

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
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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





The Problem

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?



The Problem

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

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

The Tale of Omen

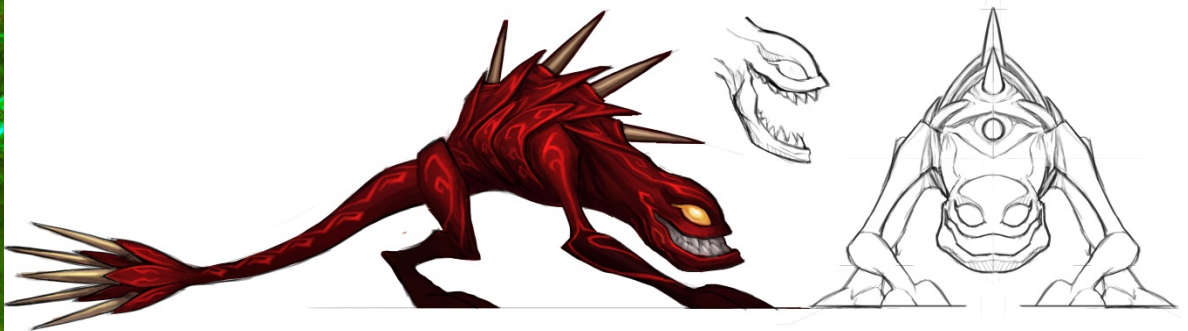


It's not bad, right?

The Tale of Omen

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.**

The Tale of Omen



An Iteration

Omen – The Real Problem

- ✊ 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 ‘10’?”

Then we would’ve 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.'**



The Tale of Omen – Solutions

- ✊ 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.

The Tale of Omen



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.



The Grand Unveil

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’.

FIRST DRAFT

MINDER'S RADIO DRAMA

Scene 1: SOUND: SIRENS, (EXPLOSION?), SOUND OF EARTH SHAKING.
BEGIN NEWS REPORT
LOCATION: AT THE MINE SITE, ABOVE GROUND.
News Reporter (female?): (FORMAL) “And we’re here at the site of the cave in, the Sounds you just heard are those of a second tremor, which has left the cave area completely sealed off from the surface. Emergency services are at the scene and are trying to figure out the safest way to get to the survivors inside the cave. It is believed that only 4 miners are trapped inside the complex cave system. ~~It is believed that only 4 miners are trapped inside the complex cave system. It is believed that only 4 miners are trapped inside the complex cave system.~~ *luckily* only one area of the mine was being worked on today, otherwise there would’ve been many more ~~workers and many more casualties today.~~ It is unknown if the 4 men are all ~~injured~~ or not. The families have been told.....”

Need to insert more specific details *Maribon Gallery* *words broken out because it's too wordy*

Scene 2: SOUNDS: FADE FROM SCENE 1 TO A KNOCK ON A WOODEN DOOR, MUFFLED VOICES FROM INSIDE, A WOMAN TELLING A CHILD TO BEHAVE, WOMAN OPENS THE DOOR, BEGIN DIALOG:
LOCATION: STREET WITH HOUSES/INSIDE A HOUSE
Wife 1: (CONCERNED) “Hello? Can I help you officer?” *More shocked*

Officer 1: (LOW, SERIOUS) “Actually Ma’am, if it’s ok with you, I think you’d better take a seat.....”

Wife 1: (STUTTER? SHOCKED, UPSET) “Oh god, it’s (miner a) isn’t it....is he....is he ok, what happened?!”

Child: (“INNOCENT”, UPBEAT) “Mummy, when will daddy be home from the mine? Mummy, why are you crying?” *Pause*

Scene 3: SOUNDS: CRUMBLING ROCKS, COUGHING, WHEEZING, GROANING, DRIPPING WATER (ALL TEXT AND SFX IN CAVE SCENES SHOULD HAVE A SLIGHT ECHO, TO REPRESENT THE SIZE OF THE CAVES AND THE REVERBERATION OF THE SOUND WAVES).
LOCATION: INSIDE THE SEALED CAVES, BELOW GROUND.
Miner a: (groan, sound of rustling as he stands) “Urgh, what just happened? Is anyone else conscious? Anyone?!”

(CAVE RUMBLES SLIGHTLY AS HE CALLS OUT)

Miner b: (hushed, strict tone) “Quiet, or do you want the whole place to collapse on us?”

Miner a: (slight chuckle) “It looks like it already has, (miner b)”

Miner b: (scowling) “You know what I meant.....”

Miner a: (serious) “Anyway, let’s get some light in here, now where’s....urgh....that damned torch....”

Give Ben lines - morbid - can't cope. ** Correct names need to be organised - characters need sorting + plot.*

The Grand Unveil - Examples

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.



The Grand Unveil - Causes

- 👊 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.

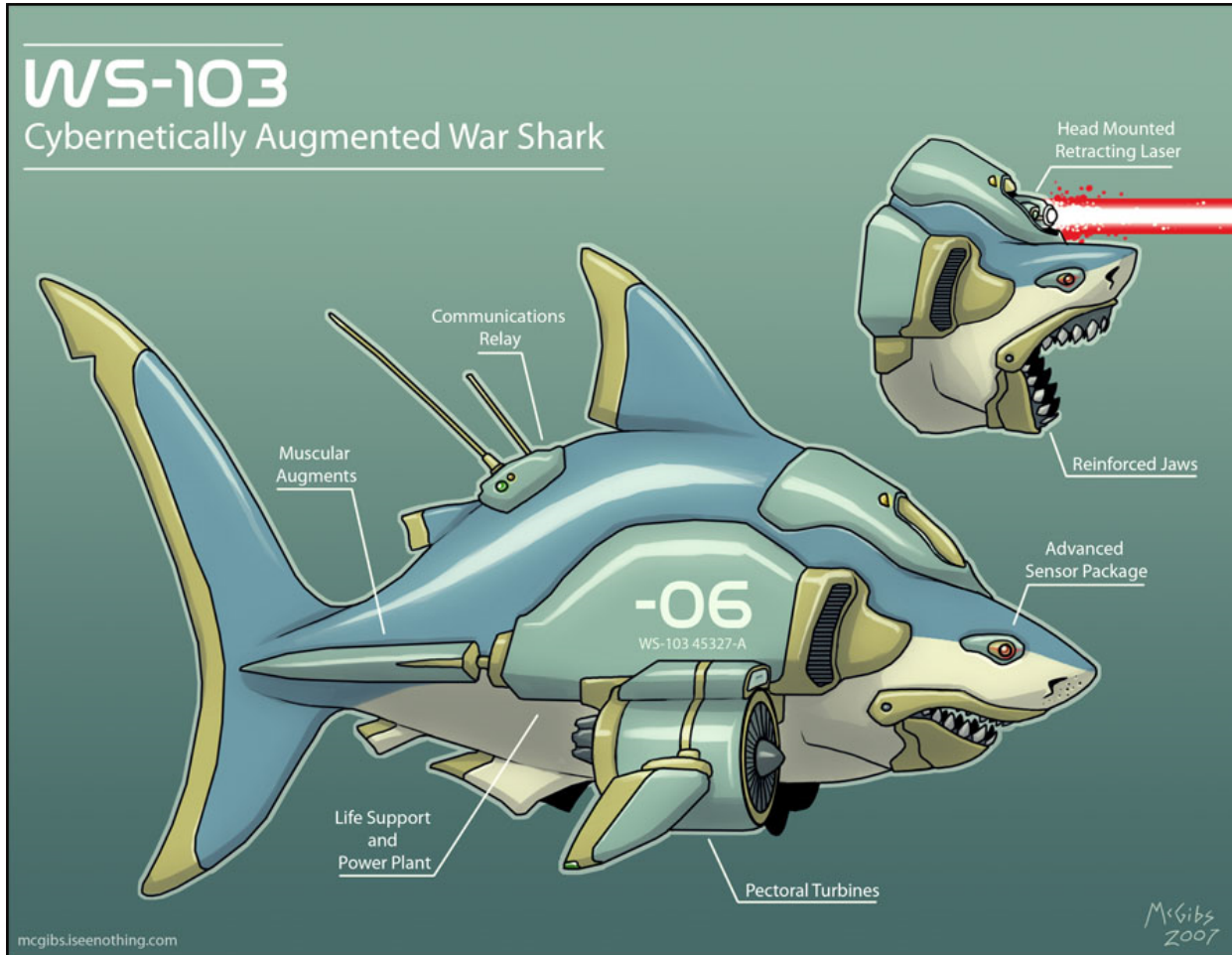




The Grand Unveil - Solutions

- 👊 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.

Too Awesome to Cut!



*Used with permission of
Jesse McGibney – who is
roughly as cool as this pic.

Holy shit, this is awesome!

Too Awesome to Cut!

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.

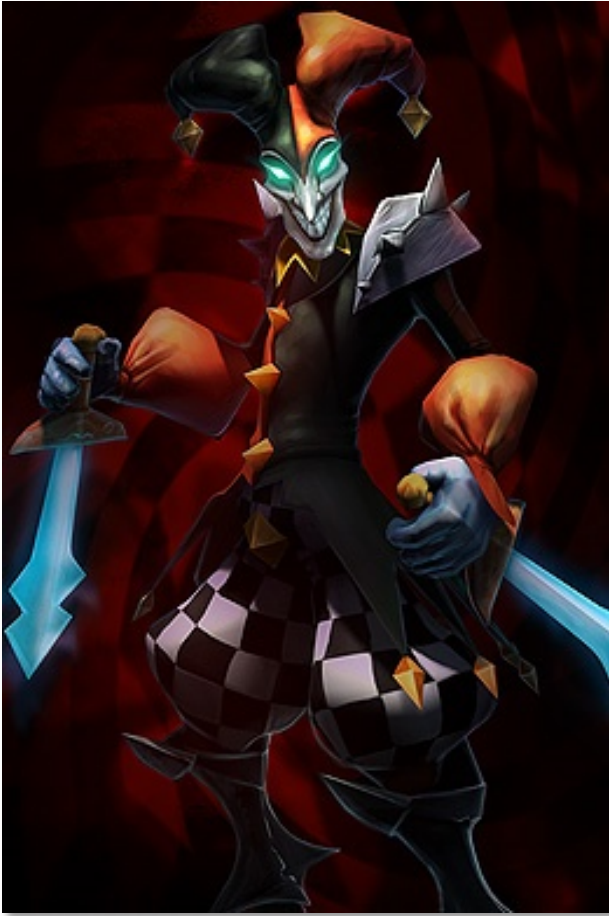




Too Awesome to Cut! – Causes

- 👊 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!

Too Awesome to Cut! - Examples



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?

Too Awesome to Cut! - Examples



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?!?!



Too Awesome to Cut! – Solutions

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



Forgotten Goals

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...



Forgotten Goals

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.

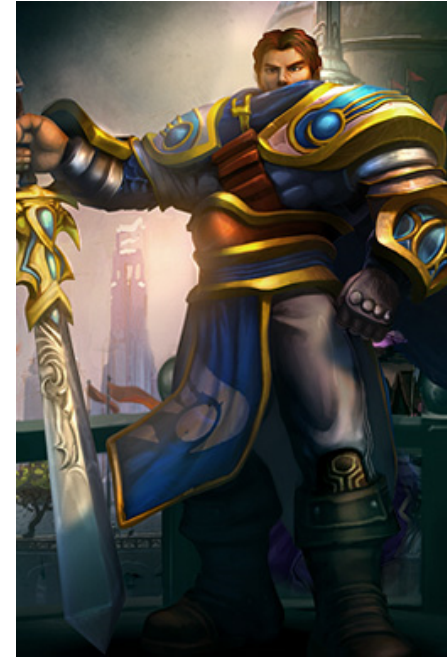
We almost failed at goal #3.

Forgotten Goals

Characters have a spectrum of complexity.



Lee-Sin was for the
veteran community –
and is very complex.



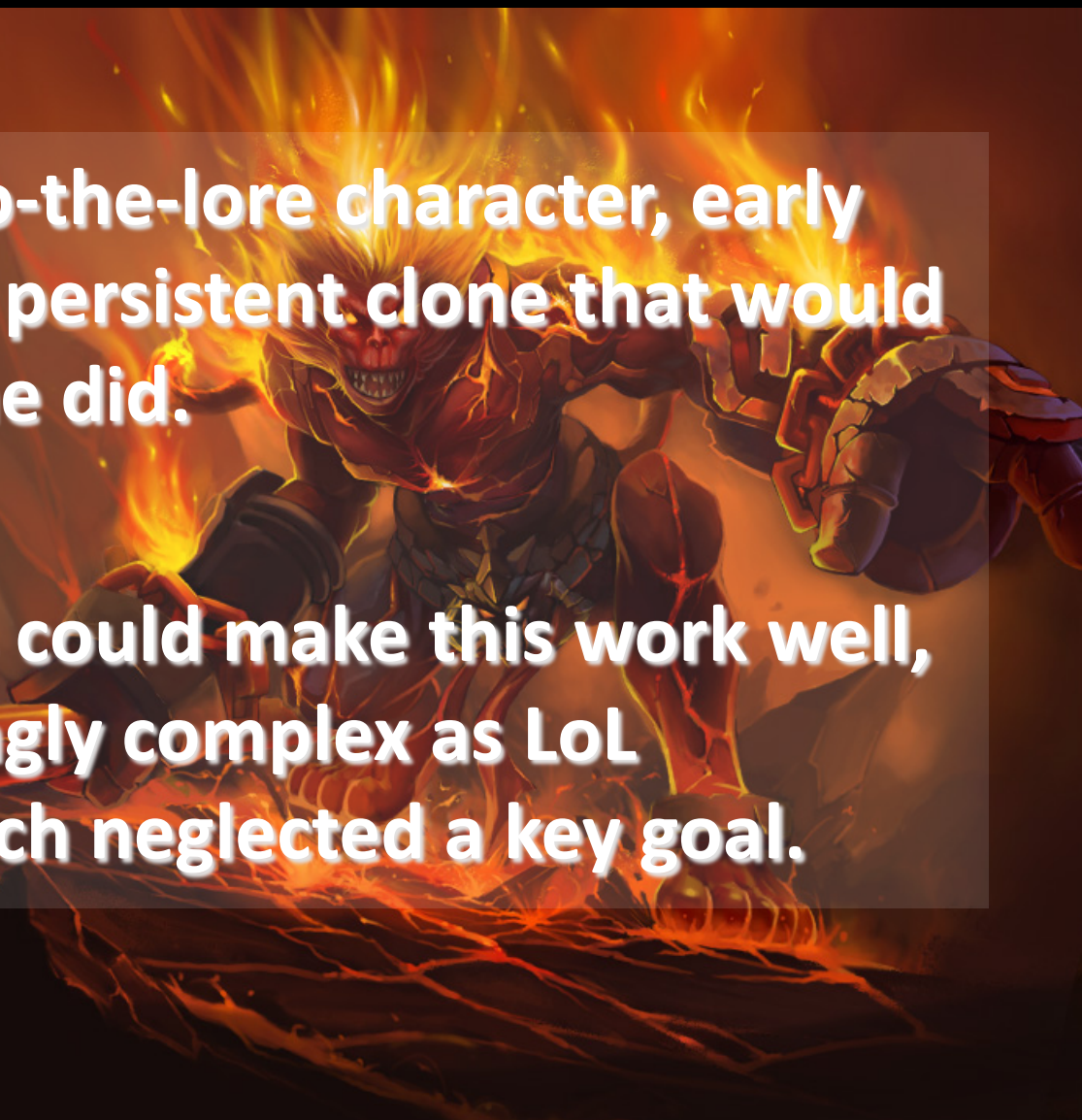
Garen is a tutorial
character – and is
simpler.



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.



Forgotten Goals

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!

Forgotten Goals – Causes

- ✊ 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.

Forgotten Goals – Solutions

- ✊ 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

Creative Fatigue

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.

Creative Fatigue

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?



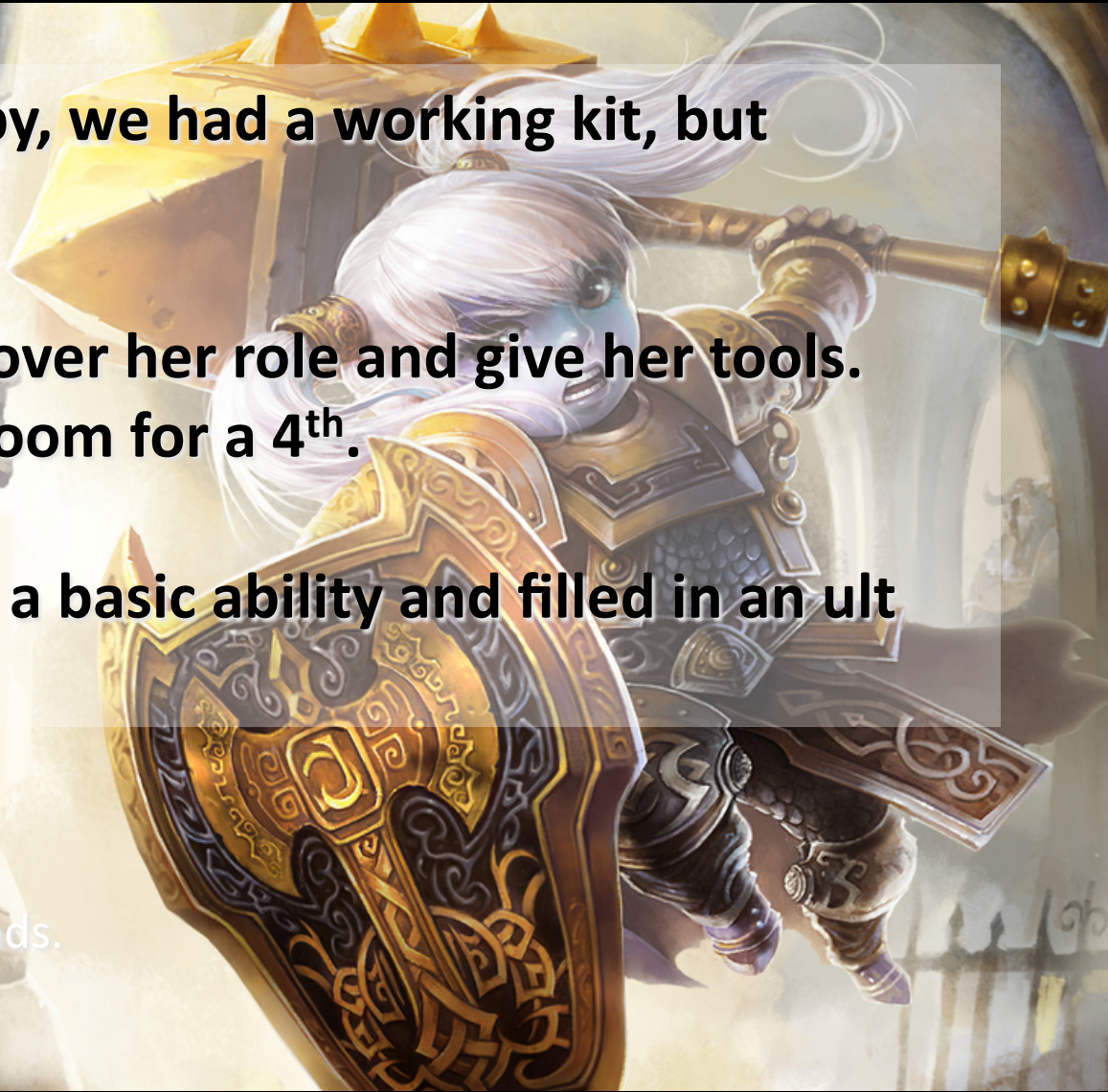
Creative Fatigue

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.





Creative Fatigue – Causes

- 👊 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.

Designing For Yourself

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.

Designing For Yourself- Examples



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.



Designing For Yourself- Examples

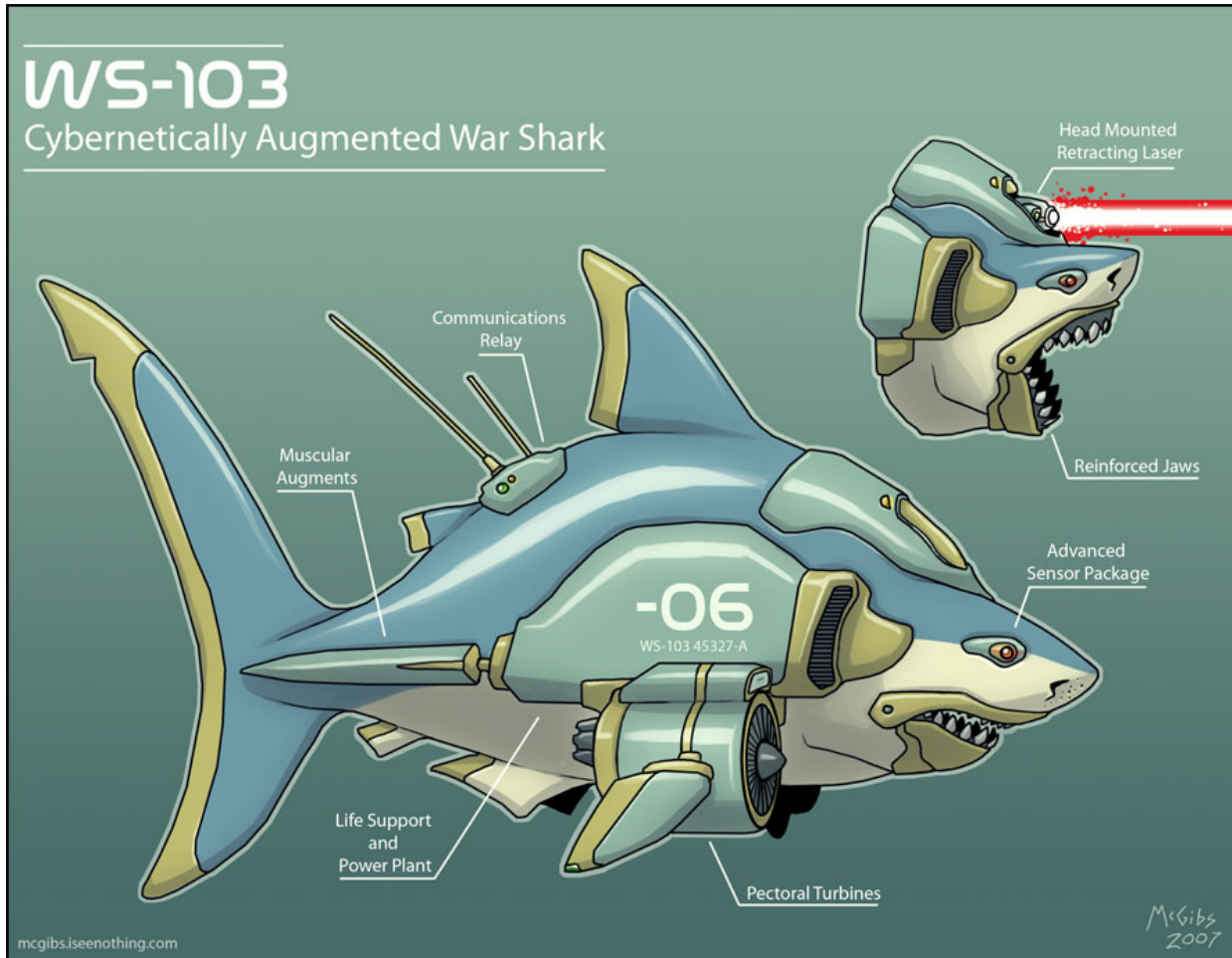
Causes:

- 👊 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.

Key Takeaway



Sharks with lasers = 95+ Metacritic Score



But Seriously...

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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Questions?

Email me at [tcadwell \[at\] riotgames.com](mailto:tcadwell@riotgames.com) for LoL Skins, comments about my talk, and questions about Riot.

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