Welcome! If you came to Flash Forward yesterday, I claimed the hiring process at TGC has a direct effect on the kind of games we make, and this talk is for those who want to build small studios with a large impact.

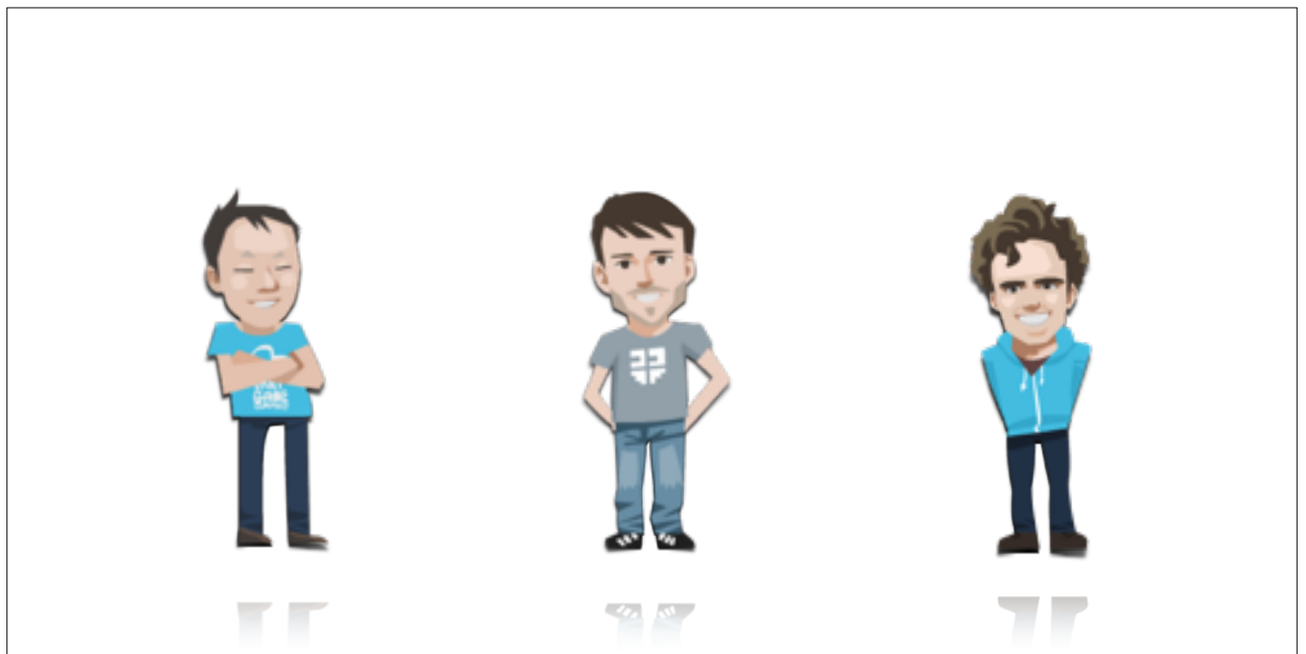
Thanks for joining me for Hiring for Hopeless Perfectionists!

Previously...

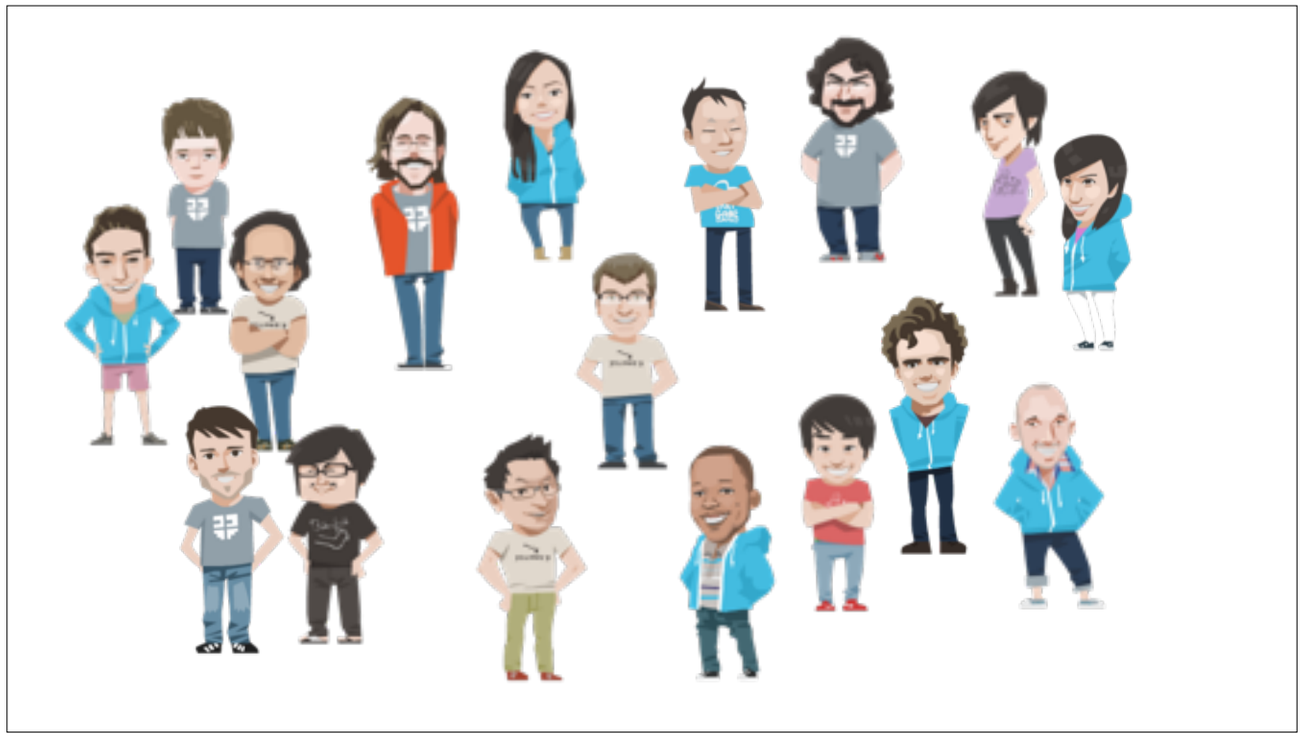
- Production
- Marketing
- Project Management
- Hiring
- Localization
- And Lots More

Sunni Pavlovic

Me - 3 years at TGC, game industry for 5, and in the entertainment industry for a few years before that.
Plus Budgeting and payroll, altogether is pretty much what studio management is.
This includes overseeing internal operations, and external relations.



This is TGCs executive team and lead developers. They've been at TGC since the beginning working on all of the studio's previous 3 games.
There were more, but that's been covered in previous talks and interviews, and is not the focus of today's talk, which centers on growing TGC back up from these three, to….

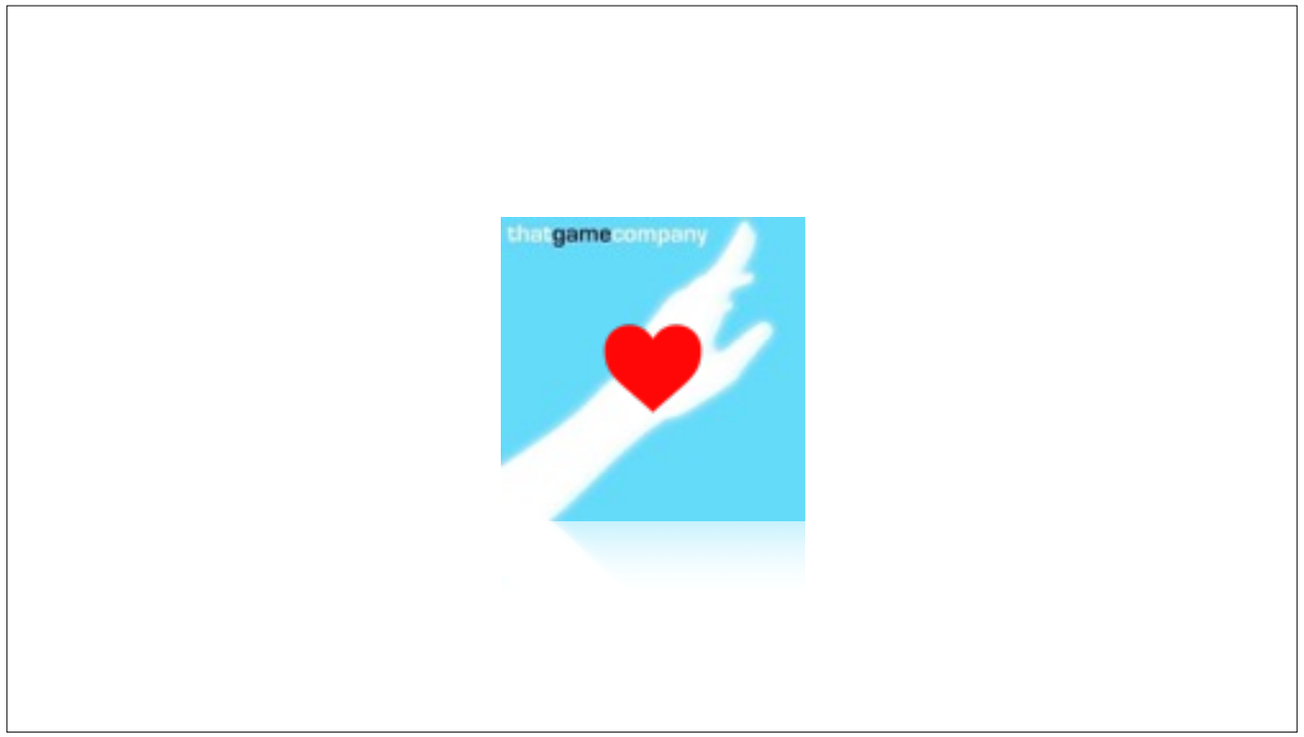


15 full time, 2 part time as of March 2015. 4 of which are returning developers from TGC’s previous game, in addition to the 3 leads.

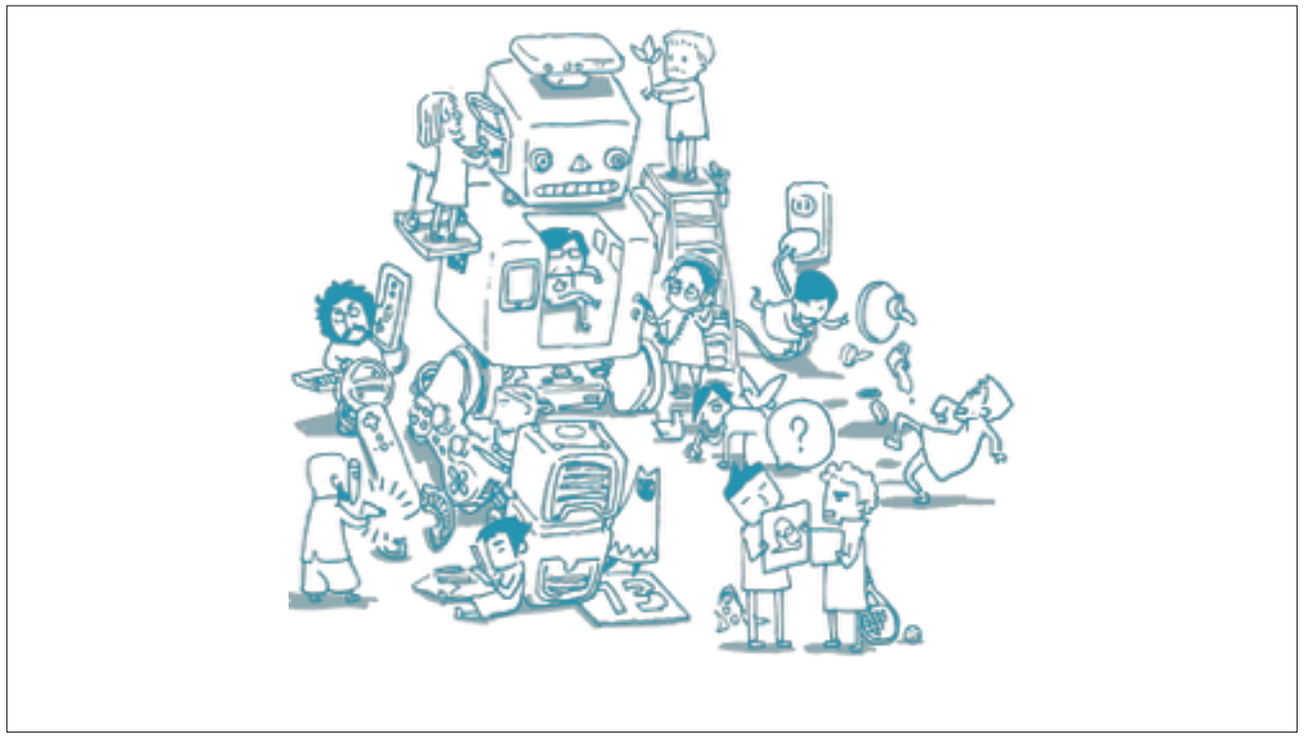
TGC’s previous three games.

each of these games are award winning games that have received numerous industry honors, including game of the year for Journey.

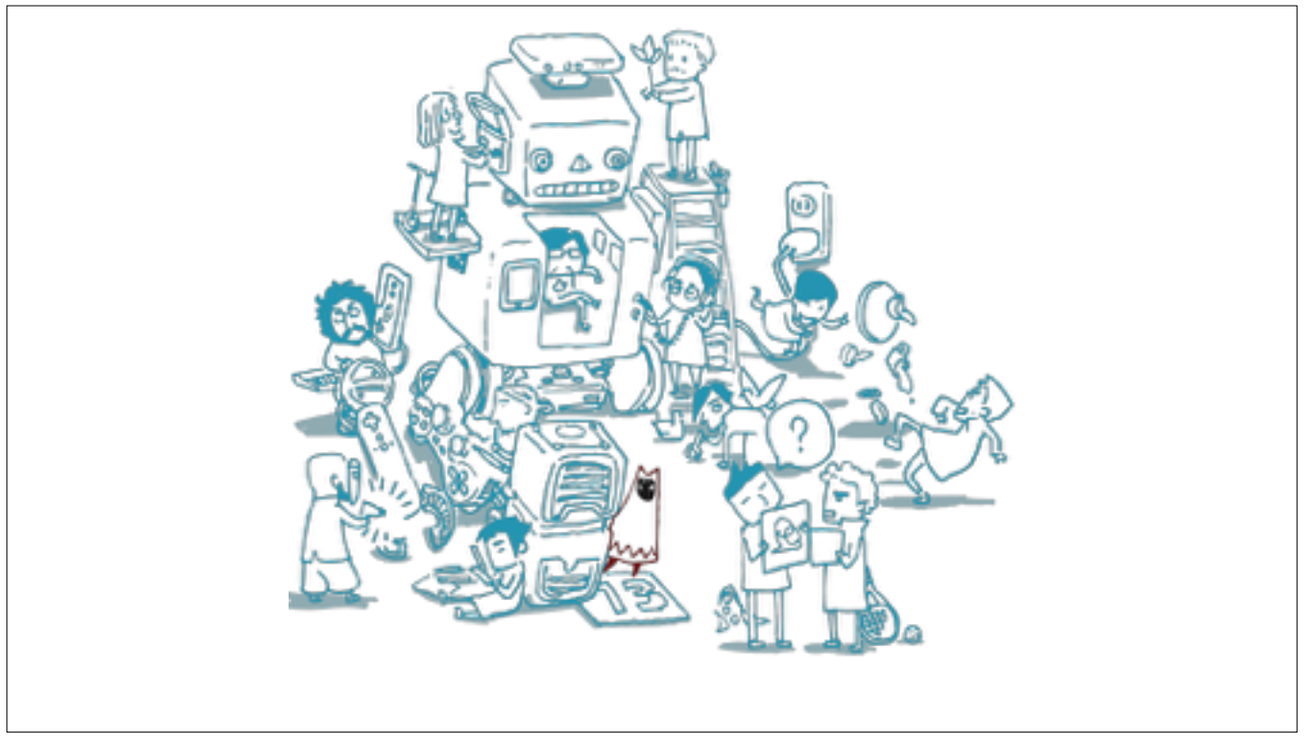
and have inspired a wide array of eclectic and devoted fan art.



Most importantly, these games are the result of the relentless hopeless perfectionism that defines thatgamecompany, and has allowed such a small development team to make memorable game experiences



Inspiration # 1 - As an anomaly within the industry, people often ask about TGC’s philosophy that allows a small team to have a large impact. Hiring for Hopeless Perfectionists is my way of demystifying thatgamecompany’s internal process and guiding values.



Inspiration # 2 - I’m talking about Hiring! Why? BC the outcomes of the hiring process touch virtually every aspect of game development. For a subject as critical to the outcome of a studio, I’m throwing a spotlight on the hiring process that has worked for our studio, and why.

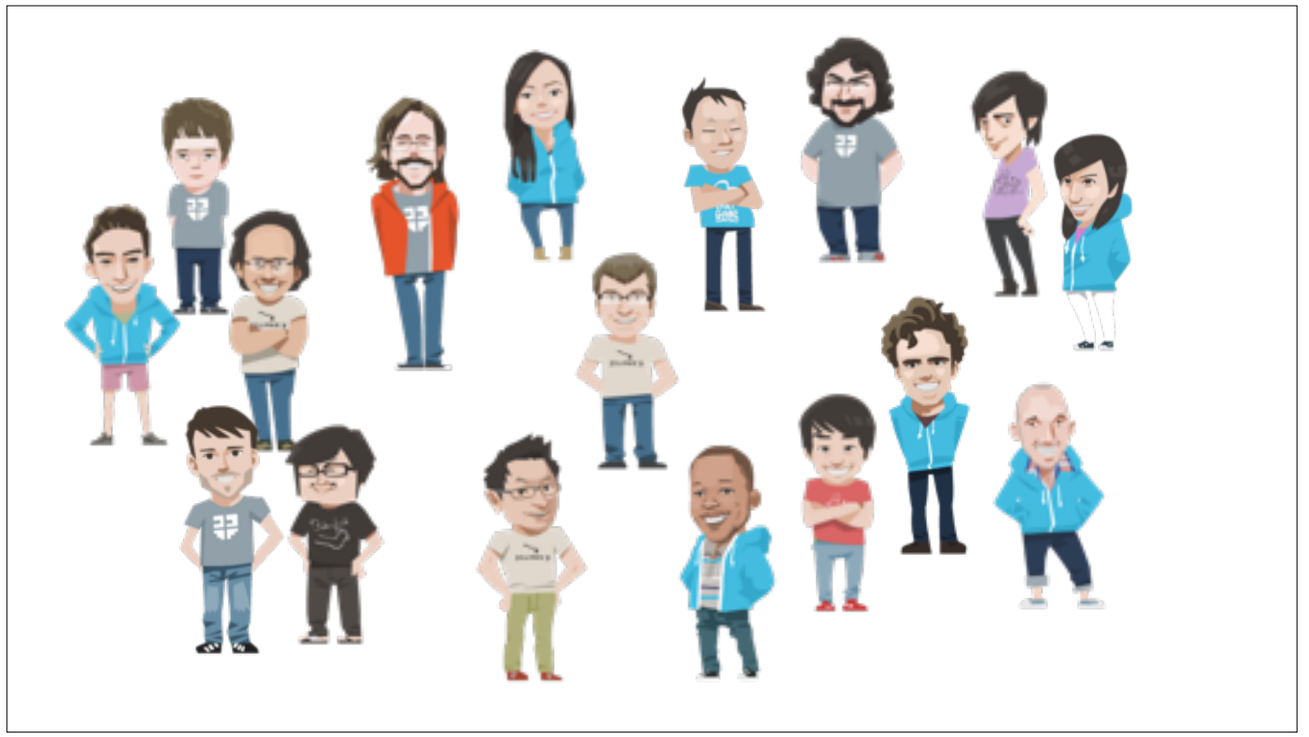
Goal: leaving you with a newfound appreciation and understanding for the hiring process in general, inspiring reflection and taking the ideas that resonate with you back to your own studio for discussion

The Hiring Outcome We All Want to Avoid

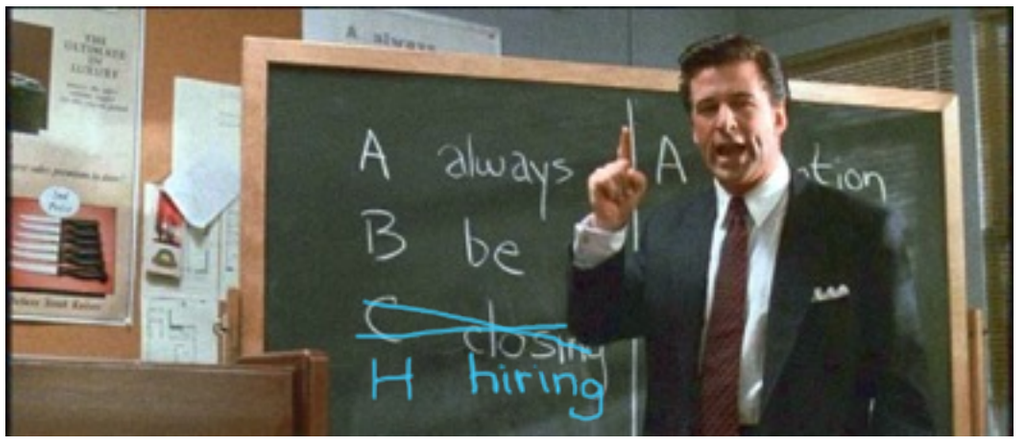
There are many ways to hire and grow a studio. Not all of them are ideal. For example:

This process is efficient because the hires are generic, expendable, replaceable — it is completely impersonal and not very remarkable. Great from a pure financial perspective, not great from a creative perspective.
Predicted outcomes: lack of team cohesion and personal ownership —> mediocre product —> crunching —> potentially layoffs.

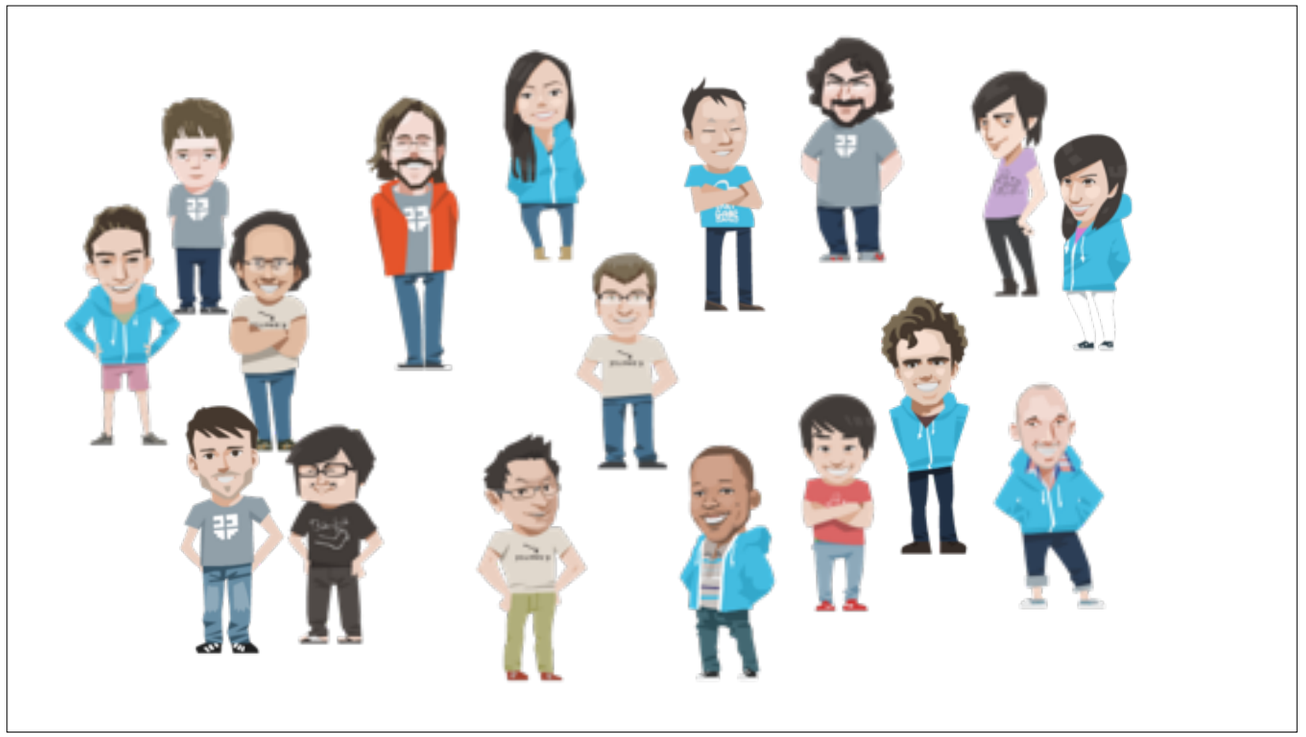
A Better Way



- Building a studio is more than the act of filling the studio with more warm bodies. The Hiring mentality reflects this. We have to ask ourselves what is the goal? It’s so much more than giving out employment offers.
- Hiring is important. A strategic pillar in the larger plan for the studio.
- Hiring = hiring well. with great thought, attention, and care



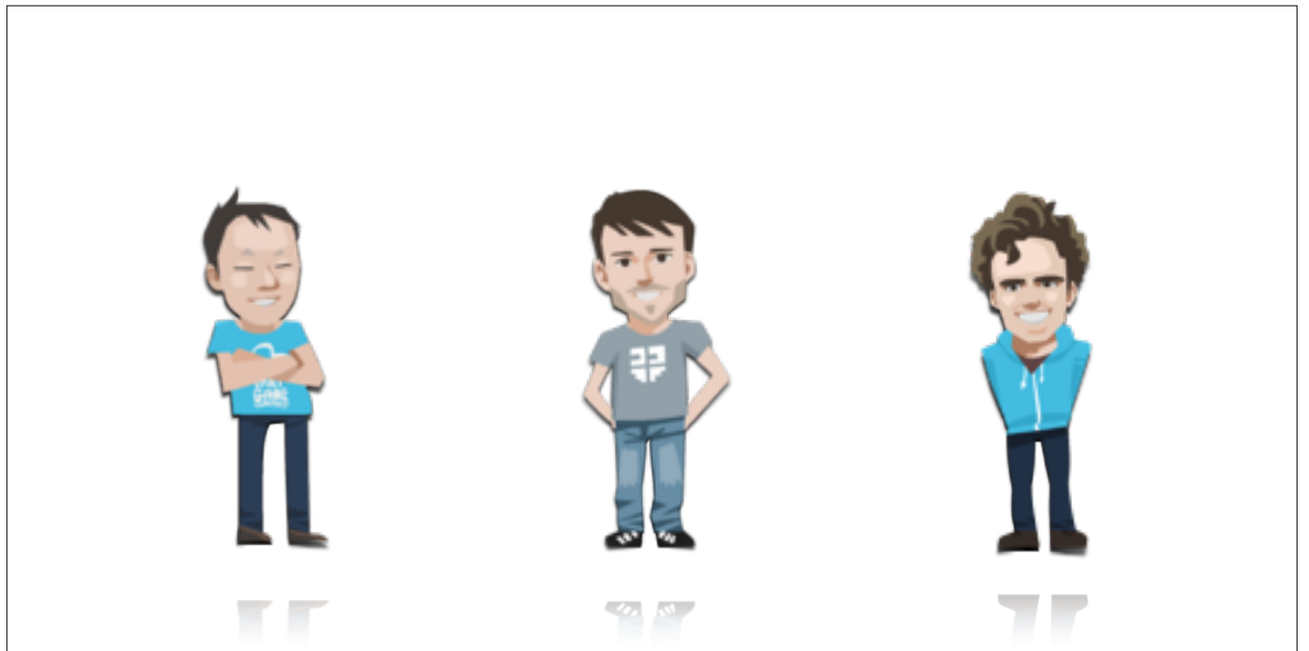
Hiring doesn’t end. It’s an ongoing process, through to retention and greater word-of-mouth for future hires.
Always Be Hiring!



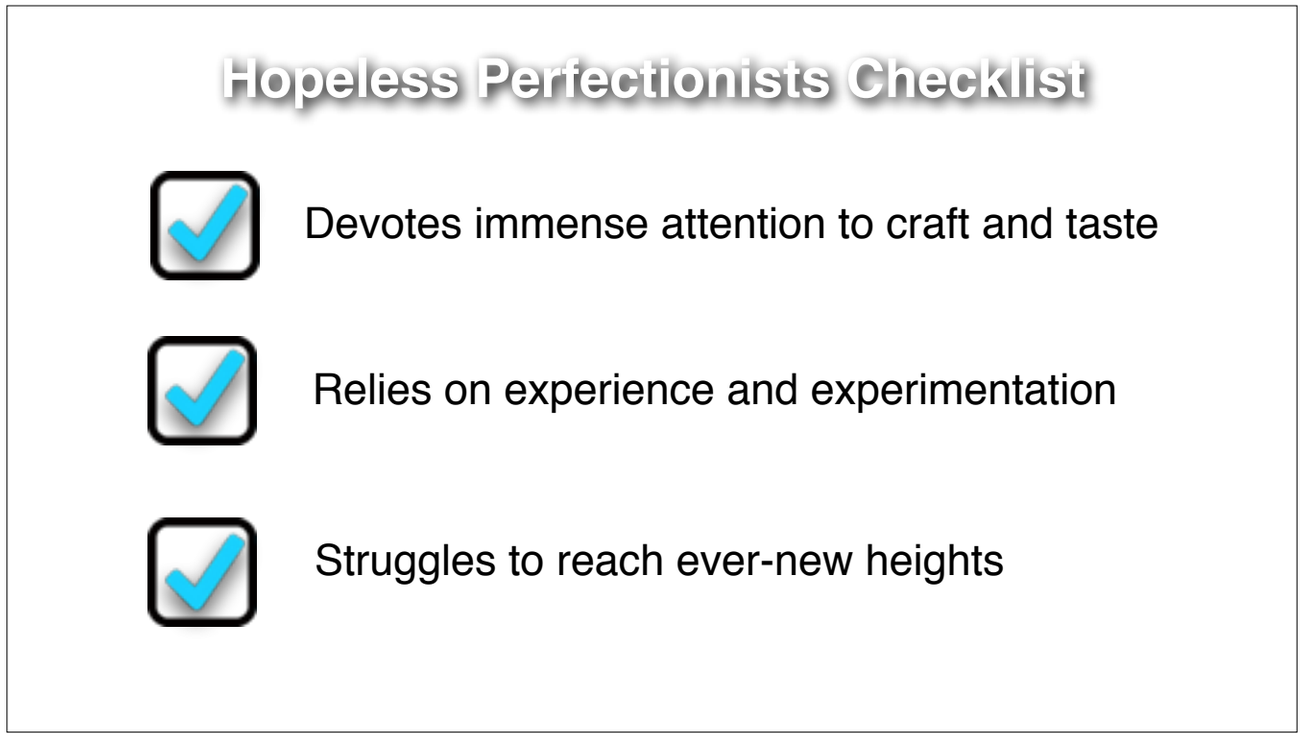
The rest of this talk goes into how TGC built this…

…And avoided building this.

So those are the underlying hiring principles at TGC, let’s circle back to our hopeless perfectionists



Introducing…the hopeless perfectionists (TGC lead developers + executive team). Hopeless perfectionism begins from these three and radiates through to the rest of the studio.



Checklist for a hopeless perfectionist - a person who:
+ Devotes immense amounts of time and attention to quality and craft
+ Is a truth seeker relying on experience and experimentation over conventional methods
+ Is in an ongoing struggle to reach ever-new heights

Strengths

- Game Development
- Artistry
- High Polish
- Broad Appeal

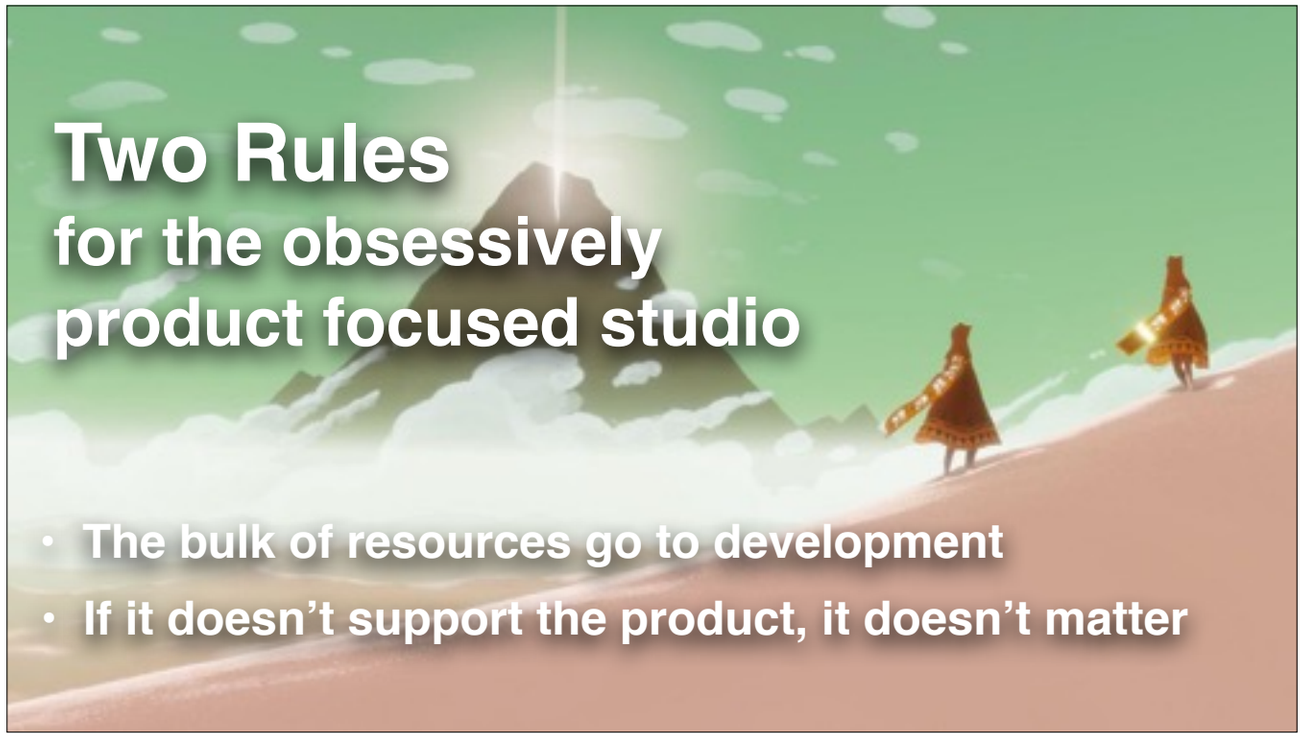
Weaknesses

- Marketing
- Recruitment
- Management
- External outreach

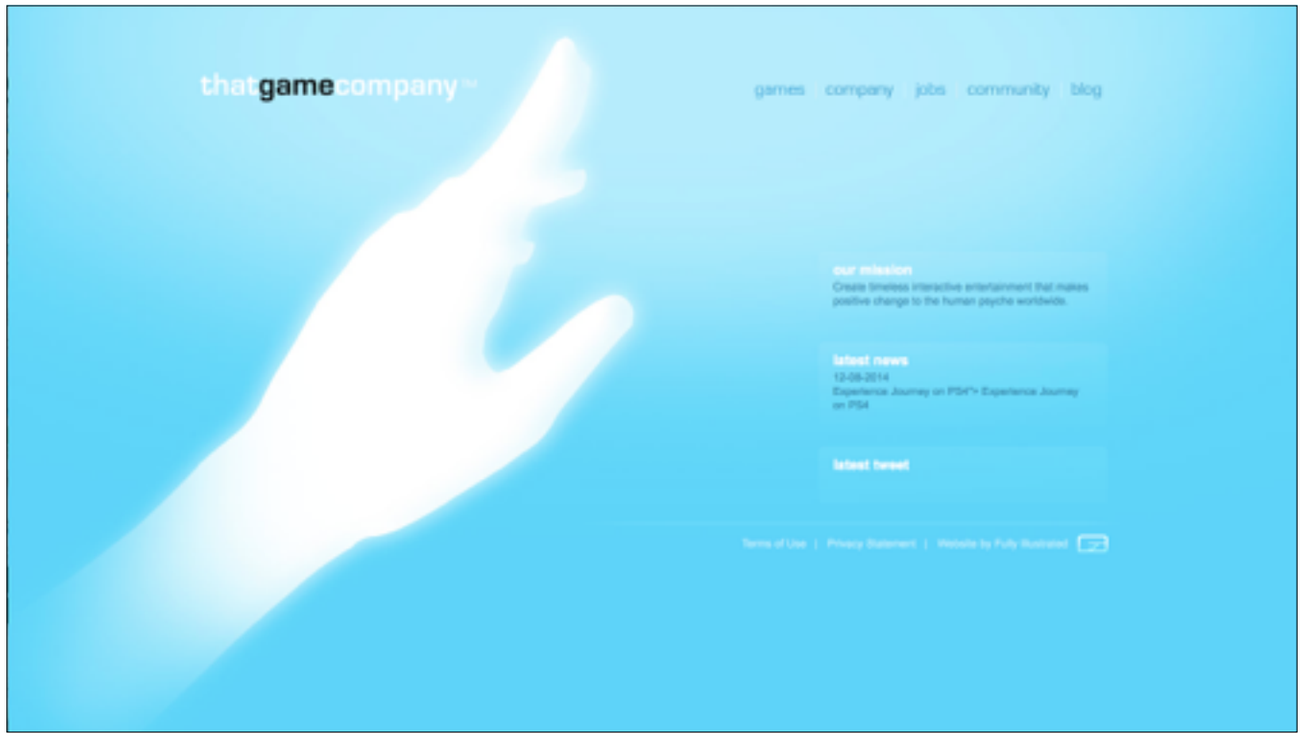
We came from student game development and small teams. Recognizing and working with our strengths can well make up for our weaknesses as a studio. Especially now that we’re self-publishing.
If we’re doing out job well in making the game, it has the carry over effects of accomplishing the areas we are traditionally are not as strong in.

One thing I’ve come to learn about thatgamecompany.

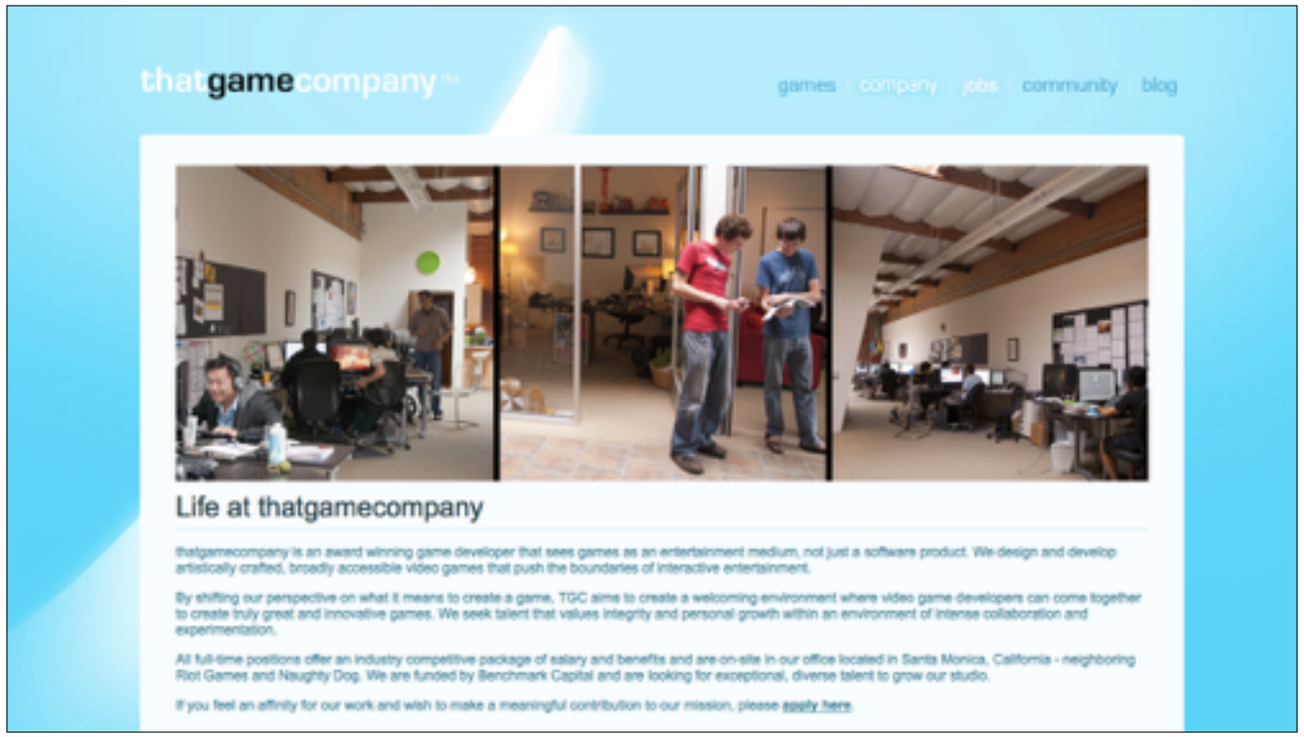
Full stop.



Two rules of an obsessively product focused studio:
The bulk of activity, and resources, go to development. Ex: We’ll buy the best hardware we can because it’s necessary for development, but we’ll use of a stash of leftover coffee mugs from the studio’s previous tenant, because a mug is a mug.
If it doesn’t support the product, it effectively doesn’t matter.



Best example? Check out our website, circa 2006. www.thatgamecompany.com



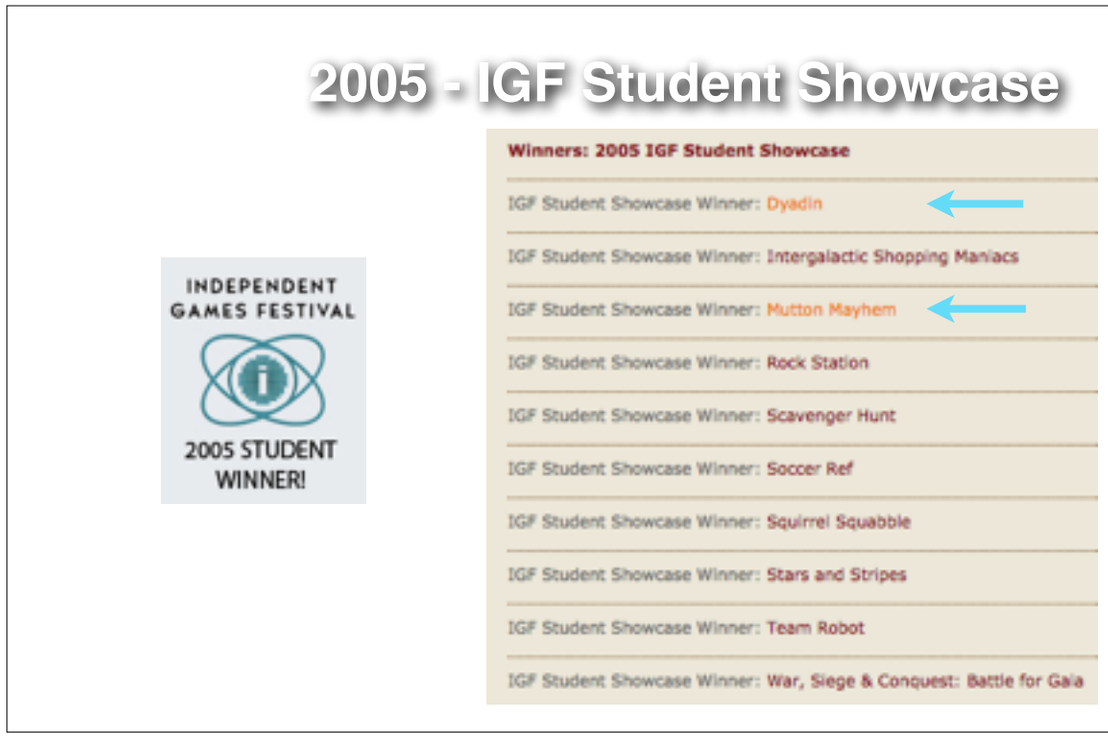
The Jobs page includes photos of our studio back in 2009. **Remember**, we're not great at conventional marketing, and our website doesn't directly help the game, and resources are focused on making a great game.

Tying hiring into the larger strategy - Being product focused, we hire HP or otherwise hire those who support HP to make up for imbalances. Hopeless perfectionists *are not* perfect, they have plenty of deficiencies, too. The whole point is that the whole team is cohesive and aligned towards the same goal.

Hiring creatives - each person receives direct feedback (reward) for their choices, self motivated, self-managed, no external bureaucracy. They are accountable to each other and themselvess.

Starting Out - big impact, small team, the studio cofounders found each other based on product. As students, they kept running into each other at the student game festivals because even back then they were product focused, spending all their free time making games and being recognized for it.

Although the founder’s network was small, it became easy to identify the people that had similar drive, dedication, talent, and entrepreneurial spirit, and when it came time to found a studio, they knew who they wanted to work with. That was how TGC built their studio, pre-product.

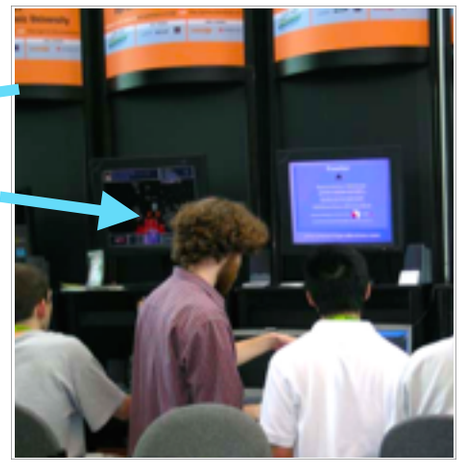


IGF 2005. Dyadin team and Mutton Mayhem team.

2005 - IGF Student Showcase

TGC Audio Director Vincent Diamante

TGC Creative Director Jenova Chen



TGC Lead Engineer John Edwards

IGF 2005

Dyadin team on the left.
(part of the) Mutton Mayhem team on the right.

2006 - Slamdance Guerrilla Gamemaker Competition

Slamdance 2006

Cloud
Ocular Ink

2006 - Slamdance Guerrilla Gamemaker Competition

Slamdance 2006 Cloud & Ocular Ink.
Future TGC Lead Engineer John Edwards (left) and future Creative Director and President Jenova Chen (right) cross paths again.

IGF 2006. Cloud team and Ocular Ink team.

2007 - GDC

GDC 2007 - TGC flOw PS3 team.

The original iteration of TGC was made up of the same group of developers who worked on the student festival games honorees: Kellee, Nick, Austin as composer, Jenova, and John.

Vincent would come back to work on Flower, and again for our game currently in development.

Bonus Tip

Know What Else Happens at GDC?

Driving along Interstate 5 in California…
(dissolve to…)

(Footage from TGC game Flower).
(dissolve back to…)

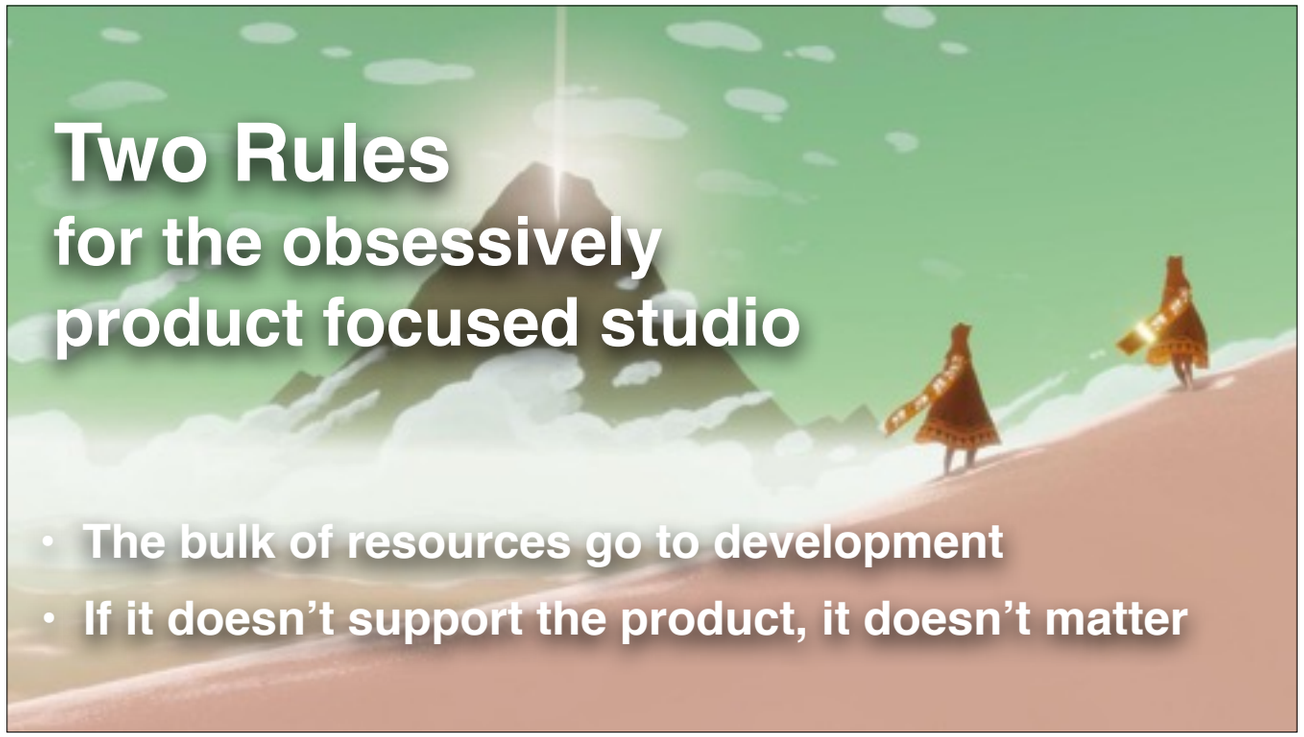
You get inspired to make your studio’s next game and first original IP.

Just sayin’.

Getting the word out about hiring once you have a product (always keeping the efforts product-focused).

thatgamecompany is an obsessively
product-focused studio.

Remember.



Plus we’re straight up terrible at conventional marketing and recruiting.

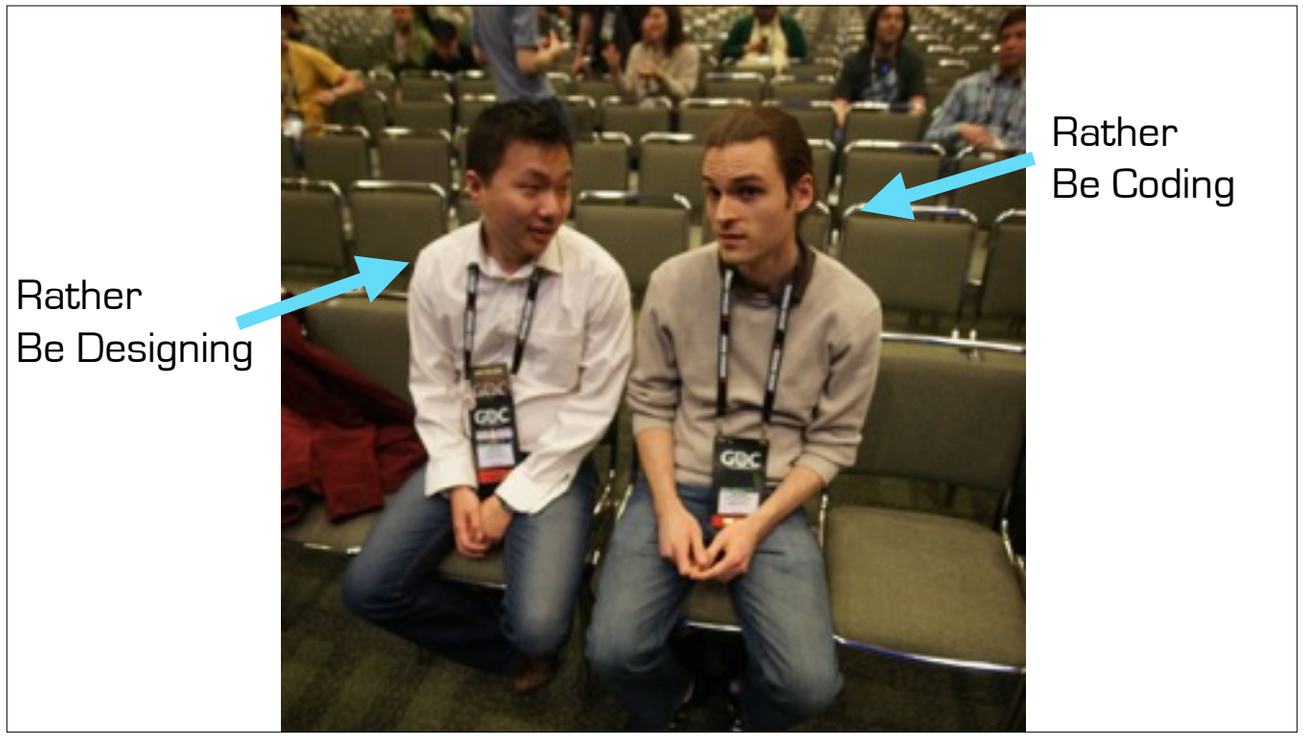
But brand-building helps the product, and so does hiring well.

So when we already have a product - our approach is still a product-focused one.

So what do we do? Give talks. Mostly about our products and process.

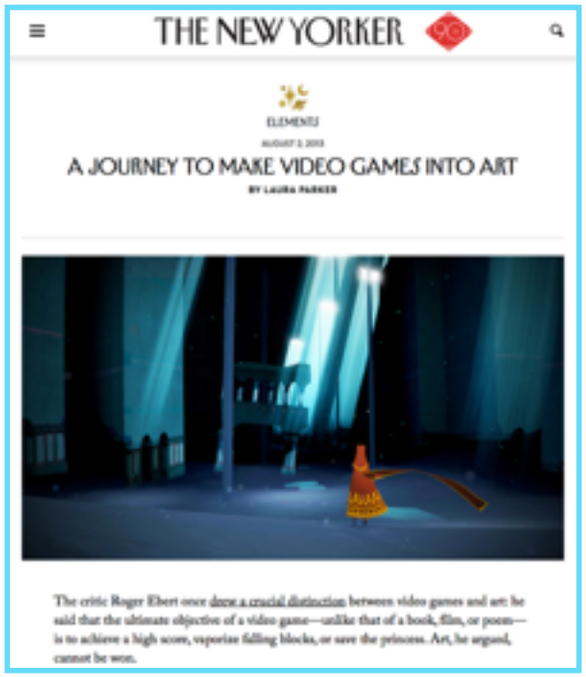
(Jenova gives talk at Games for Change 2014)

Because honestly, hiring is a numbers game. The more brand reputation we build based on external outreach around our product, the higher the chances we can find good hires because of it.
This is reputation building. this is how TGC does marketing.



Plus it’s good karma to share knowledge with our peers at conferences like GDC.
Because, at heart, we just wanna make great products, and giving talks is a by-product and conduit to making great games, so we make time for it.

Even when we would… (see above).


THE NEW YORKER

ELEMENTS

AUGUST 2, 2013

A JOURNEY TO MAKE VIDEO GAMES INTO ART

BY LAURA PARKER

The critic Roger Ebert once drew a crucial distinction between video games and art: he said that the ultimate objective of a video game—unlike that of a book, film, or poem—is to achieve a high score, vaporize falling blocks, or save the princess. Art, he argued, cannot be won.

And if we're doing our jobs well and creating memorable game experiences, the press are more likely to reach out and build stories around around studio, reducing the need to devote resources for other types of marketing and outreach.

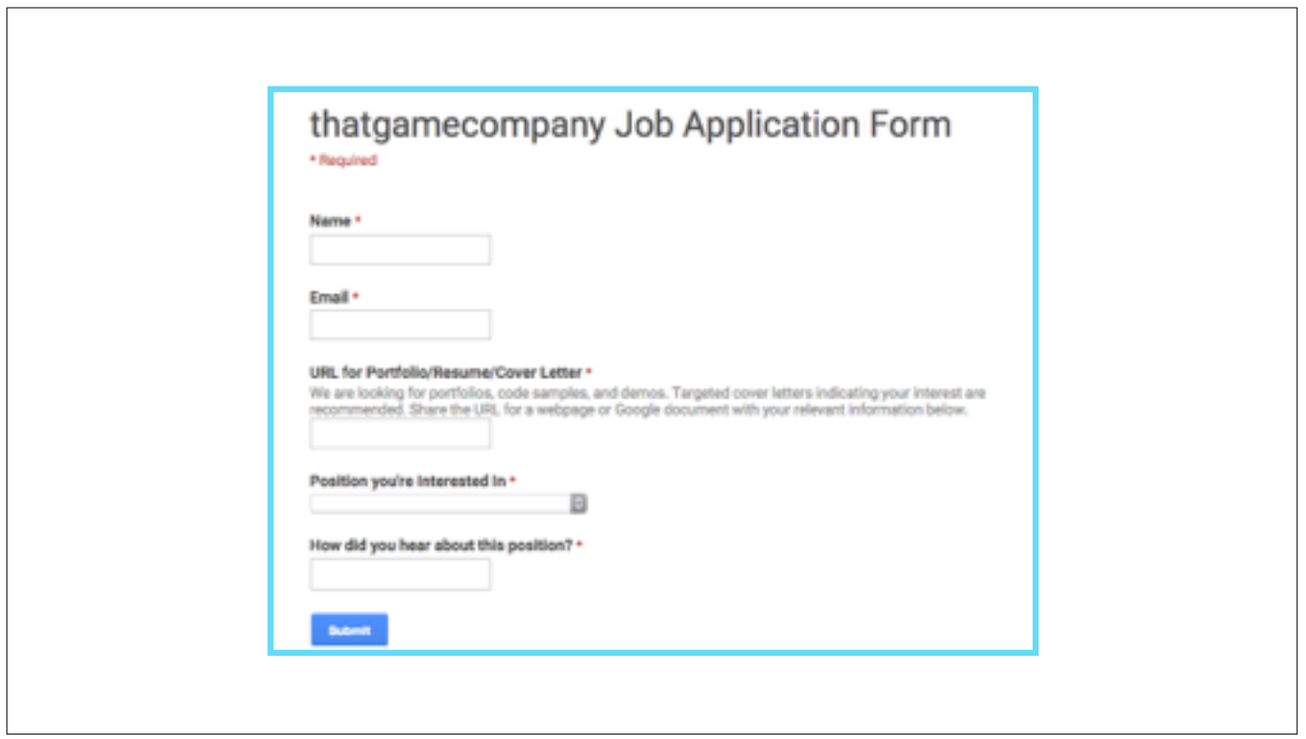
The point is even when we do external outreach, it always comes back to the product. All of these opportunities arise from the games themselves, otherwise no one would be interested to write about us in the press, or come hear us speak.

application
cover letters
resumes
portfolios
interviews
tests
final group interview
rejections
after the offer

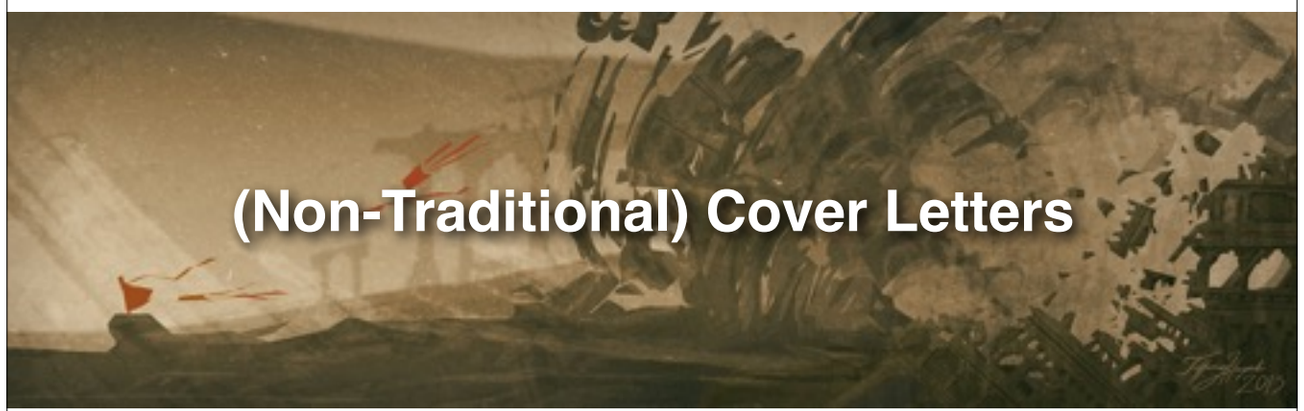
Candidate Channels

3. job application via website
2. speaking
1. personal recommendations

Top sources of finding successfully hired candidates:
3. job application via website
2. speaking
1. personal recommendations (not that those are guaranteed hires)



The TGC Job application form. It’s been around forever, it still works.



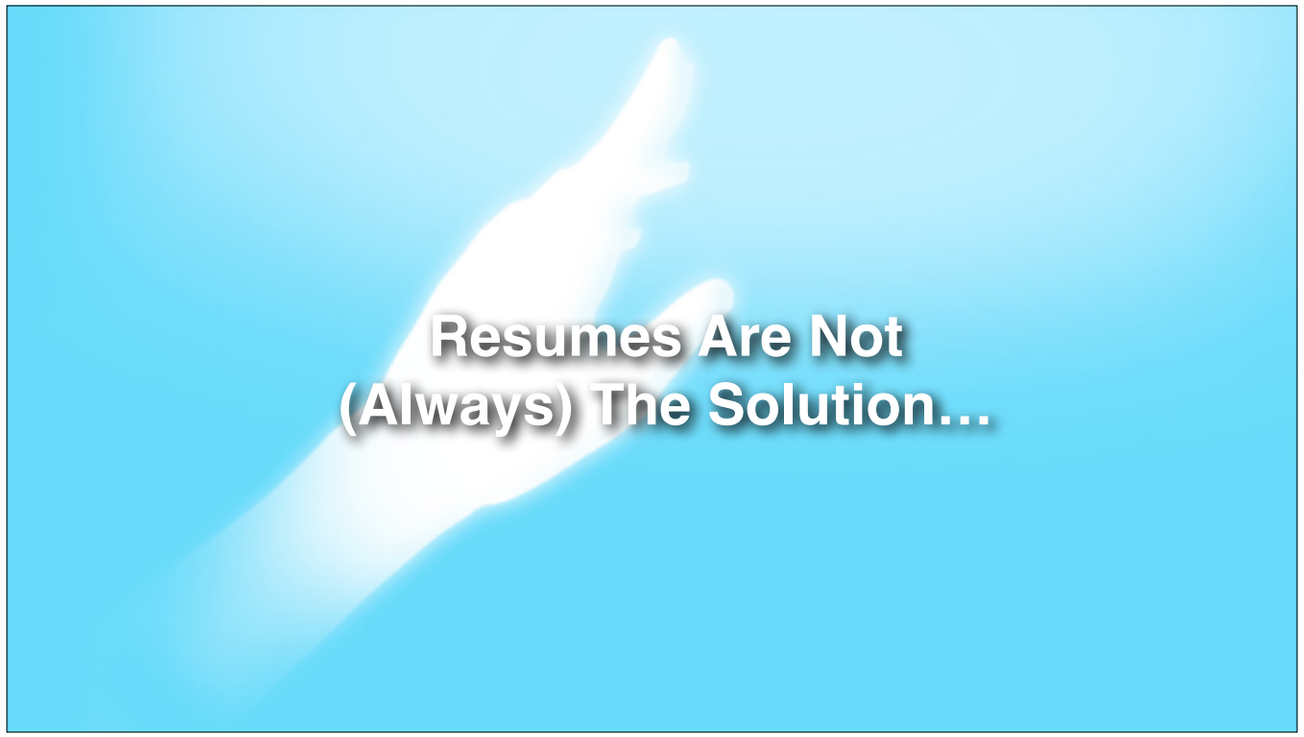
Cover letters - For non-native speakers and other creative roles, we must look beyond the obvious.

Pros - great for learning more about the motivation and personality of a candidate, especially given our emphasis on culture fit. Gets attention.

Cons - often the best developers are not wordsmiths, and need to let a portfolio speak for itself.

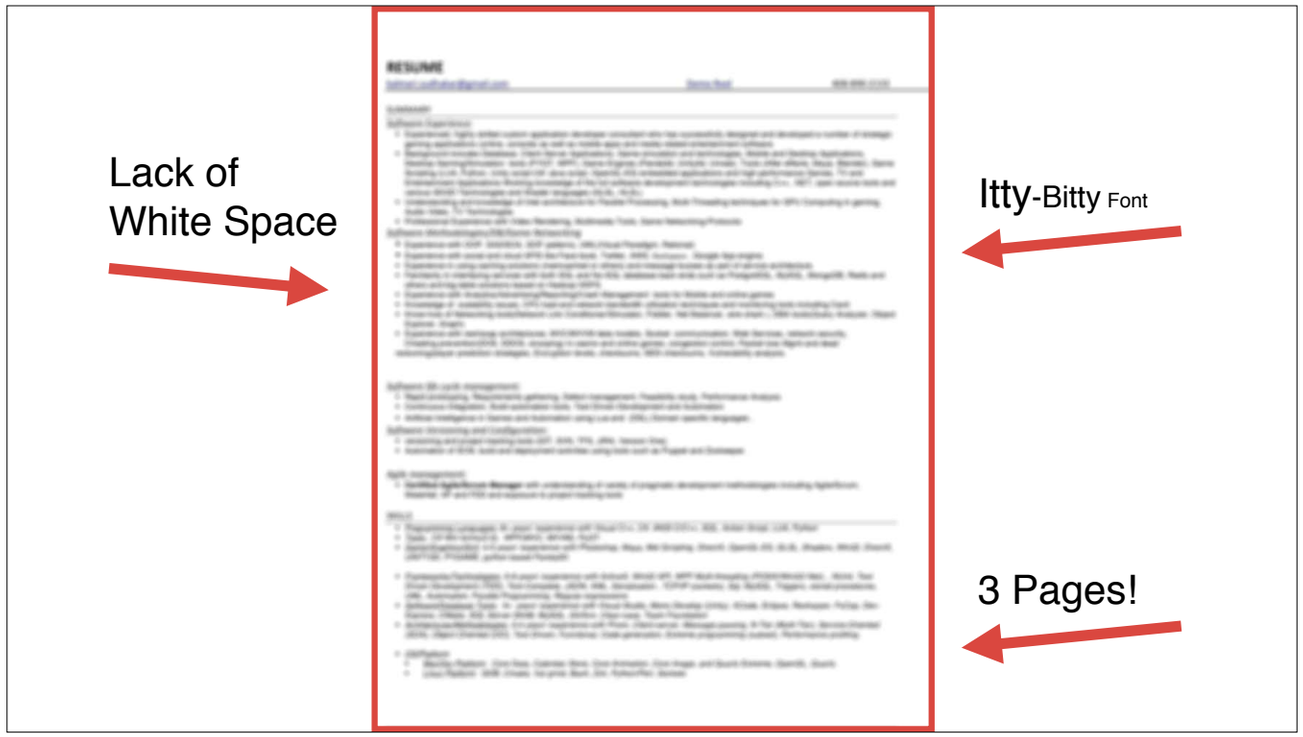
(artwork from Tiffany Hayashi, hired as an art intern based partially on her great fan art)

Tiffany went on to a role at Disney, where many great women concept artists work. The game industry has a lot to learn from the film and animation industries: by creating family-friendly work environments and creating products that appeal to a wide range of people it’s much easier to build a diverse pool of interested candidates in the longer-team.
The accessible nature of TGC’s games does help us attract more diverse candidates.



Resumes do some things well: Pros - quick glance to match up a candidate’s focus, priorities, baseline skills, past work environments (are they small studio or big studio?)

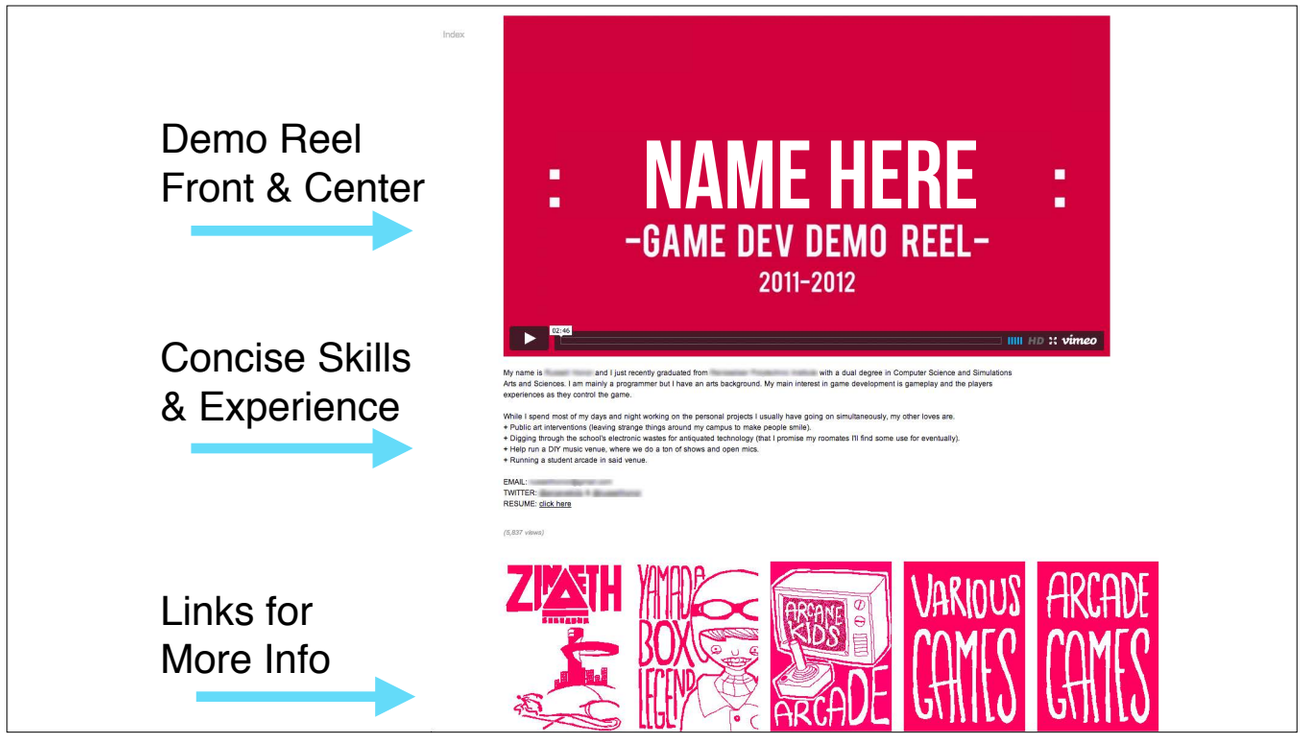
But…



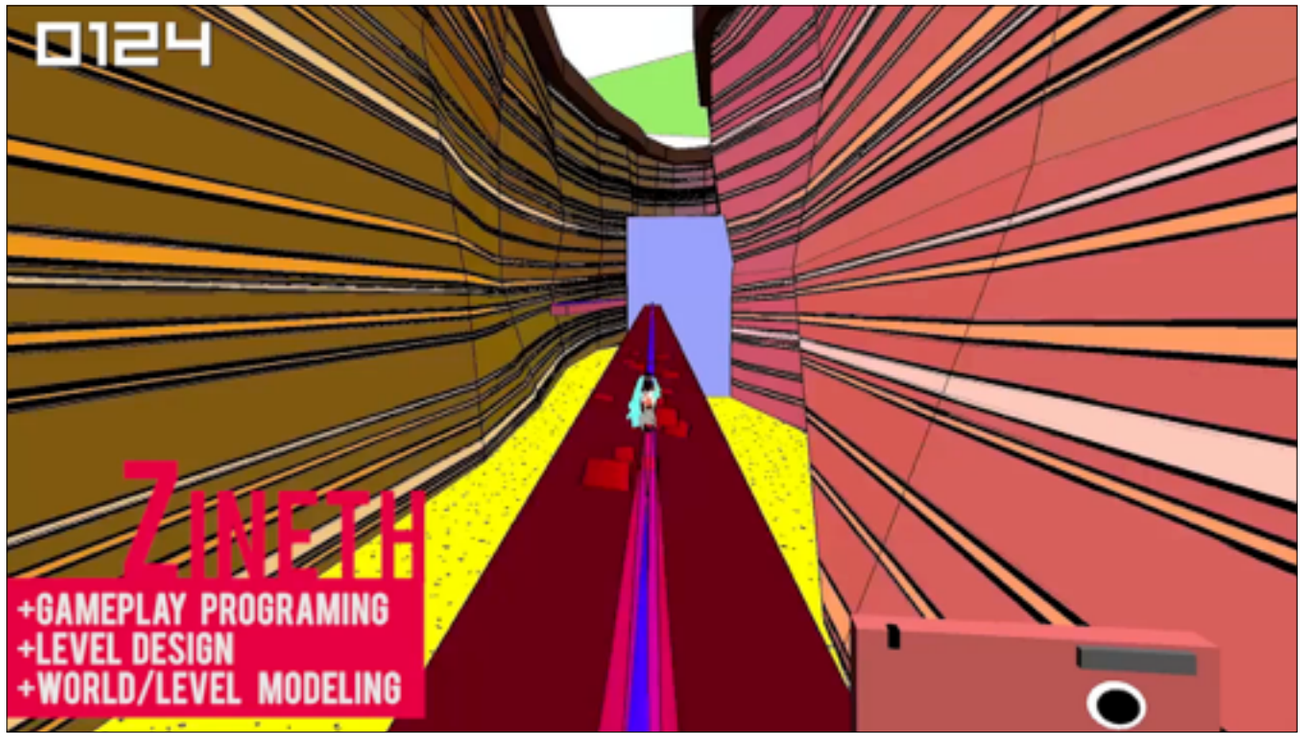
They sometimes have their drawbacks. Do not indicate talent, ability, values, taste - actually very limiting information.

A particularly egregious example of a poorly-conceived resume.

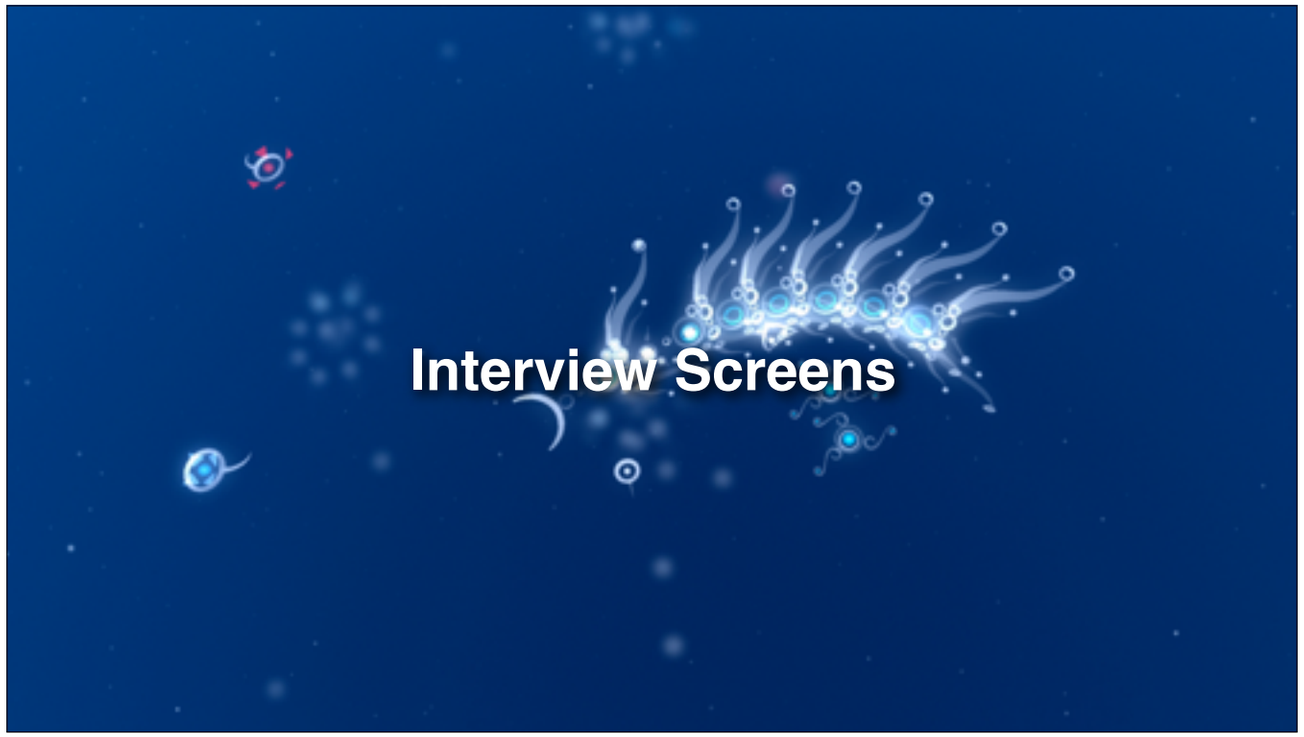
…But A Portfolio Is Worth
A Thousand Words.



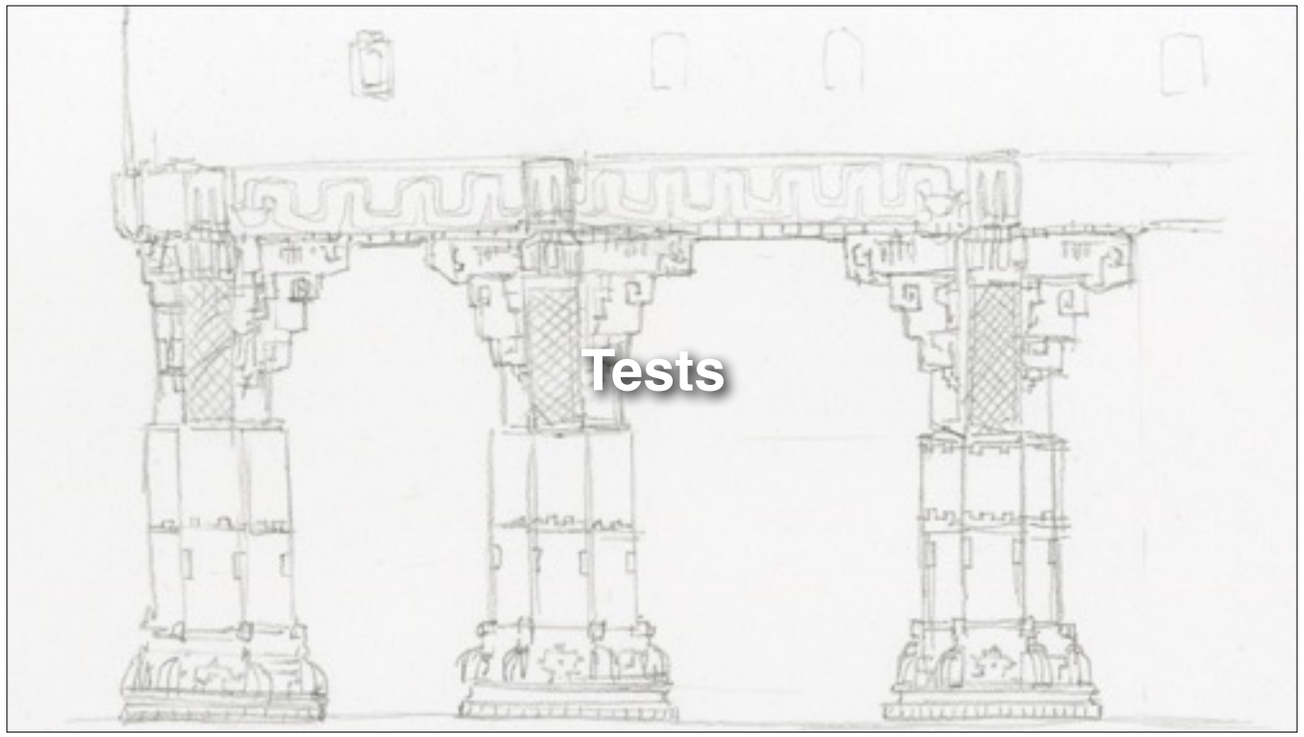
One of my favorite applications (anonymized) which eventually led to a successful hire. Applied through the TGC website and got noticed based on the portfolio work.

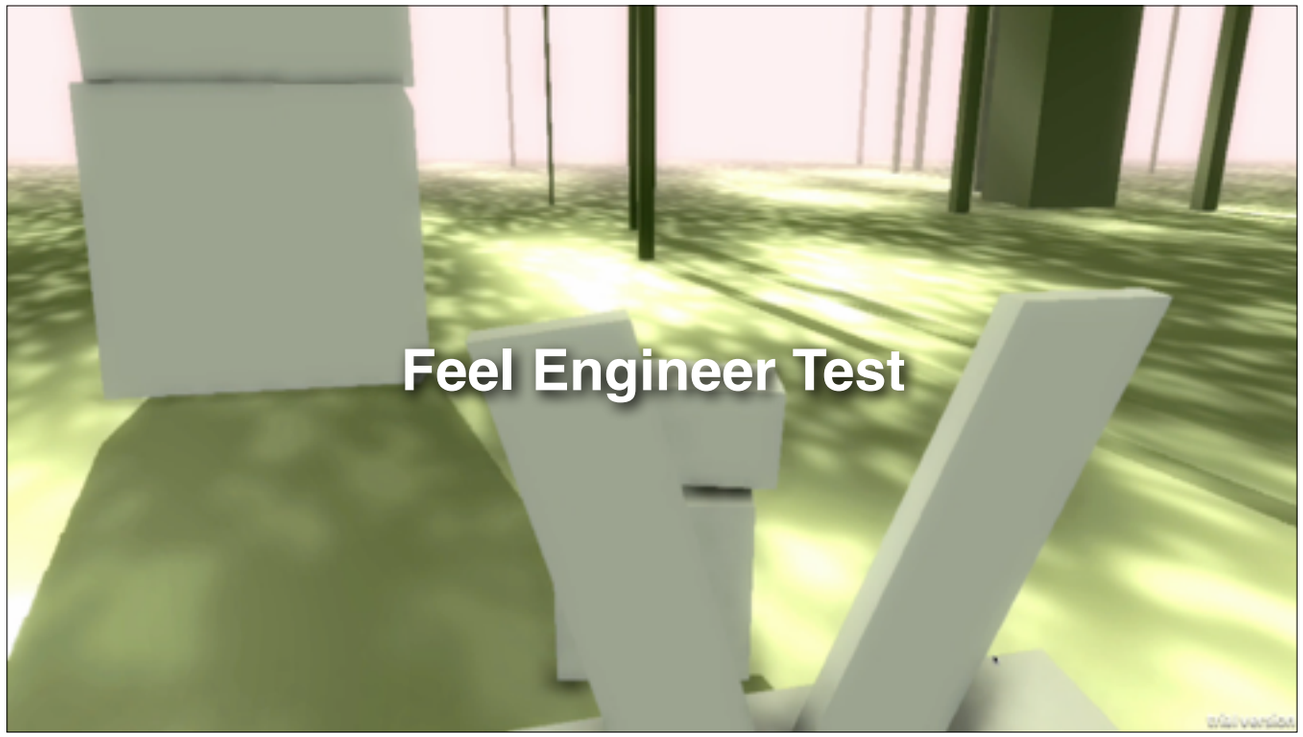


Demo Reel Video



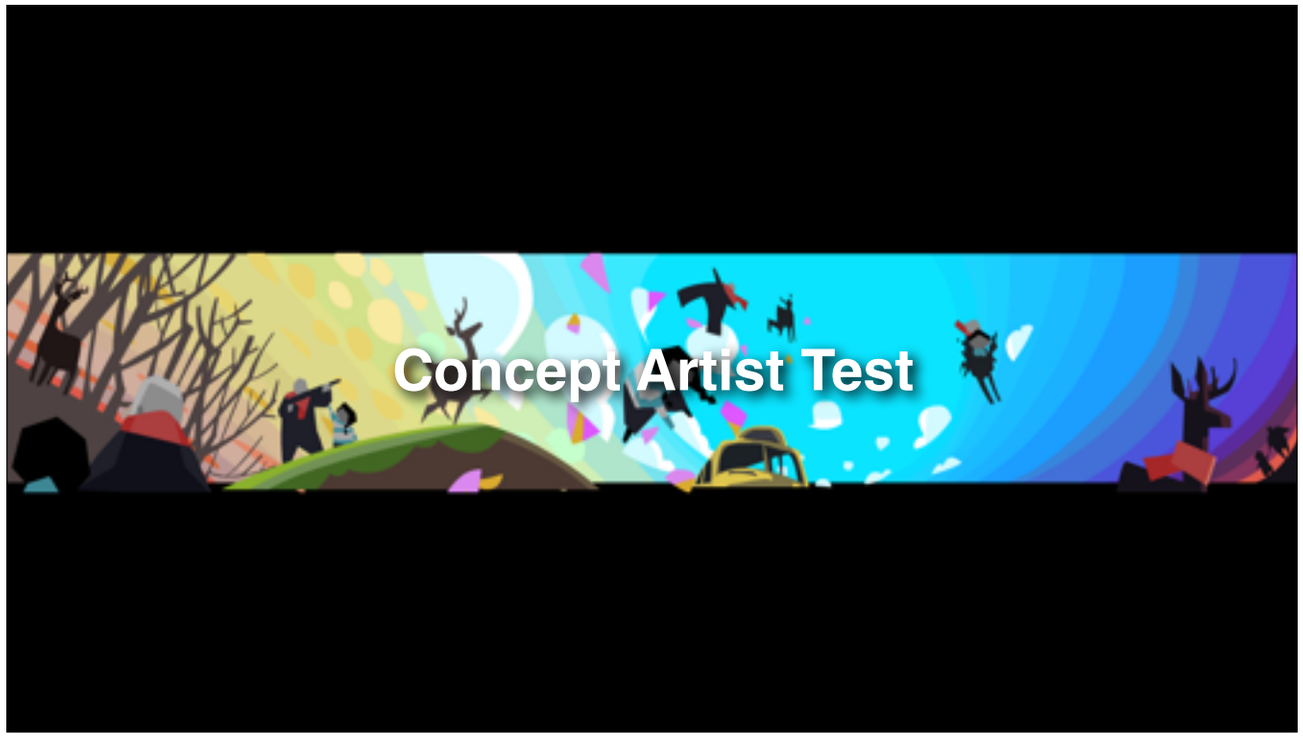
Interviewing & Screening
Goals:
Inform - the nature and needs of the role, our process, values, structure, phase of development, team size
Sell (or scare) - share the many upsides, what I enjoy most about our work and being part of this team, the kind of developer that does really well (self-directed, experimental), as well as does really poorly (requires lots of structure, used to bigger teams)
Evaluate - Listen to a candidate’s values, contributions, wants, and needs, and filter against the studio’s values, contributions, wants, and needs


Tests



Feel Engineer Test (video): Feel Engineers roles are a hybrid of design and engineering. Essentially a focus on UX from an engineering heavy background. The Feel Engineer test requires demonstration of thoughtful design choices around the characters, interactivity, AI, music, world-building, camera, controls, and more, as well as the engineering chops to implement these choices.
All tests are tailored for the role to demonstrate day-to-day skills and tasks.

Factoid: The majority of the TGC team is made up of engineers.



(Art Test)
Color script
Using color to demonstrate the progression of a basic narrative.

(Art Test)

Produce a single image that evokes an emotion or feeling, or suggests a narrative.

All day group interviews - an investment that pays off.
Is this candidate someone we can work with?
Are we someone the candidate wants to work with us?

Rejections - If they’ve gotten far, I like to offer useful feedback and areas for improvement and the opportunity to keep in touch in case a better-suited role opens up. Rejections are an opportunity to expand the studio’s limited network (as we’re not very social, and a good developer is hard to come by), so it’s important to be respectful.

thatgamecompany Programmer Requirements

Any programmer:

- Strong 3D math skills
  - Understand what all the columns (or rows) of a transform matrix mean
  - Understand the details of a dot product
  - Understand the details of a cross product
  - Understand how to project a vector onto a plane
- Floating point math skills
  - Know how to compare floating point numbers
  - Know the multitude ways floating point numbers can subtly ruin your code
- As lame as it is, understanding how various C++ features are commonly implemented
  - How are virtual functions implemented, and how can that cause trouble with memset?
  - What is the stack, and how can it hurt you?

Tools programmer:

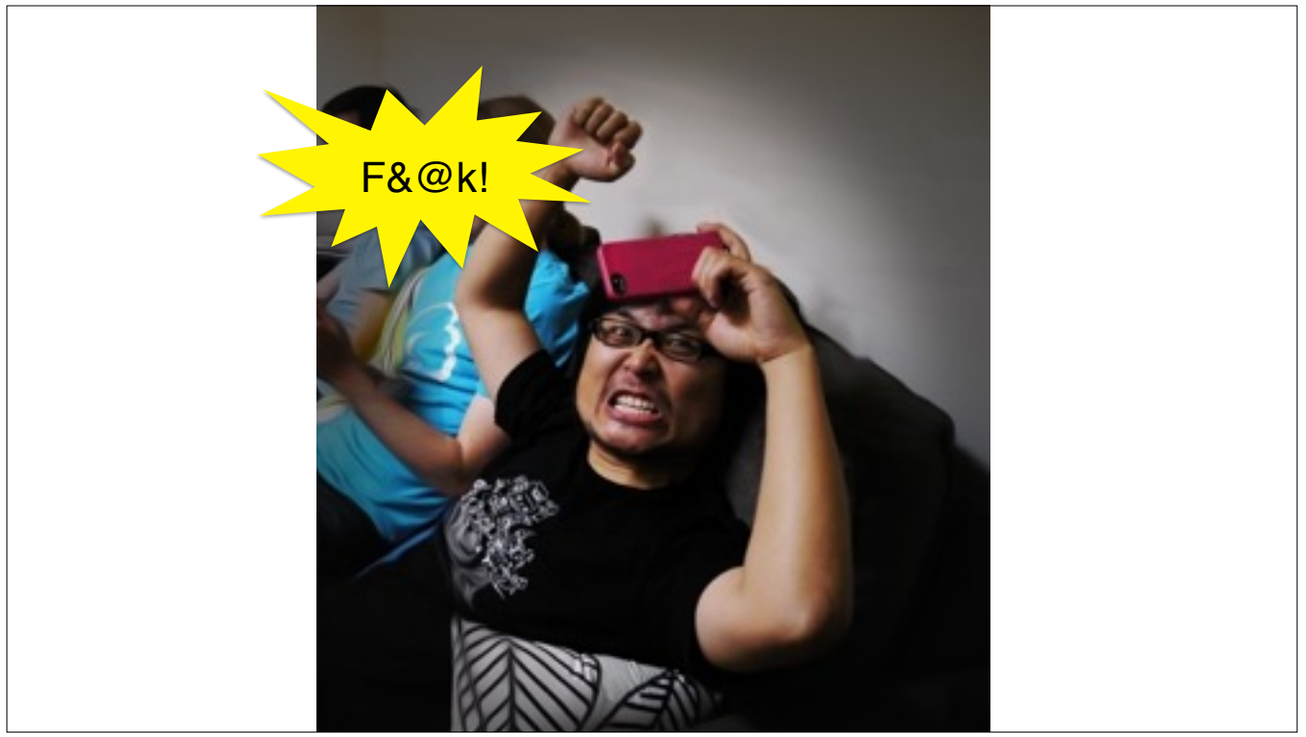
- Intelligent empathy!
  - A huge % of the job is listening to people and understanding more than just what they say they need, but what they *actually* need

Not leaving rejected candidates empty-handed. For example, if they seemed like a good fit but lack experience as a junior programmer, I've provided a list of concrete skills that will help them get hired at thatgamecompany, or any studio, in the future.

After the Offer is Accepted -
on-boarding, welcoming partners into the team.

If I’ve done my job well, the hiring process builds retention and prevents talent poaching, in addition to creating dedicated teams that work well.

Tying things up - What it’s like working with a studio of Hopeless Perfectionists, and why we do it.



Frustrating! - Because when you’ve been working at a thing for a very long time, it’s a lot easier to just say “it’s good enough” and enjoy kicking back with colleagues, instead of fighting for unproven ideas and impossible ideals. But that would also be a lot less meaningful. We’re hopeless perfectionists.

Motivating - Because the constant challenges and new discoveries keeps us ever-pushing to create something greater, leaving us hungry to seek out the next goal and improve what we can do.

Inspiring - because we made an experience where players feel something they’ve never felt, whether as their first game or after a lifetime of playing games. Because it happens over and over again with all new players, we realize we’re making something that makes a difference.

Challenging - Because redefining new boundaries of a worthwhile interactive experience can be overwhelming. But it also means we get to redefine new boundaries of a worthwhile interactive experience!

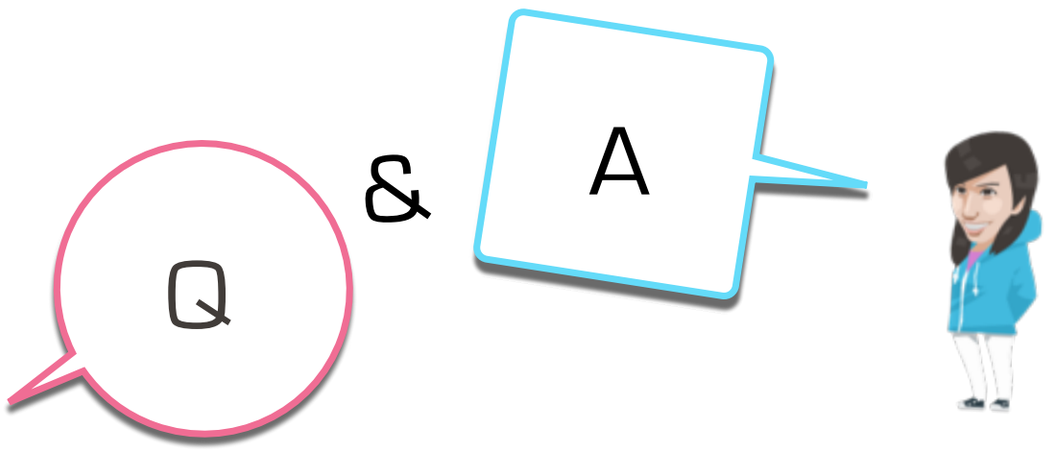
Funny and empowering when we are comfortable expressing ourselves as individuals together.

Yes, that’s an actual picture from our studio.

Worth it - Because it’s really hard, but in the end we get to make wonderful game experiences that we’re proud of, that are different, and that we wish to see more of.

Because we’re building cohesive teams to break through the hard times and make something great.
This is thatgamecompany. (video)

Hiring for
Hopeless Perfectionists



thatgamecompany is hiring!

sunni@thatgamecompany.com @thatgamecompany @sunnipav