GDC
MARCH 18-22, 2024
SAN FRANCISCO, CA

Level and Quest Design Collaboration from Skyrim to Starfield

#GDC2024

Will Shen

SOMETHING WICKED GAMES

Daryl Brigner

Soft Rains

The Elder Scrolls V
SKYRIM
MATURE 17+
ESRB
Bethesda
Fallout 4
Fallout 4
UNRAVEL THE SECRETS AND THE MYSTERY OF...
FAR HARBOR
ADD ON 3
Bethesda
PC GAME
Fallout 76
18
www.pegi.info
PROVISIONAL
Bethesda
STARFIELD

Quest and Level Design basics

Quest Design

- Dialogue
- Text
- Voiceover
- Quest Scripting
- AI Behavior
- Systems Design*

Level Design

- Locations
- Kit Logic
- AI Behavior
- Combat Encounters
- Environmental Storytelling
- Gameplay Scripting

Collaboration

Level Design

- Location
- Combat NPCs
- Layout Decisions

Quest Design

- Narrative
- Non-Combat NPCs
- Story Decisions

A typical example

The Elder Scrolls V
SKYRIM
© 2011 Bethesda. All Rights Reserved.

“The House of Horrors”

Quest Design: Dialogue, AI behavior, objectives

Level Design: Layout and haunted objects

Art adds unique assets, animation, and lighting

A closer look

We came up with the faction together

“Haunted House” was vague

VFX had idea for stacked chairs

World Art made the trap part of the altar

We are writing and designing the game together

This is a typical example of how we made Skyrim

But we also tried other ways

Level Design experimented with their own quests

An atypical example

“Lost to the Ages”: A Level Design written quest

Katria is added

Unique location element

Katria calls out unique location elements

Katria's story linked to location's story

Here's the result:

1 - Arknathamz
This one, 'Arknathamz', was on the inscription, too. Apparently the main Aetherium research center. Seems like the place to start.

2 -
Mentioned as a 'Bthar-zel' ('allied city'?). Not Bthardamz, though. Looks like a smaller site, north or northwest of there, on the river.

3 -
The primary source of Aetherium. Extracted from some deeper mine?

4 -
A storage site for raw Aetherium, just outside a major city. Apparently, it had to be kept outside because the Aetherium was 'harmonically volatile'.

Katria's Journal

M1 M2 Turn Pages

Many Level Designers learn Quest tools

Shared language deepens collaboration going forward

Nuka Cola
Fallout 4

"The Last Voyage of the U.S.S. Constitution"

Captain “Ironsides” needs help

Scavengers Attack

Collaboration brought new elements to the content

Repair Checks

Unlocked Shortcut

"Scavengers" quest path

A ship needs cannons!

The ship launches

N
E

Now on a skyscraper

Elevator to Ironsides

Learn each other's language

Transitioning to Leadership

Fallout 4
FAR HARBOR

Far Harbor Goals

- Multiple Endings
- Non-Combat Gameplay
- High Level Equipment
- Experimentation

Three factions, more outcomes

More stat challenges

New puzzle gameplay

February 15th, 2077

Grandpa Pat was yelling in his sleep tonight. He's done it before, but this time it was so loud it woke me up. I saw Mom head over to make sure he's okay. Glad she remembered her coat, it looks like it's freezing out there. I heard her talking to dad the other day about Grandpa moving in with us soon. I don't think I want him to.

[E) TAKE TAB) EXIT]

Draw a picture of your family.

[E) TAKE TAB) EXIT]

Draw a map of home sweet home.

[E) TAKE TAB) EXIT]

Artist explores narrative

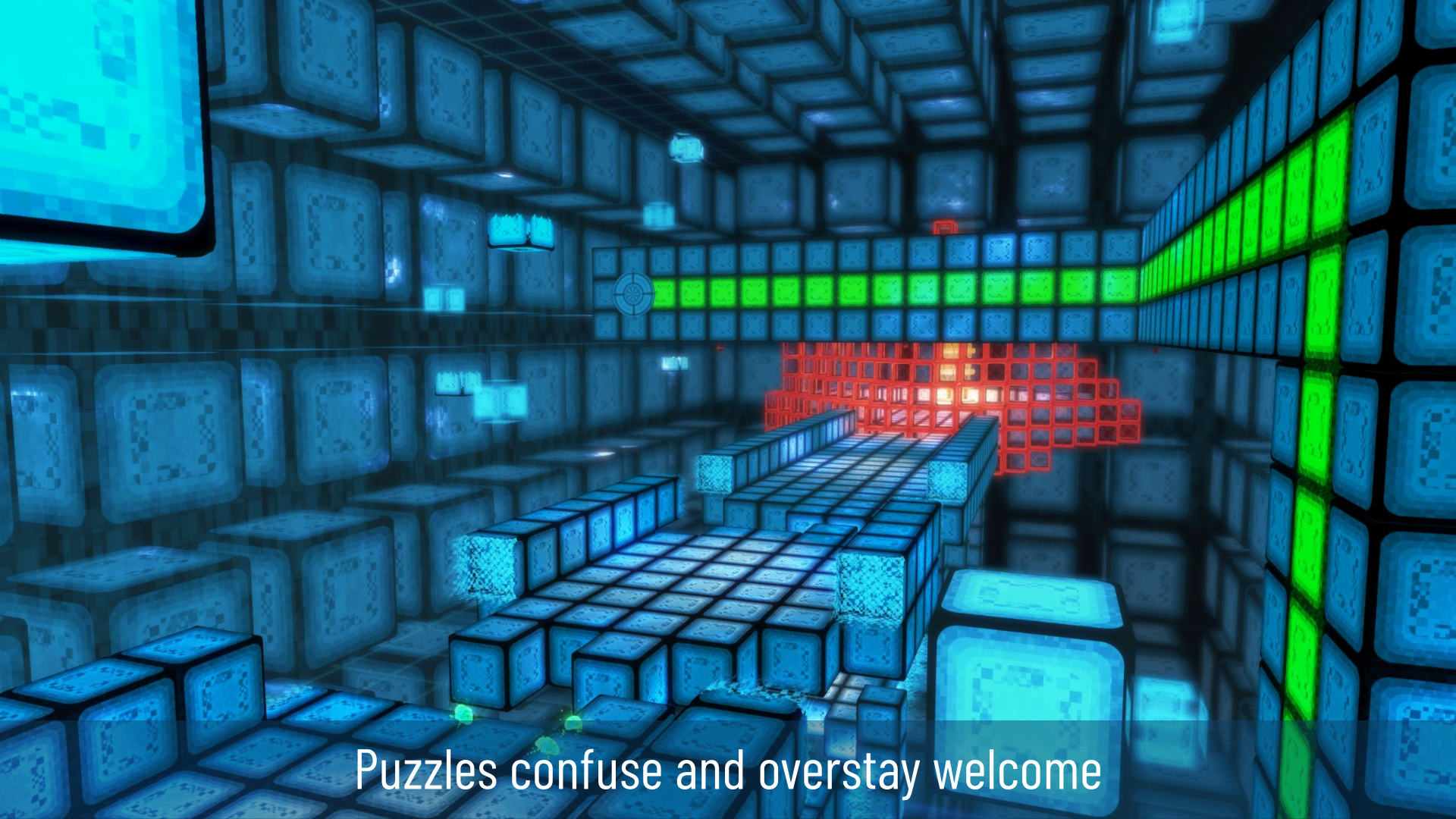
Level Designer large quest and location

Plans met setbacks

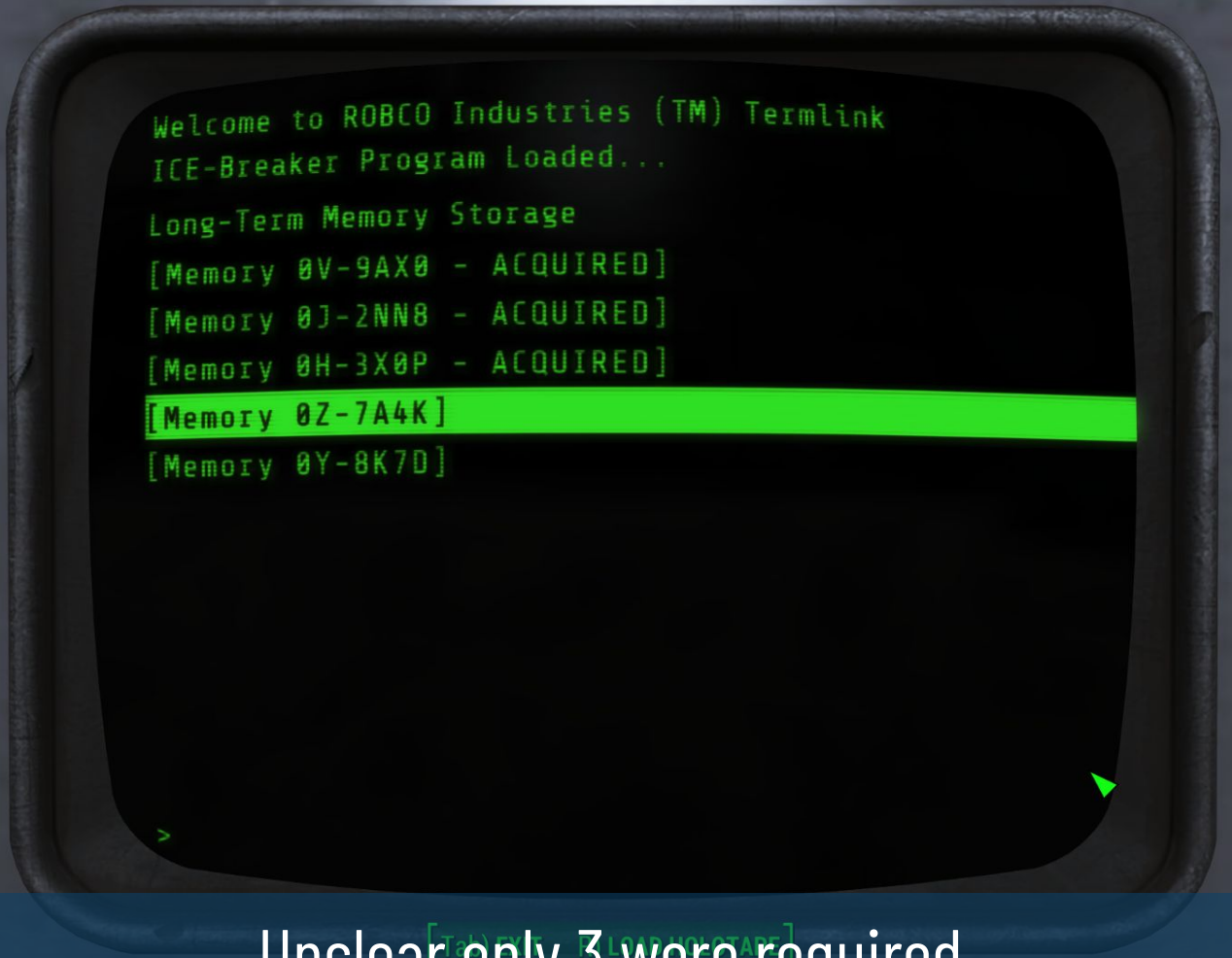
Solving project-wide problems

Support for battles

Experienced Level Designer help


Puzzles confuse and overstay welcome

Optional final puzzles



Unclear only 3 were required

A large location and large quest was too much

Focused Level Designer on just the quest

Results

- We led a project!
- Criticism mostly positive
- Puzzles a sore spot
- Level Designer quests needed production buy in
- Team morale high

Collaboration when work gets hard

Fallout 76

The easy stuff

Basic Level Design still fast

Started with Fallout 4 assets

World Art iteration still fast

Map 3-4x larger than Fallout 4

The hard stuff

Multiplayer makes all scripting harder

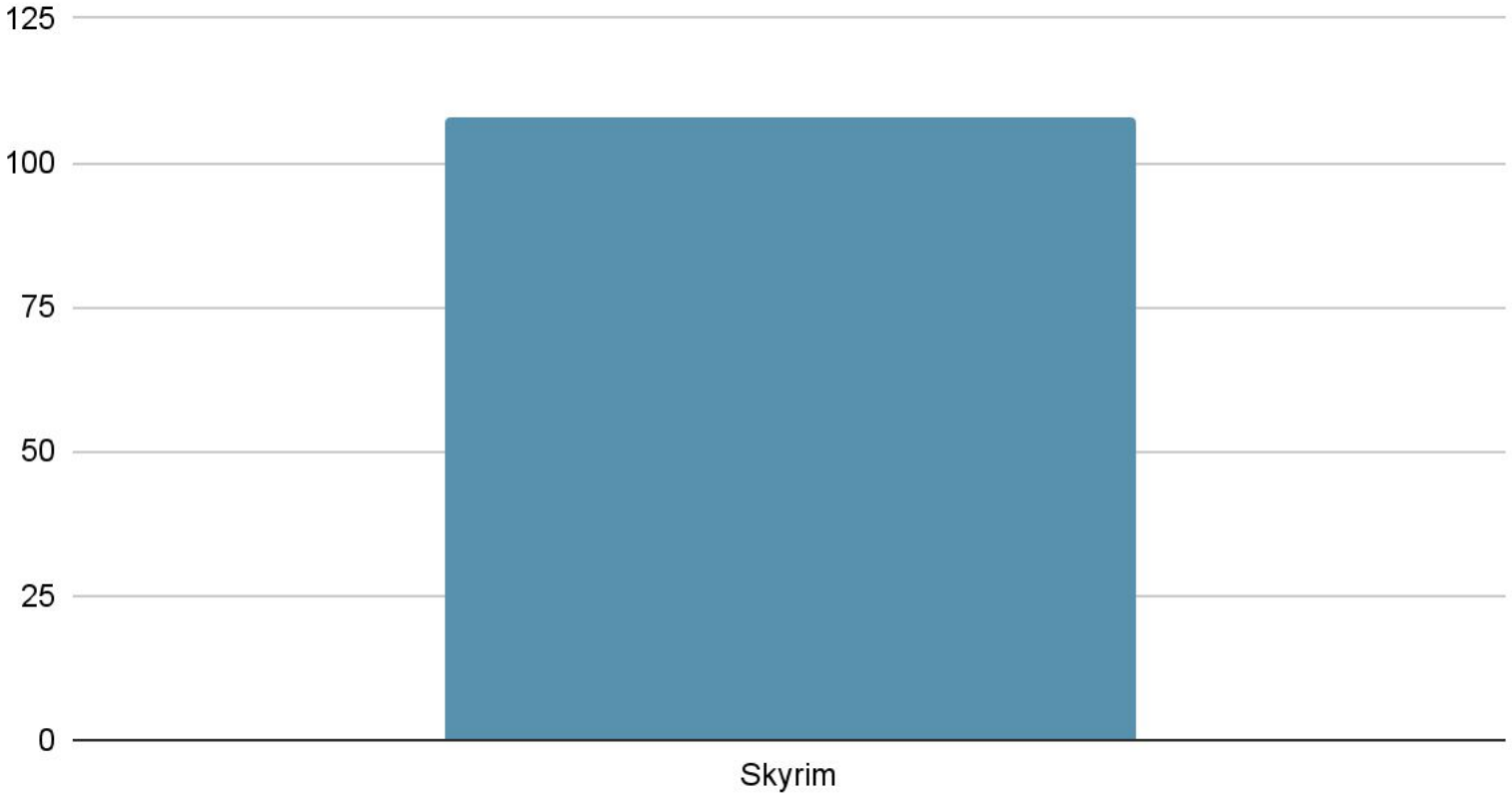
“Haunted” cabins

Terminal controlled “haunted” elements

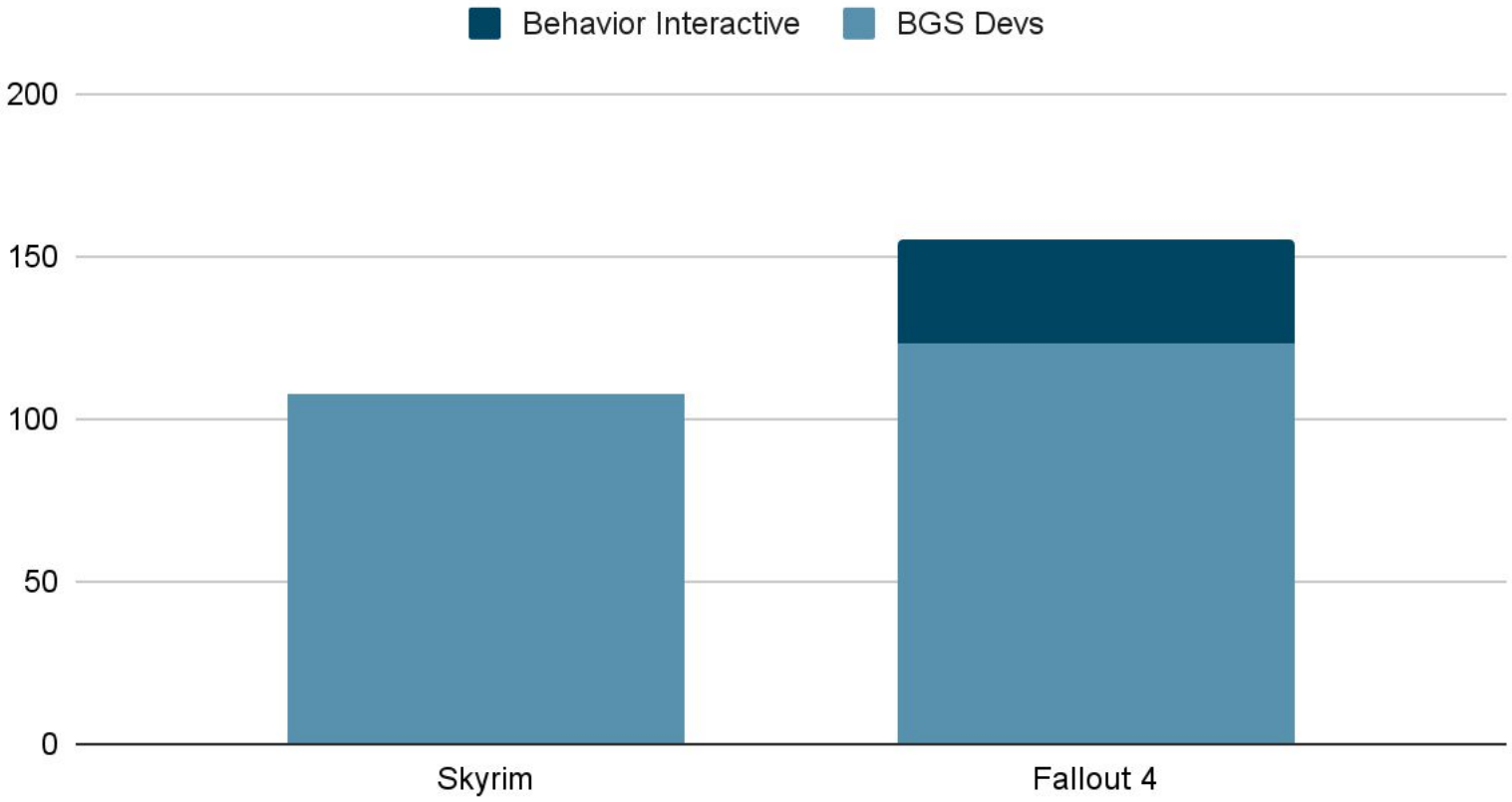
Multiplayer limited unique gameplay experiences

Level Design stopped learning Quest tools

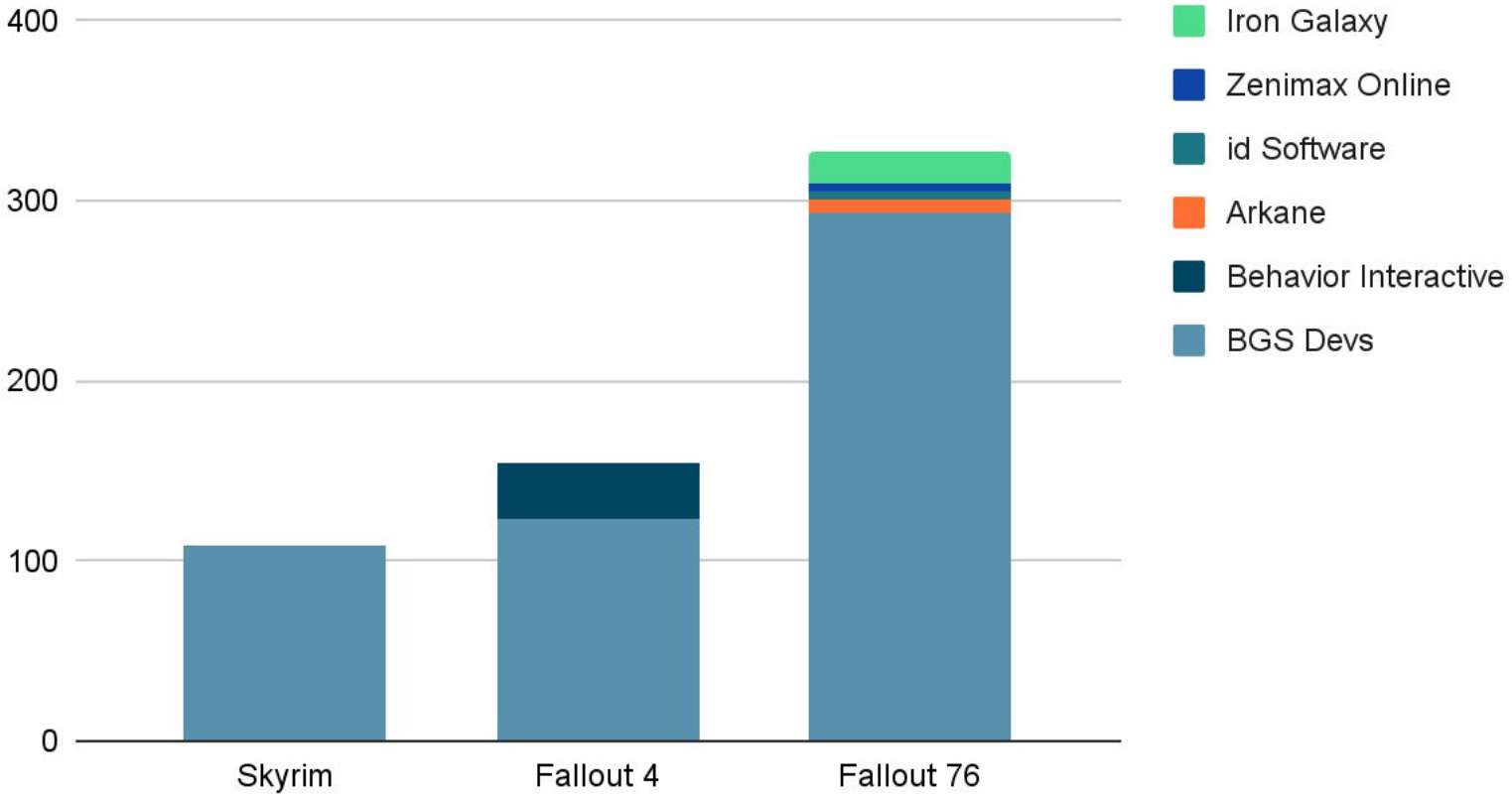
Source: MobyGames Credits



Source: MobyGames Credits



Source: MobyGames Credits



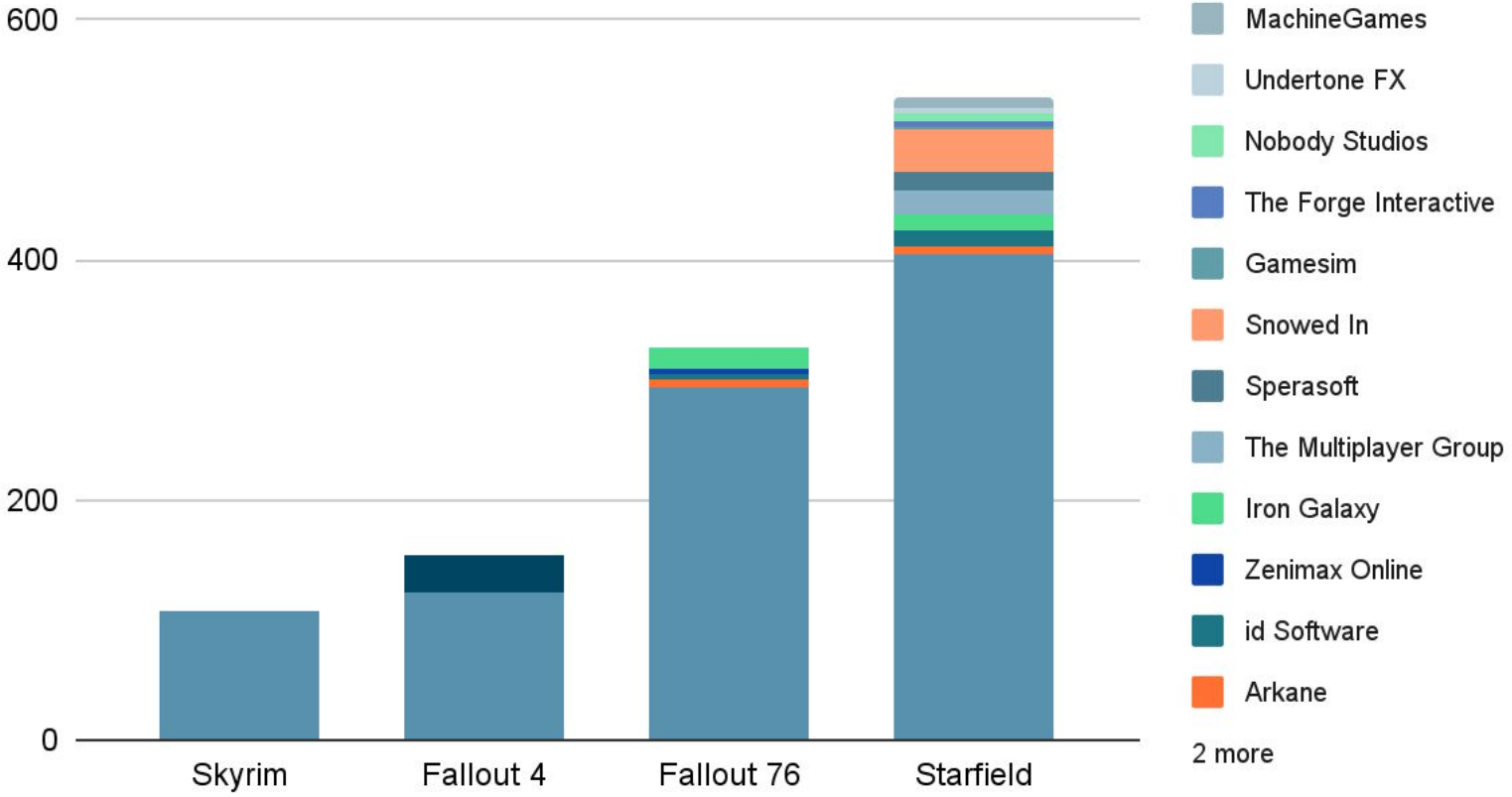
Fallout 76 has a rocky launch

Wastelanders update revives the game

Grappling with scale

STARFIELD

Source: MobyGames Credits



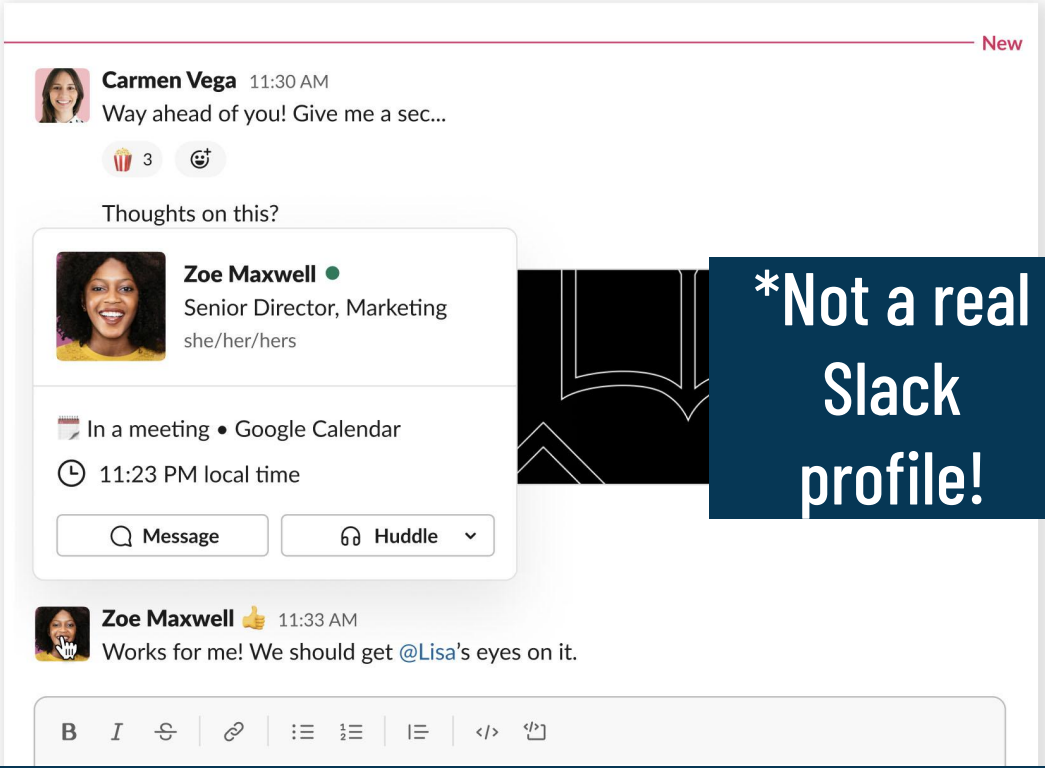
Approvals

Scheduling

Feedback

Department over project

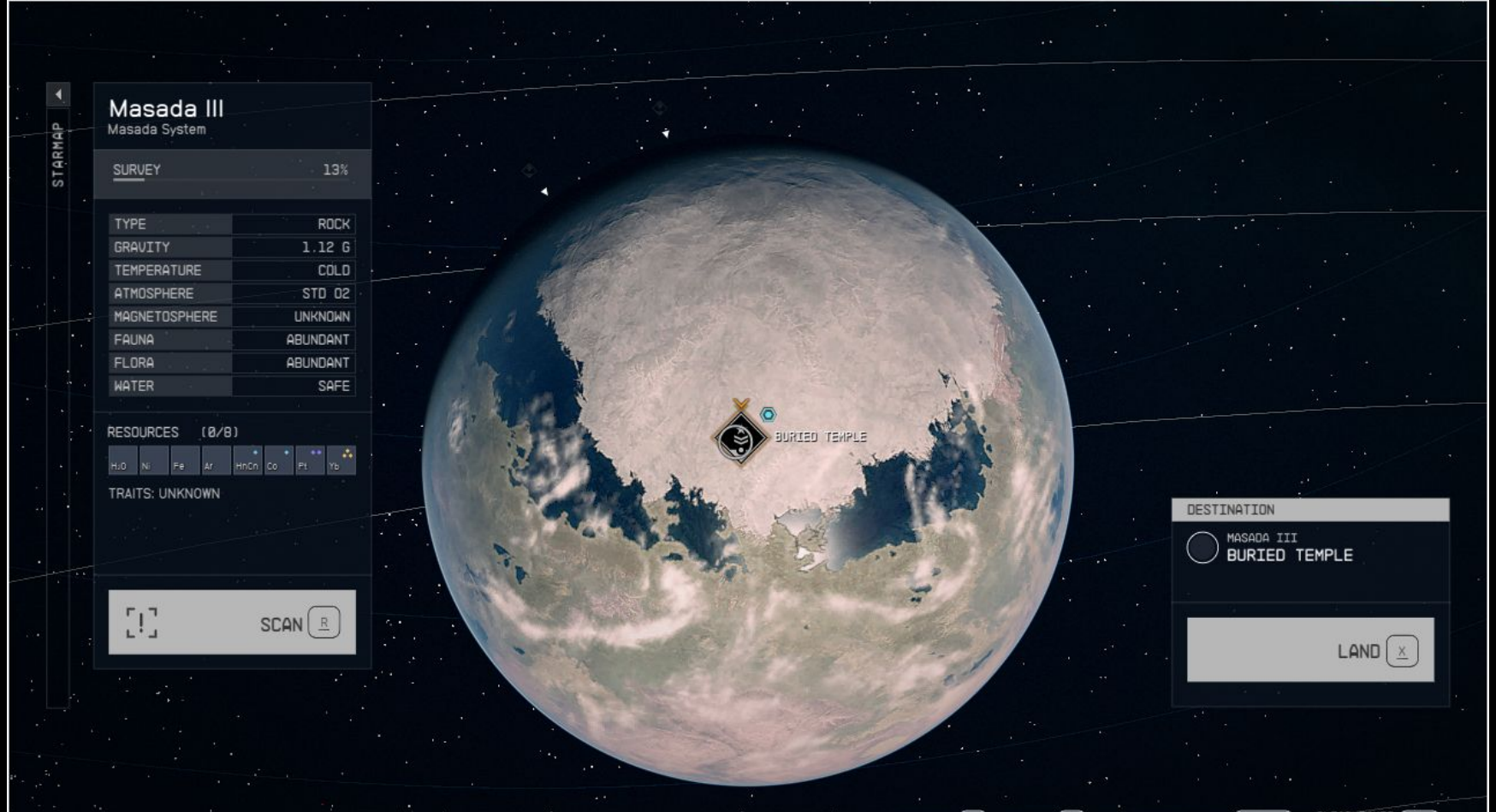
Documentation is now critical



*Not a real Slack profile!

You are your title

Can Level and Quest collaboration continue?



The Buried Temple

Needed a final dungeon

And a big space battle

Senior Level Designer implemented the quest

I wrote dialogue and reviewed the content

A separate Level Designer on layout

Dimension-hopping mechanic

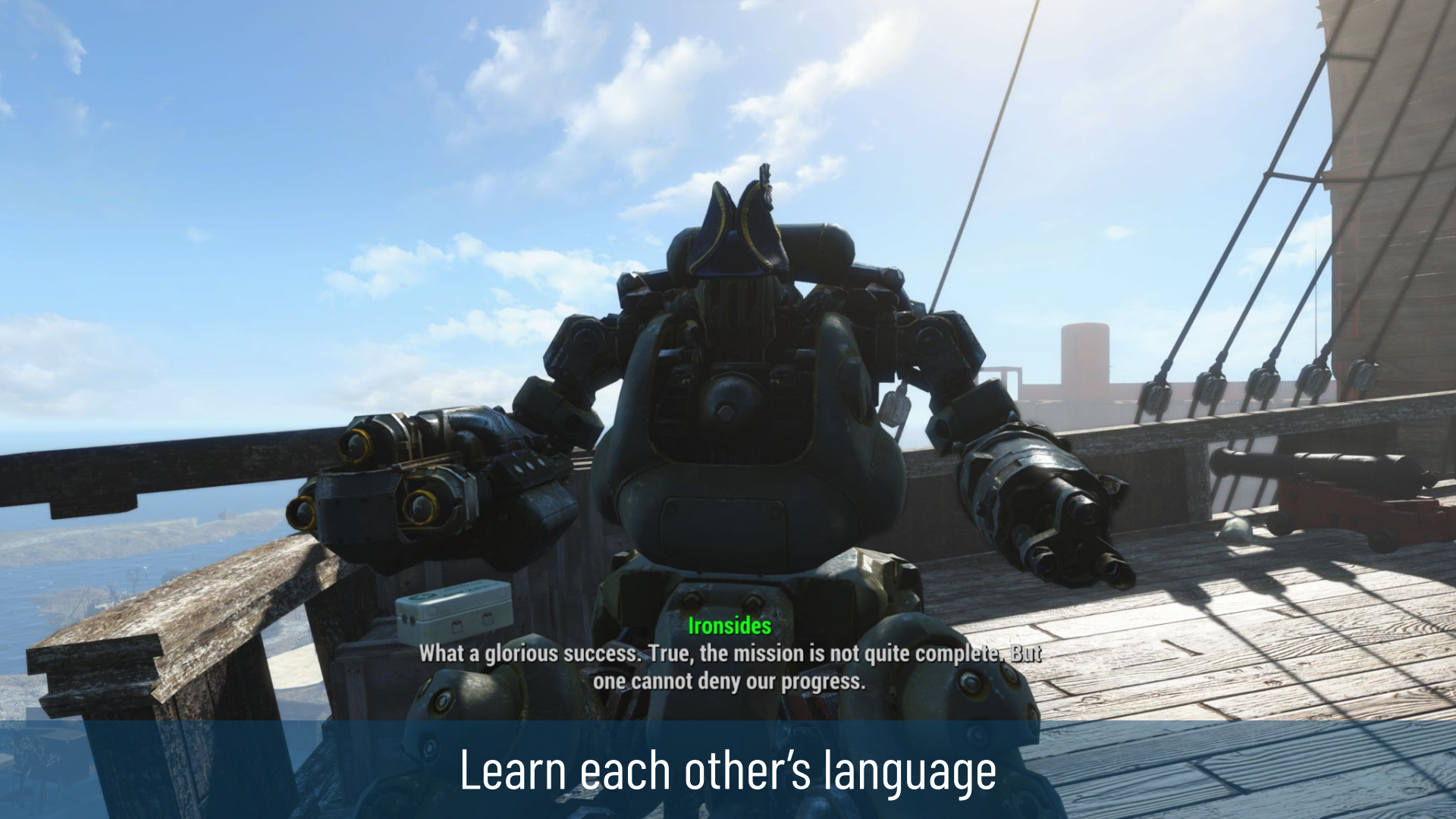
A final fight

A classic collaboration of old and new

Necessity and urgency broke silos

Conclusions and Takeaways

Write and design the game together



Learn each other's language

Give your team clear goals

When work gets hard, people retreat into specialties

Large teams silo and need project-centered goals

Special Thanks to our Design Collaborators

Dee Langlois
Steve Cornett
Kurt Kuhlmann
Nadia Haschart
Samuel Fronteau

All other Designers, Artists, Programmers, Producers, QA, Family, and Friends

For Ferret Baudoin

Questions?

Contact Information:
Will: @WillShen101
Daryl: @RenStrike