sproing

Studio Culture

Beyond "Herding Cats"

By
Harald Riegler

Who am I?

- CEO of Sproing, in Vienna, Austria

- A leading developer of multi platform Free-to-Play games (65 Employees)

- Teams:

  3 Free-to-Play teams

  1 Console team

Management

- Harald Riegler, CEO
  - Started in the games industry in the early 90's
  - Responsible for sales, business, legal, company strategy
  - Industry contribution:
    - G.A.M.E., GDC Europe, Game Connection, German Game Days, IGCG
    - Co-Founder of the EGDF (EU organization for game developers)
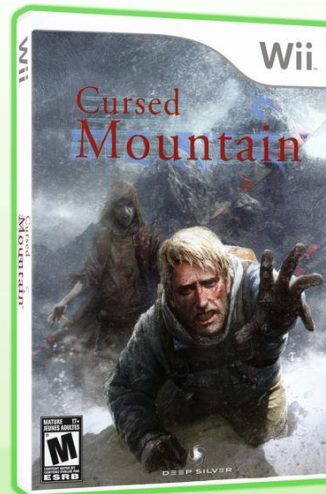 - Shareholder of Neopica, game development studio in Gent, Belgium

Console Games

Publisher: **BitComposer**
Platform: PS3, Wii, 3DS, PC
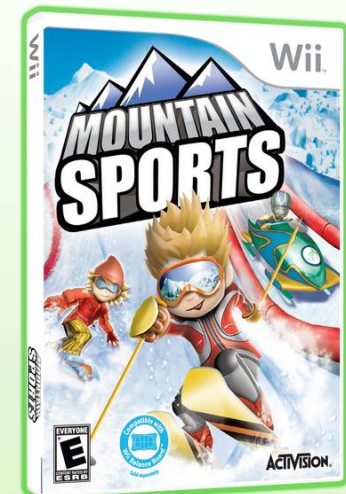Germany's best selling 3rd
Party Wii game in 2010

Publisher: **Ubisoft**
Germany's Sports Game
of the Year: 2011
Platform: PS3, Wii

Publisher: **Deep Silver**
AAA Survival Horror Game
Unique Setting & Gameplay
Platform: Wii

Publisher: **Activision**
Development: 6,5 months
Gameranking: 84 %
Platform: Wii

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Herding Cats?

- Definition of "Herding Cats":
  - An attempt to control or organize a class of entities which are uncontrollable or chaotic. Implies a task that is extremely difficult or impossible to do, primarily due to chaotic factors
- Book by Hank Rainwater

- Games industry is notorious for this process
- Doesn't have to be that way

- How should individuals work together?
  - How can we create a culture for success?

Why do we need good CC?

- Games are all about the people
- Every studio has SOME studio or company culture, good or bad
- CC will largely decide over success or failure

- Bad CC can ultimately even destroy a studio!
    - Unless you get very lucky...

Definition

- In science, CC is often defined by terms such as
    - Company Paradigm
    - Control systems
    - Organizational systems
    - Power structure & distance
    - Communication & Rites

- I believe this is only the 2nd level
- The 1st level is entirely human
- This shapes culture a lot more than the above

Studio Culture

- We will focus on the people:
    - How human interaction happens in a studio
    - How every person can contribute
    - NOT about what happens (mission, organization)
    - There are cultural differences in different countries
        - We will focus on universal themes
- Large companies often have subcultures
    - Will focus on culture within a single entity

CC Influencing Factors

- The personality of the founders and/or executive managers
- The character of the core team when the studio is founded
    - Ambition
    - Passion
    - Pride
    - Communication style
    - Management know-how
    - Just to name a few…

Games Industry Peculiarities

- Everyone is so passionate – we are an art industry!
- Passion is often the reason for founding a studio
- Many founders do not have management MBAs

- Management staff have to step up their game
    - Whether we like it or not
- Passion is widespread amongst team members, too

- Good culture is built on **lasting principles**
    - Not on management style hypes
- Leads to success and personal fulfillment
- Ensures a mature team that understands the challenges it is facing
- Is built for change, so that it can evolve as the company evolves
    - Studio will change anyway – better be in control over the process

The Principles

- Respect
- Lead by example
- Accountability
- Maturity
- Fun
- Freedom
- Honesty
- Awareness
- Consequence

Respect

- Innate respect for human beings required
    - Don't have it? It will not work
- Reversibility principle:
    - Treat everyone the way you want to be treated
- Allows room for interpretation
    - Who knows how YOU like to be treated? ☺
- Universal philosophical principle according to Immanuel Kant "Categorical Imperative"
- Respect leads to trust
- Trust helps get issues out in the open

Lead by example

- Every respectable book about parenting says it
  - You want someone to do something?
    - Show it by doing it yourself
  - You want someone to not do something?
    - Don't do it yourself
- Never ask anybody to do something you are not prepared to do yourself
  - This is not about physical fitness or taught skillsets

Accountability

- Often confused with making subordinates accountable
    - Remember the reversibility principle?
    - Remember the leadership principle?
- Introduce accountability by making yourself accountable (up and down!)
    - Let people know what you have set out to achieve
    - Report on how successful you were
- Requires healthy self-esteem and balanced personality to benchmark yourself publicly

Maturity

- Maturity is not experience or a suit & tie
- Ability for self reflection
- Understanding the games industry is a business
  - The best contributors understand both the business and product quality
- Professional communication style (requires trust)
  - If something's off – address it
  - Understand danger of gossip!
- Not helpful: Divas, backstabbers, power players,…

Fun

- Many of us could work elsewhere for more €€€
- Having fun at work is a key asset of this industry
    - One that is often misperceived as laxness
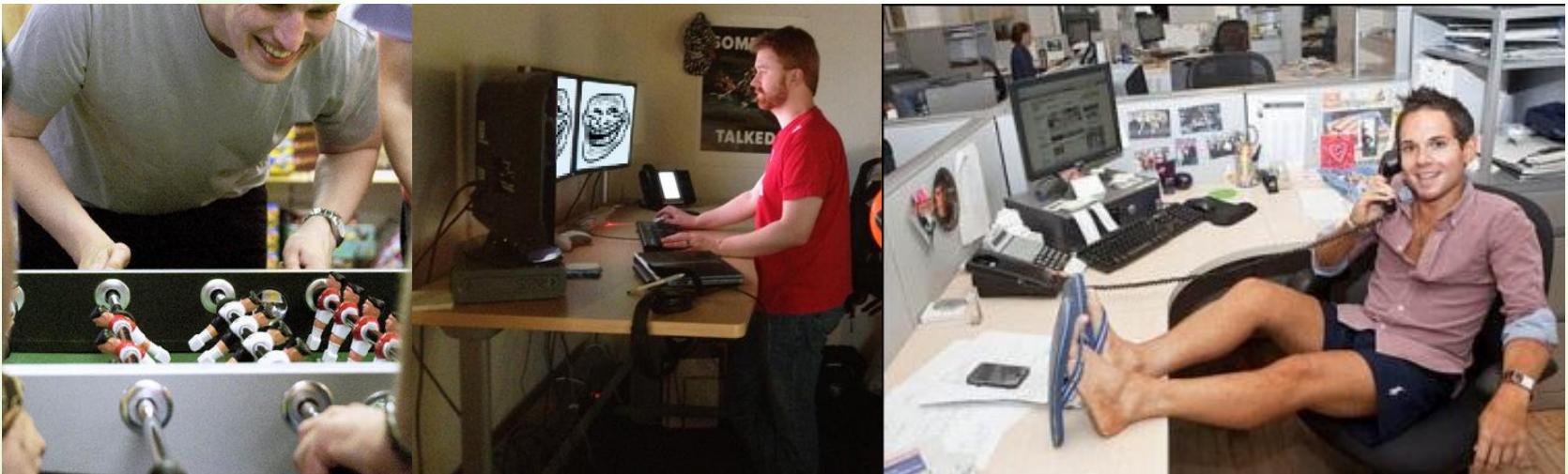
- Maturity does NOT mean we can't be crazy!

Freedom

- Freedom to
    - Decide how to solve a task
    - Come and go to work at flexible hours
    - Take time off to deal with private matters
- Freedom leads to autonomy
- Trust supports it
- Autonomy leads to motivation
- Motivated people contribute to a great CC

Honesty

- It requires a mature & solid CC to bear honesty
    - Remember accountability
    - If something went wrong, admit it
- You HAVE to have a culture where failure is accepted
    - A culture of blame will suppress honesty
    - People will be afraid to admit failure, and afraid to point out bad decisions!
- Honesty is critical for success!
- But: Never loose faith!

- There has to be a common awareness that
  - The culture is crucial
  - Everyone needs to live by the principles
  - Everyone constantly needs to improve their ability to fill them with life
    - It is actually very difficult
    - Challenge yourself to become a interdependent human!
- Common awareness holds everyone accountable

Finally: Consequence

- Principles are not worth anything if not enforced
    - Not just by ‚the bosses', by everyone!
- The principles will only work if they are just that:
    - Principles
- Consequence is required to improve CC
- Consequences are required when individuals really don't want to stick with them
    - Being friendly (= misunderstanding „respect") and ignoring transgressions will backfire

You are a manager?

- Lead by example
- Make yourself accountable to your team!
    - Communicate your own goals
    - Report your progress
- Work on being balanced, encourage your team to challenge you
    - Professional criticism will make you better
- Lead by setting (the right) goals
    - Give freedom, resources and autonomy
    - Strong team members – stronger than you!
    - Recognize effort and results – show awareness

- Lead by example
- Make yourself accountable to your team!
    - Communicate your own goals
    - Report your progress
- Work on being balanced, deal professionally with criticism
    - Professional criticism will make you better
- Be responsible with autonomy
- Communicate professionally – watch out for gossip
- Maturity – self reflection and industry understanding

- Is it unique to videogames or, say, IT?
- I don't believe that
  - Working in teams is difficult due to human nature
- The term „Herding Cats" carries innate disrespect
  - Violating the first principle
- Need to move beyond that
  - Find likeminded people who are up to the challenge of building a great team
  - A good CC will bring out the best in everyone

Development Studio Types

- Stereotypical video game studio cultures
    - Indie coolness
    - The sweatshop
    - The corporation
    - The dreamers
    - The nerds
    - The VC outfit
    - The creative pro's

- Are these total contradictions to the ideal?
- The ideal can evolve from almost any of the above

CC and HR

- Video game studios require a professional hiring process
  - First: Understand which personalities you are looking for
  - Second: Know how to probe for these
  - Third: Don't compromise
- Remember: It's about the RIGHT people

Dealing with Change

- Video game companies tend to change
  - Grow (and shrink) fast – volatile landscape
- CC does change with size – do not trick yourself!
  - The principles don't
  - They make it easier to deal with change
  - A culture of honesty, trust & respects helps to avoid (or cure) costly growth mistakes
  - Communicating what the goals are (e.g. Growth & Exit vs. Indie Spirit) helps achieving the right organizational culture

Unhappy with your CC?

- Some places may indeed be beyond saving…
    - …but actually very few are
- If they are: Vote with your feet – walk out
- If they are not: Start turning the flywheel
- How?
    - First: You've decided it's worth it
    - Second: Understand spheres of influence
    - Third: Understand changing CC is turning a flywheel – sometimes a very big one
    - Then lead by example and live the principles
        - Raise those tricky issues, work virally
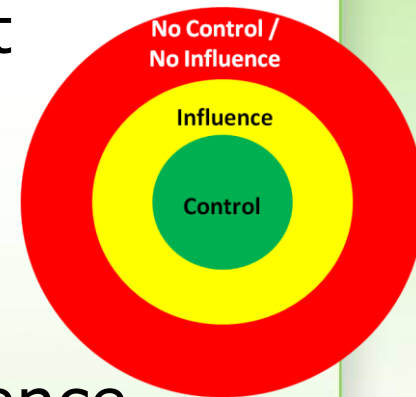
Personal Development

- Turning a flywheel – dealing with frustration
- Watch for the passion vs. indifference trap
  - The wheel accelerates too slow?
    - Too passionate? Nobody listens!
      - You get frustrated!
    - Too indifferent? Doesn't matter anyway!
      - You get frustrated!
- Personal fulfillment depends on having a clear view of the flywheel mass.
  - Required persistance & patience
  - Required shots on goal to score

Finally...

- Ideally all of this will lead you to a great…

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...and Reality

- Of course reality catches up
- It is easier to know these things than to live them
- Our personalities get in the way all the time
- Some days you do better, some worse

- There is no excuse not to...
    - ...be aware of these things, and...
    - ...not to try to constantly improve!

- It is possible to build a creative & highly professional team AND have fun!
- Requires a set of principles that everyone lives by
- These principles should be defined together (not just issued by management)
  - Highest possible buy-in
- Requires willingness to openly deal with personal strengths & weaknesses
  - Only works in an environment of respect and trust

Some suggested reading

- „Drive" by Daniel Pink
- „Seven habits of highly effective people" by Steven Covey
- „Good to great" by Jim Collins
- „Thinking, fast & slow" by Daniel Kahneman
- „Crucial conversations" by Patterson

- These books can provide good inspiration

World class multi platform Free-to-Play games!

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