Designers are Human Too – Causes of Poor Design Decisions

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About Me – Tom Cadwell

- Design Director at Riot Games
- 12 years of game dev experience:
  - Warcraft 3 – balance lead
  - WoW – misc systems design & on-boarding
- MBA from Kellogg, BS in Computer Science from MIT
- Recovering engineer & producer
- Former Starcraft expert
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About Riot Games

- Developer and Publisher of League of Legends
- Global company with offices in Los Angeles, St. Louis, Dublin & Seoul
- ~ 350 employees and growing
- World class development team
- First publisher in the western world to focus on offering core games as a service
- Global focus and appeal

Many poor design decisions come from weak designers. But as many or more come from good designers.

Why do talented designers keep making many serious mistakes?

Talented designers often make serious mistakes when:

1) In a process that impedes good decisions

2) Influenced by emotional or social motivations

3) Accepting unnecessary constraints

Solutions take one of three forms:

1) Set up process that facilitate good decisions
2) Coach designers towards productive behaviors
3) Don't hire people with undesired behaviors

Talk Overview

- The Tale of Omen: Opposing is hard, not supporting is easy.

- The Grand Unveil

- Too Awesome to Cut

- Forgotten Goals
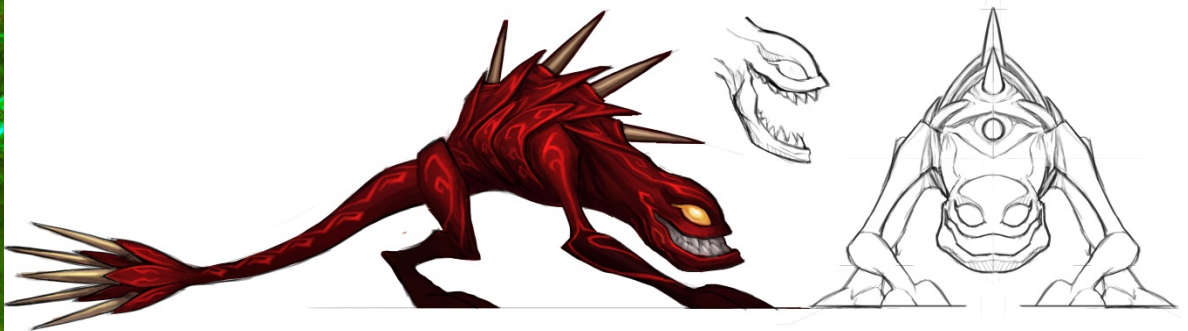
- Creative Fatigue

- Designing for Yourself

It's not bad, right?

It wasn't bad... but it wasn't great either.

Any ideas?

Omen Problems

- Is it melee? Is it Ranged DPS?

- No one was excited.

- It didn't seem to be getting better…

And we were 50% done with the character when we replaced it with Riven.

An Iteration

We did not clearly define what 'good enough' was.

We did not give leaders a decision point oriented around the standard of 'good enough'.

We told Decision Makers:

"We are continuing this character, OK?"

No one said "No."

What if they had been asked:

"Would you bet this will be a ʻ10ʼ ?"

Then we wouldʼve heard "No!"

It's a lot easier to say, "I don't think this will be a 10."

Make it easy for people to say 'not good enough.'

- Make it hard for decision makers to bless 'so-so' work.

- Ensure that the standard of quality is well understood.

- Speak up if you think there is an issue and make sure decision makers think through the concern.

Riven replaced Omen.

The Grand Unveil

We all know that frequent, honest, early feedback is key to quality.

Anything that undermines this iterative loop will also undermine quality.

The Grand Unveil is a common source of breakdown.

Typical manifestation:

- A designer is asked to design something.
- Peers or supervisor wants an update.
- "Oh, you know, I'm still fixing some details. Can I show it to you next week?"*

*Hint: Correct answer is, "Now is fine. I know it's not really ready and will be better later, but I'm excited to see what you've come up with."

The Grand Unveil – A Hint

Writers are close to their work and suffer from this problem.

So, editors often ask for 'a crappy first draft.'

It sets the expectations lower, and makes people more comfortable sharing – because it's just 'a crappy first draft'.

Dark Reign 2: One of the designers was not showing his levels – and they were too complex.

LoL: We inadvertently caused this on the Kayle and Tryndamere remakes, greatly delaying their release – because there wasn't playtest time.

Designer is worried that their idea will be misunderstood or unfairly judged if seen early.

Designer feels they can have 'more control' if they avoid feedback.

- Don't let people hide progress – schedule deliverables to show progress
- Make early feedback pleasant – expect a 'crappy first attempt', and then be positive.
- Early peer review – WITHOUT repercussions.
- Have a mistake-forgiving culture that inspires openness.
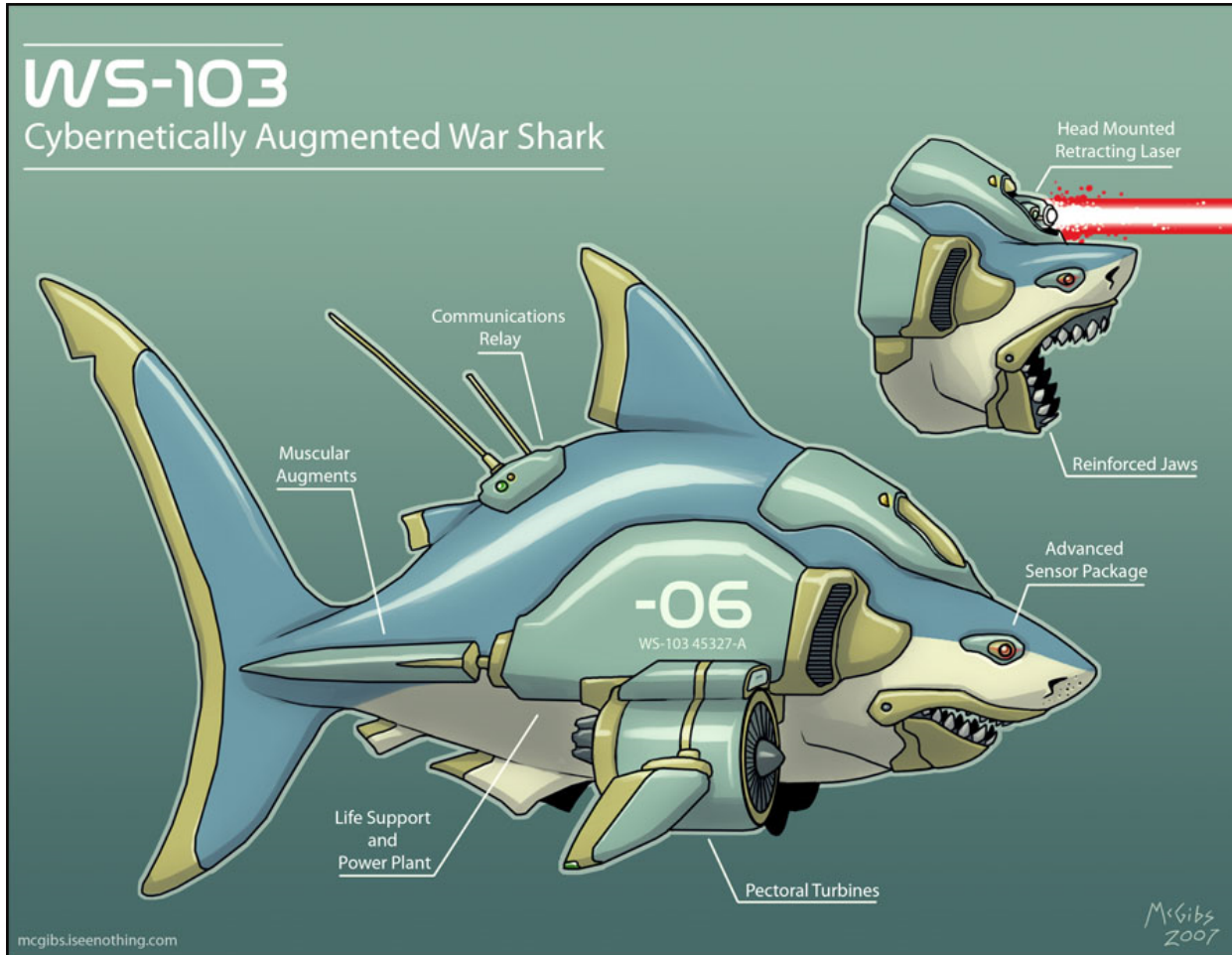
*Used with permission of Jesse McGibney – who is roughly as cool as this pic.

Holy shit, this is awesome!

Typical manifestation:

- We have an idea we love (sharks with lasers)*
- It's probably not worth the effort…
- But we can't cut it!
- And… we have a problem.

- NOTE: SHARKS WITH LASERS ARE AWESOME AND PROBABLY SHOULD BE IN MORE GAMES.

- You invest emotion and lose objectivity.
- Your peers also have the same investment – and you don't want to be a buzzkill.
- Excitement is contagious, watch out!
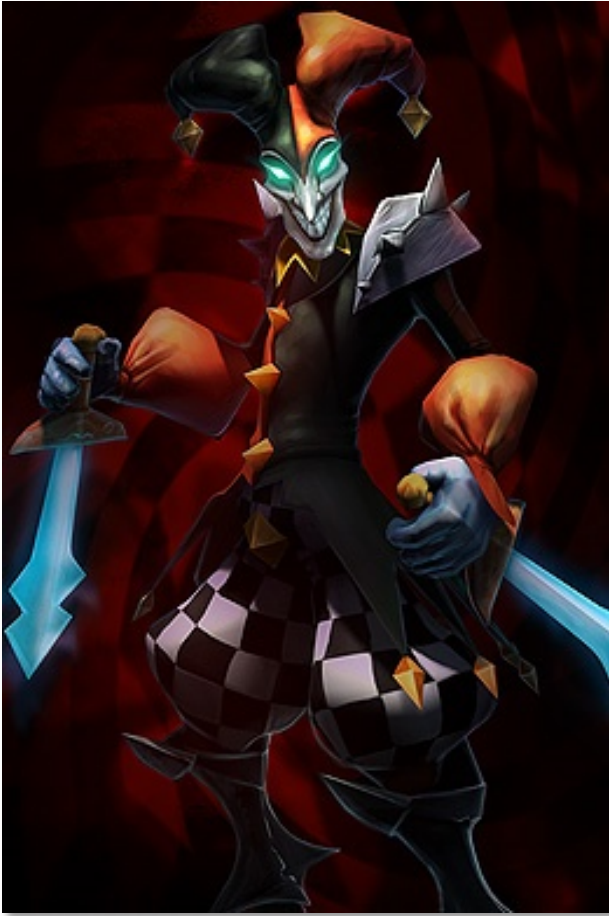
Shaco is a character in League of Legends.

• We spent a month tweaking a 'permanent stealth' ultimate ability – similar to Akali's smoke bomb, but permanent.
• Shaco is a great character now – but did we need to use an extra month?

The Firelord is a neutral hero in Warcraft 3.

Volcano is a siege spell – siege spells, such as Earthquake, are less combat related and somewhat inactive – less fun in general.

But... who could cut a volcano?!?!

- Ensure decisions reviewed by peers or supervisors who are not 'interested parties'
- Structure process to identify and acknowledge risk early.

League of Legends is made for a global audience – but we sometimes draw on a 'local' idea and pair it with a new launch for large markets.

Wukong, The Monkey King, draws upon Chinese lore, and was intended to launch at the same time as millions of Chinese gamers got their first taste of LoL.

Almost didn't work out…

Three goals were set:

1)Make a character that our global audience would enjoy.

2)Make a character true to Monkey King lore.

3)Ensure that complexity was reasonable, while retaining skill depth.

We almost failed at goal #3.

Characters have a spectrum of complexity.

Lee-Sin was for the veteran community – and is very complex.
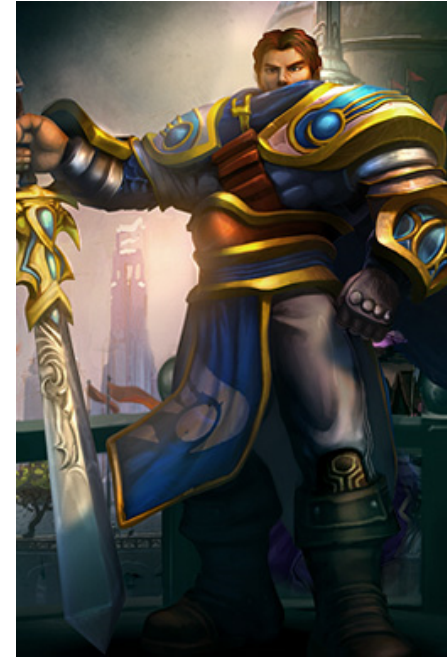
Garen is a tutorial character – and is simpler.

Forgotten Goals

In creating a true-to-the-lore character, early designs called for a persistent clone that would mirror everything he did.

Only expert players could make this work well, and it was exceedingly complex as LoL characters go – which neglected a key goal.
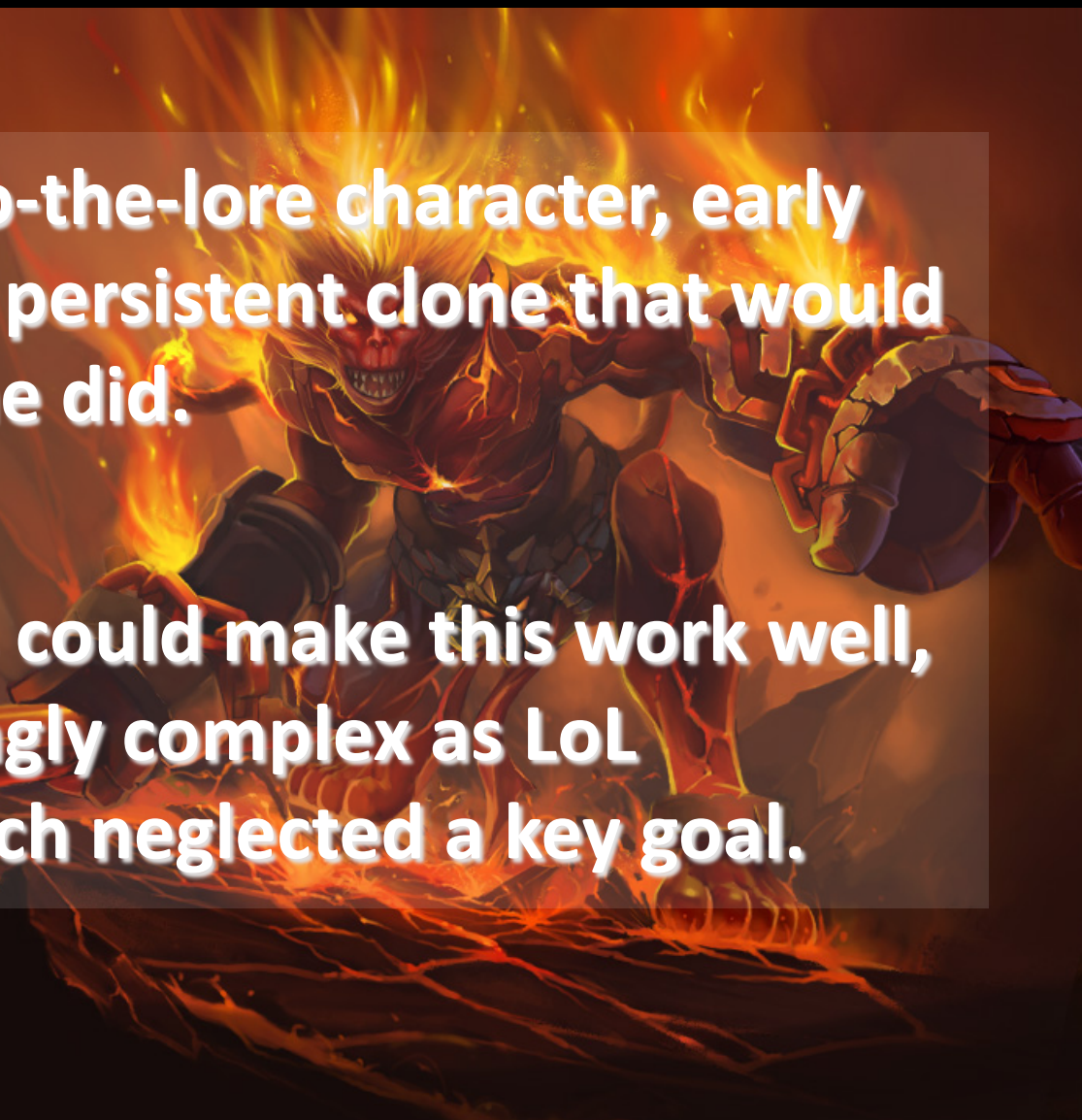
So, we redoubled our efforts, and came up with a better kit that met the goal of 'less complex, but still deep

But... we meander to situations like this often.

Always ask: **Does the thing we have designed line up with the goals we set?**

*Credit to Gabe of Penny Arcade!

- If several goals are stated, it's hard to honor all of them with very complex work.

- Humans sometimes under-assess the impact of something on a secondary goal.

GOALS

JUST BECAUSE YOU HAVE THEM DOESN'T MEAN YOU CAN REACH THEM.

- Ensure that the core goals are very well understood by those working on a design.
- Explicitly check the work vs the original goals from time to time – either by ad-hoc asking, or better yet, making it part of a process.
- Train team members to be aware of this issue.

Creative Fatigue

- "In my opinion, it sucks" – Penguinimp
- "Ran out of time for the Anivia skin?" – Varmin
- "This Anivia atrocity is the biggest LoL upset ever." – Imasock
- "Almost as bad as not having armored bears in LoL." – Volibar
- "WTF is this!?!?!" – 420GanjaMasta69

Typical manifestation:

- A lot of creative effort is required – so a really long meeting is called.

- Psychology research shows a drop in creativity & attention after 15 minutes, and major deficiencies by 1 hour.

- Some meeting output is quite uninspired.

Creative Fatigue

WoW 1.0 suffered from this:

👊 Designers used lists of 30+ named creature types.

👊 My best contribution in a long meeting: Sparkleshell Borer: An aggro stealth 'ninja turtle'.

👊 Cata mobs are far superior.

Another Manifestation:

- The team accepts a ton of constraints – it can't be blue, it has to be a human, it can't be like this other thing, etc.
- Eventually, there is no wiggle room, and mediocre solutions are generated.
- But are the constraints really mandatory?

Creative Fatigue

When designing Poppy, we had a working kit, but needed an ult.

Her basic 3 abilities cover her role and give her tools. There wasn't really room for a 4th.

We should've tossed a basic ability and filled in an ult that way.

Poppy, the Iron Ambassador. A character from League of Legends.
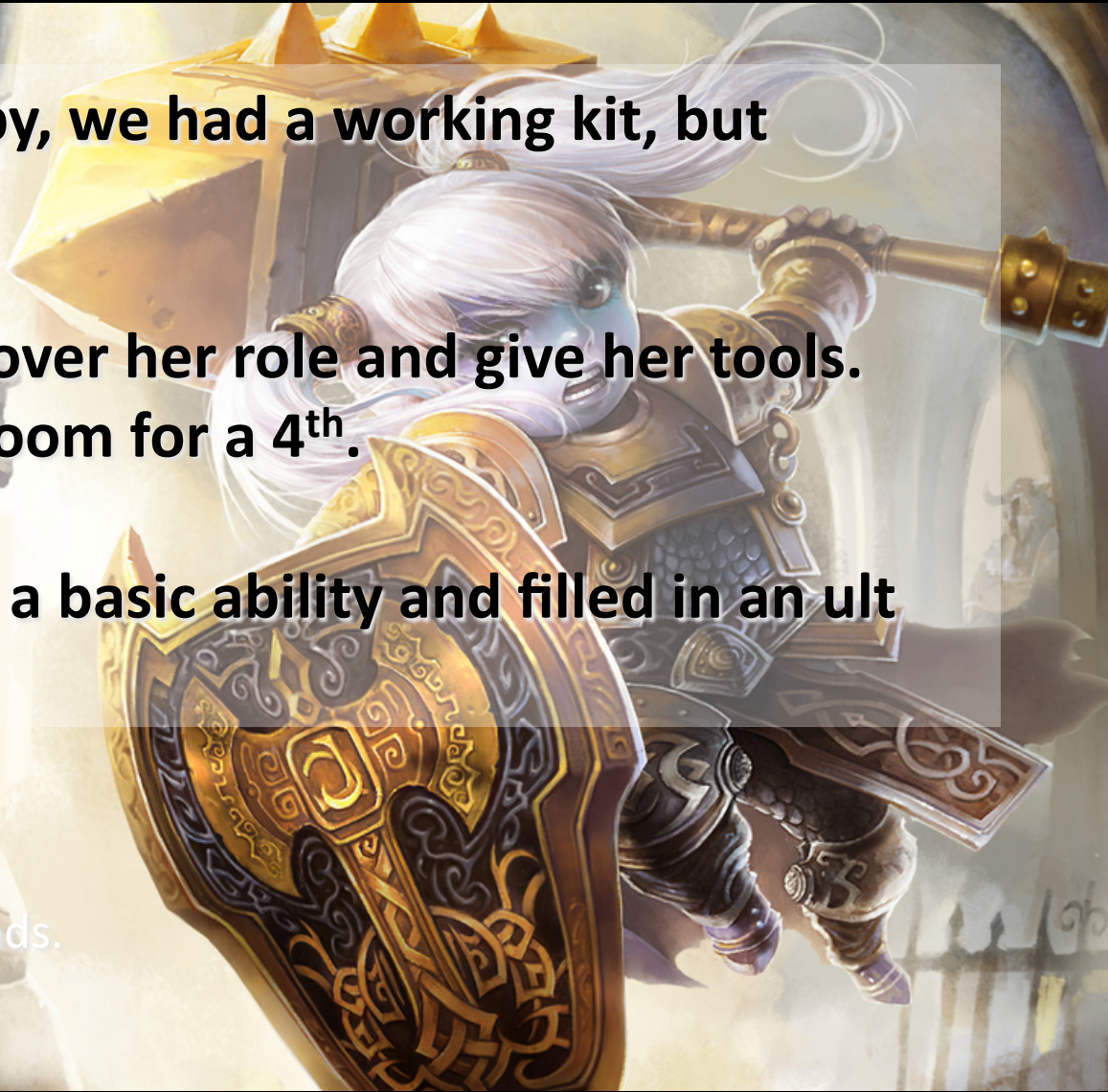
- Long meetings drain everyone's ability to continue contributing.
- Constraining early commitment strips the creative landscape.

Creative Fatigue – Solutions

- Peer review!

- Time box attempts to solve the problem to reduce maximum stress levels.

- Try rotating the people involved and using smaller meetings on a more frequent basis.

- Challenge constraints.

- Use many smaller groups instead of a big one.

Typical manifestation:

- Designer makes complex design loved by hardcore users such as the designer.

- Implementation is done, and is incomprehensible to most players..

- Result: Less players understand the game & low value features get over-prioritized.

I did this in LoL by pushing forward an 'inverse power law of ninjas' (-1 hp per ninja present in game).

This is a joke – in movies, when lots of ninjas are on the screen, they die easily… But a single Ninja is always very tough. This is too subtle.
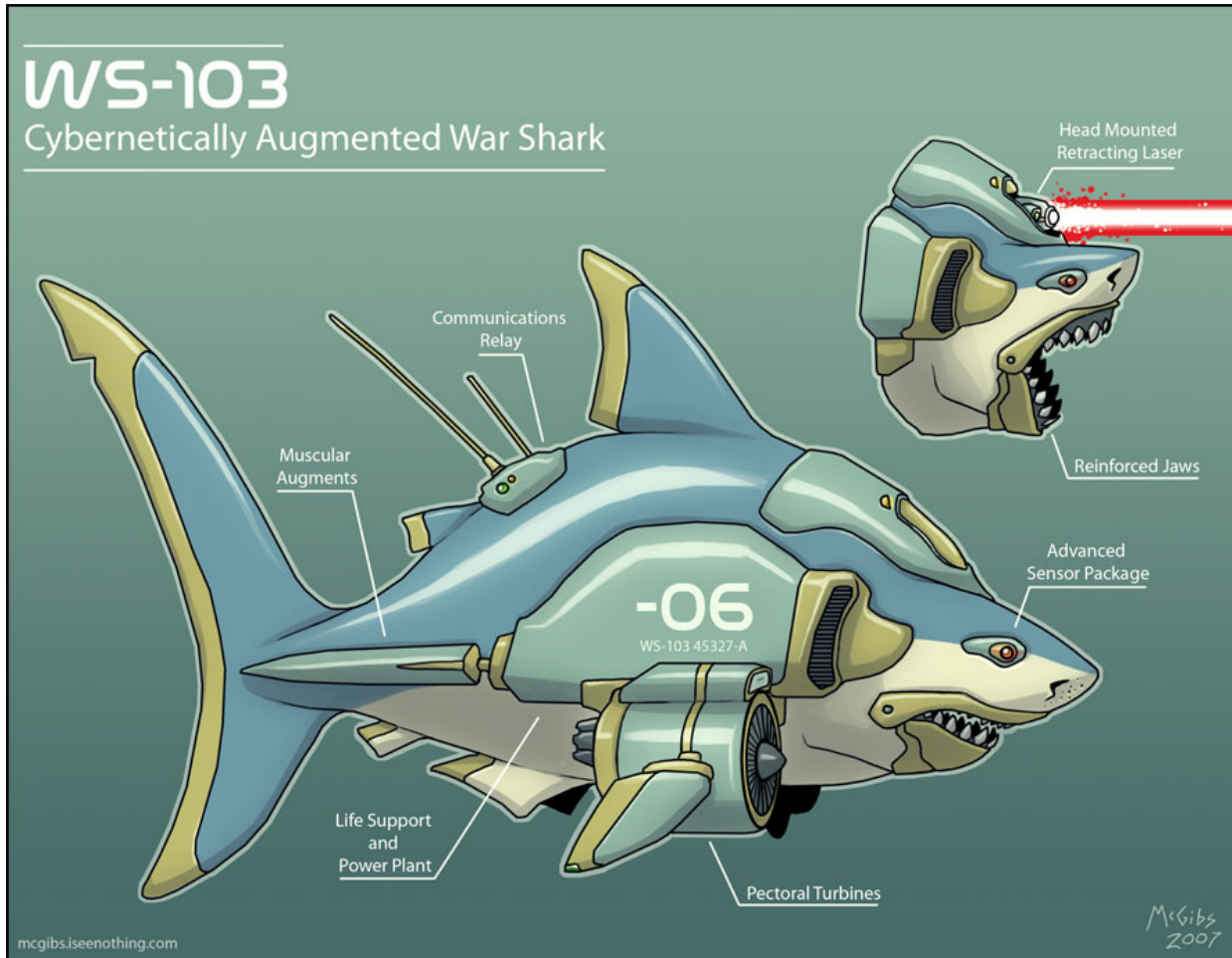
Causes:

- Designer are great at designing what they like.

- It's easy to be excited about things you like.

Solutions:

- Peer Review... But beware, excitement is contagious.

- Require that the broader dev team is excited about large initiatives and concepts.

Sharks with lasers = 95+ Metacritic Score

Some hints:

- Everyone: Ask yourself which of these traps you are vulnerable to, and recognize where you need to be careful

- Junior Designers: Get a circle of design mentors – people you can bounce ideas off of and help you avoid traps.

- Managers: Think back on your team's last few design failures. Ask very carefully if it was a people problem, or one of these traps.

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War3 and WoW 1.0 were long ago – my recollections may have some errors. Sorry if there are some!

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Questions?

Email me at tcadwell [at] riotgames.com for LoL Skins, comments about my talk, and questions about Riot.

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