Crown Jewels and Royal Pains: A CastleVille Postmortem

William Lemons
Senior Designer, Zynga
Bruce Shelley
Director of Design, Zynga

Who Are We?

- Bruce Shelley: Zynga Director of Design
  - Game developer since 1980
  - Began in paper and board games
  - Transitioned to computer games late 1980s
  - Credits include Civilization (1st edition), Railroad Tycoon (1st edition), Age of Empires series, Settlers 7

- William Lemons: Zynga Senior Designer
  - Began developing educational games for the University of Texas at Dallas
  - Joined Bonfire Studios in 2010
  - Developed iPhone Games We Farm and Adventure Bay

Agenda

- Preproduction & Production
  - What Worked
  - What Didn't Work
  - Solutions
- Live Game/Cadence Process
  - What Worked
  - What Didn't Work
  - Solutions
- What We Will Take Forward
- Q&A

Zynga Dallas

- Originally Bonfire Studios, founded in 2009
  - By former Ensemble Studios employees
  - Currently 50+ employees
- Acquired by Zynga in 2010
- First project for Zynga was CastleVille

What Is CastleVille?

- Began as a Zynga "ville" game set in the Middle Ages
- Distinguished by:
  - Beautiful art
  - Polished interface
  - Original music
  - Design enhancements
- Leverage
  - Take our experience with RTS and adapt it to social
- Big Design Features
  - Characters with stories as quest sources
  - Over-arching story with a villain
  - Crafting and map expansion

CastleVille poster
February 2011

What Is CastleVille?

Pre-Production & Production

Pre-Production & Production Stages

- Pitch = green light stage
- Pre-Production = planning stage
  - Our best ideas up front for how the game will work
  - Core loop of game play
    - How player gets stuff – what stuff?
    - How player turns that stuff into better stuff
    - Player goals
  - Story outline and character sketches
  - Quest system
    - Quest templates
    - Data tool for quest implementation
- Production
  - Creating the game and bringing it to launch
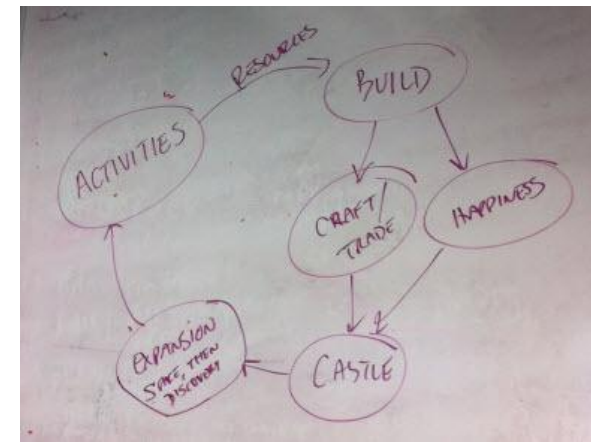
Core loop on white board
April 2011

Pre-Production & Production: What Worked

- Strong design focus during pre-production
  - Ample design time before business involvement
  - Allowed for free creative process and innovative design
- Design tools helped with implementation
- Collaborative process helped maintain a high bar of quality for feature specification and story

Pre-Production & Production: What Worked

- Example: Collaborative Design Review
  - Brainstorms
  - Individual designer assigned the specification
  - Email review of specification
  - Group discussion and revision
  - Consensus reached
  - Specification accepted
  - Play test may lead to more revision

Pre-Production & Production: What Didn't Work

- Frequent changes in vision = ill-defined core loop
    - Gameplay is highly dependant on quest content
- Too much time and iteration spent on FTUE
- Design tools had high learning curve
- Time constraints resulted in cuts to features & functionality
    - Resulted in useless items left in-game
    - Old data left that needed cleanup
    - No time to innovate on social mechanics

Pre-Production & Production: Solutions

- Settle quickly on a core design the consensus believes will work
  - Begin testing prototype as early as possible
  - Iterate on design based on test feedback
- Scope dev work for design tools during pre-production
- Don't overdesign upfront: Start with a solid core loop and build from it

Live Game & Cadence

Live Game & Cadence

- CastleVille went live November 14, 2011
  - Everyone on Facebook had access and could start playing at that moment
  - Players liked it – set an internal record for rapid adoption and reached 8M DAU
- The Post-Launch Plan
  - Weekly quest series releases from characters
  - Advance the story through quests (the Canon)
  - New characters to be revealed in hidden map squares
- Cadence
  - Weekly quest series releases beyond the story for advanced players
  - Theme releases with limited edition items (Halloween, Christmas)
  - Helps drive engagement

Live Game & Cadence: What Worked

- MMO Style player progression (leveling) allowed for scalable difficulty & linear storytelling
- More time was dedicated to new releases to maintain quality
  - Design review on releases helped maintain quality
- Diverse economy allows several vectors for balance tuning
- Art was great and characters were well-defined
- Balance (costs, inventory limits, drops)
- Decisions mattered, especially for crafting
- Hidden map with hints (aspiration +)

Live Game & Cadence: What Worked

- Example: Crafting
  - Encouraged the player to plan
  - Created interesting decisions (meaningful game play)
    - Gather what is needed as inputs
    - Priority of crafting steps
    - An orchestration process
  - Easily incorporated into quest tasks
  - Opportunities for viral asks
  - Encouraged responding to viral asks
  - Encouraged neighbor visits

Crafting Examples

Wall post ask

Viral ask

Gathered on board

Crafted from a crop

Neighbor visit reward

Live Game & Cadence : What Didn't Work

- Initial design wasn't prepared for cadence release process
  - Locking content behind player progression conflicts with releases designed for the "wide funnel"
  - Cadence release timing too fast for design review
  - Painted ourselves into a corner with exploration mechanic
- Design frequently over-scoped releases
  - Resulted in late night/weekend work and release delays
- Systems have required changes they weren't designed to handle

Boxed into a Corner
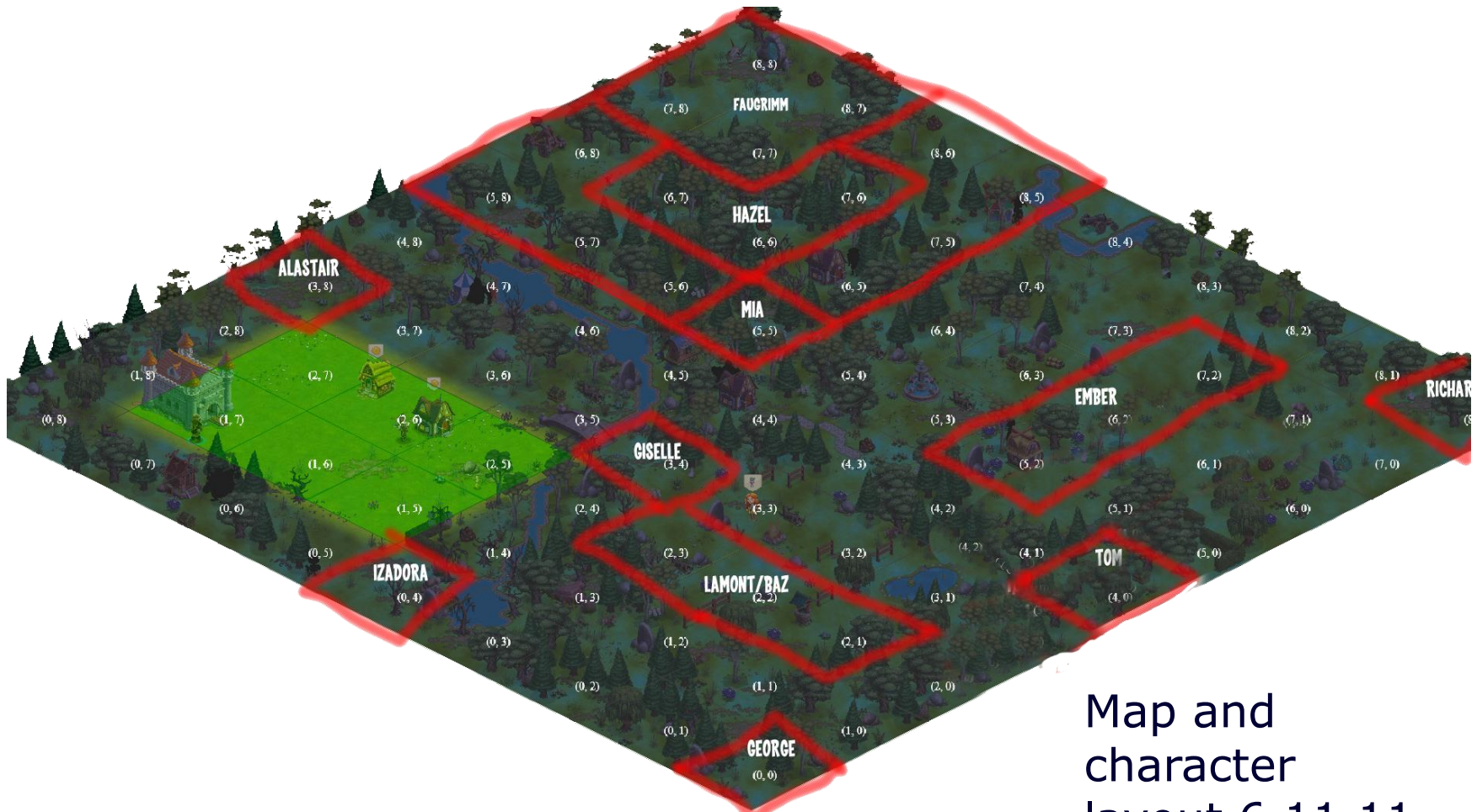
Map and character layout 6.11.11

Live World Map

5.17.12

Live Game & Cadence : Solutions

- Define a realistic post-release process
  - Manage everyone's cadence expectations
- Define a strong core loop and gameplay focus
  - Reduce dependence on heavy content releases
- Estimate hours of design work during specification process
 - Can reduce long work weeks & over-scoping

Key Takeaways

Key Takeaways – Part I

- Fun = interesting decisions that have meaning (goals)
- Stick to your guns on mechanics you know will work
  - Crafting, balance & limits on viral gates
- Immersion is good…even for social games!
- Limits are good (inventory especially)
  - Protects economy & balance
  - Requires player choices
- Feeds & rewards are effective

Key Takeaway Example

- A strong story is powerful in social
  - Gives meaning to the play experience
  - Players connect to the story and characters
    - Tune in tomorrow to see what happens
    - Players begin to care about favorites
  - A strong villain is a focus for the player-- competition
  - Partially hidden maps create mystery and aspiration
  - Cadence quests tie to the main story's big elements
  - Opportunities for mini-stories tied to characters
  - Easier to hang new content off the story frame
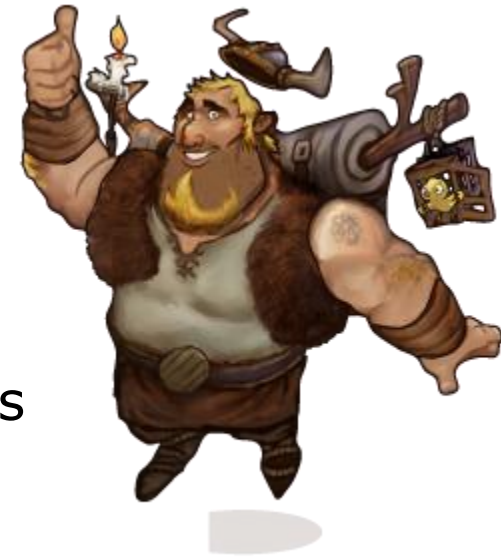
Key Takeaways – Part II

- Middle Ages is a good period for a social game
- RTS is good preparation for social
  - Developers are experienced responding to feedback
  - Systems design and balancing key to both
- Good writing increases player delight
- Meaningful characters are great
  - Personality
  - Opportunities for humor
  - Quests flow from character quirks

Thank you!

Contact us:

bshelley@zynga.com   wlemons@zynga.com