- They all play games – doesn't mean they can develop games

No value judgment.

- Not here to discuss whether these games are "real games"

- My opinion: in some cases they are,
  (Farmville)
- In some cases they're not (and should be).
  (Second Life)

New game development teams

- At best:

New game development teams

- At worst:

Let's break out the clichés!

- Good judgment from experience; experience comes from bad judgment

- Don't reinvent the wheel

What is a culture of Game Design?

Thought exercise: How do you go about designing a casual game?

- Identify the genre you're targeting
- Play the Popcap game that defined the genre
- Copy it.

The difference?

- Between newbie teams and veteran teams?
- Game design.

    - Constrained creativity

    - Player on stage

    - An application that brings its goals to the user

    - Entertainment

My actual goal as a consultant:

- Create a process and culture that integrated game design
- Intellectually knew they needed it
- Viscerally unsure

The Eternal Mystery of Game Design

- Does your management know what a game designer does – in articulable detail?

My analogy as definition:

- Architect and the contractor
- (Rewording: my first strategy, which I'll talk about later)

- Unbeknownst to me, I found 'game design' had a lot of baggage

Game Design? Oh noes!

- "We're not building WoW!"*
- "Games embrace emergent behavior – almost all other software applications eschew it."
- They don't know what's involved
- What do designers do on your team?

* said by CEO while making a casual MMOG

Creating a Design Culture

- I didn't quite realize that was what I was doing
- But that is, in fact, what I had to do for different organizations as a consultant
- Benefit from my stupidity, naiveté and occasional success.

Organizational Challenges

- Are EVERYWHERE.
- This talk isn't about the problems of each org.

Project 1: Not-So-Brave New World

- Game-like virtual worlds, or
- Virtual worlds with games embedded
- Why not call it a casual MMOG?

Here's what I tried.

- Reword the problem. I sold out.
- I feel better as Koster does this all the time. (Use other systems as references, not sell out.)

I used "economic policy"

- The biz guys should like it.
- After all, game theory is part of modern theories of market action, biology, warfare – all serious stuff
    - Nash equilibrium
    - Prisoner's dilemma
    - Kobayashi Maru scenario

Simple Microeconomics

- Why do we buy things?

  - Utility

- What would we pay for that thing?

  - Value

- How do you calculate value?

  - Utility and Scarcity

Context is King.

- Utility is defined by the ways the 'system' supports its usage
- What are those needs and wants?
- BONUS: fits in neatly with the goal of microtransactions

Reposition Game Design as *Creating* Utility

- Economic utility:
- Expected utility:
- Personal preferences

Scarcity

Scarcity means simply that needs and wants exceed the resources available to meet them

Scarcity is artificially maintained – and that's OK!

Value

Value is Utility under a condition of Scarcity

My Practical Application

I wanted to relate the virtual world trope of "clothing" and "customization" to status and progress mechanics.

How does utility explain this?

Dolce & Gabbana

$3,950 / £2,298

Astrakhan Jean

Available at Saks Fifth Avenue and Dolce & Gabbana Boutiques worldwide

It says something about:

- What you've done
- Where you've been
- Where you can go
- What you can do
- What you own
- Where you are on the social ladder

Look at virtual worlds.

"Is there a similarly clear statement in Second Life?"

What does *this* say about you?

A lot.

What does *this* say about you?

- What you've done
- Where you've been
- Where you can go
- What you can do
- What you own
- Where you are on the social ladder

So, how'd that work out for you, Bernie?

Not so great.

Success: realization that game design was a complex, important component

Failure: They didn't embrace a game development process

Remember my earlier slide?

"We're not making WoW!"

Well, now they're **sure** they don't want to make WoW.

Lessons Learned

- Stay aligned.
- Be involved.
- Evangelize.

Project 2: Our Users Play Games!

- Dedicated community site
- Strong demographic overlap with casual and social games
- Built small games internally
- Scale!

What I Did:

- Integrate myself into their development process
- Built simple, proto-social games
- Transitioned team to Flash
- Took core idea from management and built it out

Well, that was a disaster.

Why?

My preconceived notions

- What was the business model?
- Game initiatives didn't address core business

Integration

- The small dev team – like me – ended up being insular
- My goals were not reasonable.

Being insular is bad (and easy to do)

- Ignored the overall direction of the company
- Understand the core business
- More time building a strategy

What I Would Do Differently

- Push harder
- Create clear goals for success

Or

- Build games that were designed to drive current metrics for success

Project 3: The Lure of Social, part I

- Casual Game Developer moving into social games
- Bigger projects, more complexity
- Experienced development team
- No full time 'game designers'
- Tight schedule and fires to put out

My approach: Jump In!

- Work on business proposals, presentations to project funders
- Give actionable feedback on game design
- Write docs
- *Tried* to be as diplomatic as possible

"Jump in" proved to be naïve.

What **actually** happened?

- Impacted schedule
- Affected producers' ability to deliver on time.
- Introduced new problems
- The began to realize what was missing

Game Design Feedback: No good deed goes unpunished!

- Came in and started to give direction right away
- Who originally owned the game design?

Design Owners

- Producers
- Artists
- Programmers
- Management
- Everyone

Guess which of these became my allies?

No one.

Who is 'everyone'?

- A body with momentum (or inertia)
- Changing direction isn't easy
- Prior investment and history, baggage

- Man, this *is* like dating. And not the fun part.

More on 'Process'

- Recurring theme: impact on process
- Team was already 'successful'
- Introducing new variables made everyone uneasy
- Introducing new authority, even more so
- Specific example: GDD

Use a taxonomy of game design

- Find a way to talk about game design in concrete manner
- Why?
- Set up clear project/design goals to communicate up and down

Where does design belong?

- Sensed resistance, compensated by not being too pushy
- Buried myself in writing design docs
- Finished first draft of the GDD…
- …then what?

How did Game Design 101 work?

- Teaching willing students and reluctant professionals is different. Duh.
- Difficulty multiplier: personal investment
- Underestimated effect of existing culture

What happened? And why?

- Group came together around new direction
- Some core concepts started to be understood, even if not adopted
- 'Everyone' still involved

Success or failure?

- Partially successful

- More design process built in

- But creative direction arbitrary without shared framework

What would I do differently?

- Find an ally. STAT.

  Not easy, I know.

- Know when to confront and when to collaborate
- Establish key metrics of success (a recurring theme)

What would I do differently?

- Don't isolate, even if you're the only game designer.
- Help the producers accommodate your needs
- Circumvent game of telephone and sit everyone down

Project 4: Social is our 'Future', part II

- Games portal with young team
- Looking at... social games!
- No real game development experience
- Managing external developers for casual games

What did I do? A repeat of Project 3.

- Jump in!
- Participate in biz dev
- Give actionable feedback on projects in development
- Introduce core concepts of game design
- Write docs

Was second time a charm? No, but…

- …but it went better
- Less dev experience = less ego
- Remember that ally?

Actionable Feedback

- Worked with two external studios
- Helped redirect a project in progress from going down the wrong design path
- Without an enshrined process, much more freedom and fewer landmines

Helped write GDDs

- Led 2 producers to write GDDs for their social games projects

- "Now I know what game design documents are supposed to look like."

- Introducing ways of talking about game design much more well received

How did it turn out?

- GDDs well received in biz dev
- One social game in development
- Despite all that, only a partial success.
- Helped refine business implications for strategic direction
- "Don't want to be a social games developer."

What didn't work so well?

- Commitment to strategy
- Clear deliverables and decision points
- Lasting cultural change

What I'd do differently

- Communication
- Be pushier
- Document decisions and rationale
- Despite all this, risk was too much

Big Lessons

- Take mystery out of game design
- Insert yourself into the business
- *Understand* the existing business
- Communication is always an issue
- Don't assume they know the implications of your work
- 1 = insane; 2 = religion; 3 = civilization

Big Lessons

- Resist urge to 'start typing'
- Set up design framework (and take out handwaving/design randomization)
- Know when to (a) walk away, or (b) be patient
- Produce tangible assets: GDDs, pen and paper prototypes
- Beware of companies 'expanding' outside their core competencies

Made me a better producer.

- Hope it will help you, too. Thanks for coming!
- Feel free to contact me with questions and feedback:

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