It's More Than Making Coffee:
Interns - How to Grow Your Team from the Ground Up

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What we are going to cover
This talk focuses on developing and maintaining successful internship programs from both the developer and the student's perspective.

What is an Internship?
Dictionary.com defines an internship as "any period of time during which a beginner acquires experience in an occupation, profession, or pursuit" and as "any official or formal program to provide practical experience for beginners in an occupation or profession."[1] One may notice that in these definitions there are several words which are actually very important in setting up successful internships. Let's start with the words "formal program." It is crucial when employing an intern that there is a structure in place to grow that person's skill set and at the same time mitigate the risk of their inexperience to that project. "Practical experience" is key as well.   While the work that interns may be assigned is usually not terribly complex, make sure it is real work and keep making their tasks more challenging with each passing success. The most important part of the definition to keep in mind is "beginner." While interns are inexpensive and potentially a very important supplement to your team, they are not contractors.

What an Internship is NOT
All game development has its share of work that can be repetitive, tedious and downright boring. It can be tempting to want to use interns exclusively for such tasks, and while a lot of tasks being assigned to an intern are somewhat unavoidable, interns are not indentured servants. It is important to give your interns rudimentary work because if it is structured correctly, it usually gives them a strong foundation and demystifies the career that they are considering. No one likes doing endless grunt work, so interject some more creative opportunities along the way. This venture is a two way street, and while the project may be getting some extra help, you need to keep in mind that you are educating the next generation of developers and they need to feel like they are getting

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[1] See http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/internship

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something out of this arrangement as well. Washing your car, picking up your laundry, or only having the opportunity to clean up sloppy work or take endless screenshots doesn't benefit either participant.

Types of Internships

There are basically two typical kinds of internships, paid and unpaid. Most schools have some general hours guidelines that have to be followed in order for the student to receive credit. For an example, colleges require interns who are unpaid to work a minimum of 120 hours and interns who are paid need to work a minimum 220 hours to get 3 credits. Firaxis has offered both paid and unpaid internships, usually based on the skill level that the student brings, but, in my experience, paid interns tend to be more invested and focused and seem to work out better in the long run.

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THE COMPANY PERSPECTIVE

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Why offer Internships?

There are a several reasons to look into the option of offering internships. The first reason is that if find yourself in need of extra help to develop your project, and let's face it, what project couldn't benefit from a few extra hands. It is an inexpensive way to bolster your staff and enables the team to off load some of the less complex tasks. It also provides you with the opportunity to instill your company's techniques in new talent. Finally, it provides the studio with a 4-6 month interview when evaluating a potential new hire.

Firaxis Internship History

A little over two years after Firaxis Games was founded, we realized the need and ability to offer internships. Having a few employees who got their start in the industry through internships at Microprose Software we saw the benefit of investing in homegrown talent. Since we are based in a region with a limited talent pool, we also saw the potential long term benefit to grow our own team. Over the past eight years we have been lucky enough to have had approximately 30 interns in the 3 major departments of our studio. Eighteen of those interns have found permanent employment with us. Many of them are the strongest performers in the studio. The estimated break down by department is as follows:
- 3 design/production
- 18 art interns
- 7 programming interns

Evaluating whether or not you can commit to interns

There are a few guiding rules that we tend to follow when evaluating whether or not to bring on interns. Most importantly, we don't offer internships if we don't have enough work to keep people busy. Make sure there is work for them to do. The other side of that is that because they are beginners you need to have time to devote to getting them up to speed. You can't necessarily expect that interns will arrive possessing all, or even most, of the skills and techniques

you need and use. For this reason, when things are crazy and the project is close to shipping, we don't offer internships.   In addition, when the internship is costing you more than it benefits you, ending the internship may be the only option. Generally students that are in their junior and senior years tend to be better suited for internships, however there are exceptions. In addition, make sure you respond to all inquiries from younger students because you may want that student to apply once they become an upper classman.

How to Find Potential Intern Candidates

Getting an Internship Program started may not be as difficult as you might think. If there are colleges near by, start with them and if one of them happens to be your alma mater then that will most likely be a bonus. If you know professors at the schools who you trust, they are always a great resource for recommending appropriate candidates. Find schools with strong art, computer science and design programs. Contact department chairmen and career development offices and offer to do speaking engagements, career days, portfolio reviews and demonstrations. This is also a great way to let entry level people know that your company is out there. Honestly, the time commitment for these sorts of things is fairly minimal and typically adds up to a couple of days out of the year. By speaking at one high school career day five years ago as a favor to the school, we actually ended up finding three full time employees that were recently hired. Becoming involved with steering committees and possibly even teaching, you can help influence the curriculum, and ensure that students are being taught contemporary techniques. This makes it easier to find and integrate qualified interns when the opportunity arises.

What makes for a successful Internship Program?
Set Up

When preparing to integrate interns to your work force, it is very important to consider the following items. Know the tasks that the intern will be doing. You are flirting with danger by bringing someone in without knowing exactly how they fit into the project plan. Set up a senior member of the team as a mentor, preferably some one who is a good communicator. A project lead is probably not the best person for this task since they are usually managing many people and it is easy for the intern to slip off their radar. If at all possible integrate interns before the project schedule gets too crazy. Firaxis has had a lot of success in bringing interns in over the winter break for a few weeks of full-time exposure to the company before going back to school when their availability becomes only one or two days a week. This also works well with a summer internship that leads into a fall semester.

You want to make the interview as professional as possible. Be sure that they sign an NDA, and explain to them the importance of that document. This first impression sets the tone for the potential relationship and will help them understand that while we may be casual, we are less casual than they may think. Also, don't compromise on talent because that requirement is much harder to teach than the tools.

Implementation

Now you have everything set and you have selected the candidate you feel most qualifies for the position. Since you have the list of tasks that need to be done, structure the tasks so that you can build the student's confidence by increasing the difficulty of each task with the success of the previous one. You may get the question, "so when do I get to do real work?" This is a great opportunity for them to develop an appreciation for the amount of stuff that goes into a game that isn't necessarily fun.

Since most of their work is going to be fairly mundane (especially till they gain more of your confidence) it is a good idea to set some personal goals for the intern. It's a two way street, so understand that they may have ideas about what they want to get out of the experience as well and if you can work that into the project, try to accommodate that interest. It shows the intern that they are not there just to do some monotonous work and that you have an interest in their growth as well as what excites them.

Early on, it is important to realize that you can't necessarily bank on their work to be exactly right; they are not normal employees and are bound to make a few more mistakes than the more experience members of the team. Set mid-term and final evaluations and let them know how you think they are progressing. If there are issues, address them quickly and before they become a bad habit. Make sure that you have established an end date for the internship from the very beginning. The end date provides a formal time to do a performance review and a way to lower the expectation that the internship will automatically lead to a full-time job. In many cases you simply may not be in a position to offer a full time job, or the intern just wasn't a good fit, and having a clearly defined ending will help you to avoid a potentially awkward situation.

From the very start of the internship, treat them and their ideas with the same consideration and respect as any other employee and encourage them to contribute in meetings. For example, at Firaxis we include interns in most meetings. Understand that interns have other responsibilities and commitments, most importantly school.

Practical Suggestions for Structuring your Internship Program

Determining your intern needs
- Project leads along with their department directors usually determine the need for an intern. This decision should be made after reviewing the project schedule and looking at your man-hour needs as wells as whether you need an intern with a specific skill set (in which case you will usually be limiting the field of applicants to those with prior internship experience or upper level course work).

Candidate Portfolios
- Candidates should submit resumes, and whatever may be pertinent to determining their skill set. For example, if it is for an art position, we like to

see some fundamental drawing and painting examples, along with some 3D computer graphics. Be sure to advertise what format you want to see their portfolio in. If it is for programming position, ask for code samples

Hiring Decisions
- The department director, the project lead, and the project sub-leads (frequently one of the sub-leads takes the mentor role) need to be involved in the interview process.
- Communicate hiring decisions in way that avoids misunderstandings. If you've decided to hire a candidate, make an offer in person or over the phone and, once the offer is accepted, send a letter confirming the internship and stating the starting and ending date, agreed upon time commitment, and salary, if applicable.
- You should also be sure to send a short, standard rejection letter to those candidates to whom you can't offer positions. Simply thank them for their interest in the position, but inform that you cannot offer them a position at this time. If it is someone you'd be interested in hearing from in the future, you should state as much in the letter. This is never a fun task, but it is necessary. Remember that your company is the professional in the dialog and how you treat candidates is a reflection on your company as a whole. If you recruit at local schools, you should remember that how you treat rejected applicants will get back to other students, so don't use fictitious names to communicate with rejected candidates and don't leave candidates hanging for weeks on end when you've already made a decision.
- Generally, I suggest using snail mail, and not e-mail for hiring decisions. For some reason, e-mail tends to encourage people to respond further. Snail mail may also provide a little more privacy.

Intern's time commitment
- How much time you should expect an intern to be available to you really depends on the specific situation (the project needs and the student availability). These to issues may exclude some candidates immediately from the process. In my experience, 10-15 hours usually works out best, but it is really a case by case basis. For a summer internship, I would expect a full work week from the intern.

Allocating work to interns
- It is hard enough for experienced professional to switch between projects and even harder for intern. If you want to ensure success with you intern its best if the intern is assigned to a specific project.
- Assignments and direction need to be filtered directly through the project lead or sub-lead, so that the intern is receiving assignments from a limited number of people who know what else is on the intern's schedule.

Work product expectations
- Initially, you should not expect to receive much useable work from an intern. This is why the feedback process is so important. If something is wrong with the work, explain what it is and have the intern make the corrections so he/she is learning it by doing it. You should always be seeing continual progress, if you aren't try to address the problem as early as possible.
- As the internship progresses, you should expect to receive work that is consistently useable, even if you send the intern back with revisions.

Determining if the intern is a "fit" with the company culture
- Other than the intern's proficiency, this is one of the most important factors to consider when viewing an intern's potential for long term employment. Other than the day-to-day interactions with the team, you should plan some social events throughout the course of the internship so that you can get a feel for whether the intern plays well with the others on the team. This is also an important opportunity for the people who aren't on the project and who aren't working with the intern, but who have some say in the hiring of full-time employees, to meet him/her. It is also your opportunity to show the intern that although you work hard, you also find time to have fun.

Conclusion

Potential Pitfalls and Benefits of Internships
      Of course there can be some draw backs to bringing interns into your team. Some general issues are as follows: internships require some effort to plan and are definitely a time commitment, but when done correctly, the benefit should outweigh the cost. Another potential problem involves the fact that they don't have the experience of the rest of the team and it may take a while before all of their work is usable. And lastly, if you don't treat your interns well you may develop a bad reputation among the students and entry level candidates that you may want to hire at a later date.
      In many ways, the potential benefits offset the risks of offering internships. To start with, there is always the chance that you will find a full time employee, and you never know when that employee will end up being one of the top in their field. Interns almost inherently bring a new energy to the studio because they are young, excited just to be there and always have new ideas. One of the other benefits is that they are an inexpensive risk to the company, and once they get up to speed they can be more reliable than outsourcers. By investing in them you are giving them skills that they will no doubt take back to school and share with other students. Therefore, making the students at that school easier to integrate into your pipeline the next time you offer an internship. Lastly, if treat your interns well you will develop a great reputation and recruiting, to some extent, will be easier.

THE STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

Why pursue an internship?

Whether you are a hardcore gamer or just play games every now and then, an internship will get you an inside look at how games are made. It will confirm (or disprove) your belief that there's no better job than video game development. A huge benefit of having an internship will be the opportunity to begin networking and getting your name and reputation out there. If the company where you are interning cannot hire you, they're bound to know of other companies around and will most likely write you a letter of recommendation. Having industry experience before you graduate from college will make you more valuable and set you apart from other graduates. Your classmates could eventually benefit from your internship by asking you questions, learning your tips and tricks that you pick up on at work, and maybe even use you as an "in" for a job at the same company.

Which internship is right for you?

To decide what internship is right for you, consider your career goals. Don't apply for an animation internship if your heart lies in modeling. Search for a good company that is close to your school; there may be more than you think. If you're going for a summer internship, apply to your dream company, you may just get an interview, but the experience will be worthwhile. Research and find out how demanding the internship will be so you can figure out how you're going to balance school and work. Talk to your career advisor at your college's career center for more information on companies around you. They may even be able to hook you up with previous interns from that company who are also alumni.

How do you stand out in a crowd of potential candidates?

Professionalism is the key to standing out from a crowd. You wouldn't believe how many college students cannot write a resume, cover letter, or market themselves to a company. You should have excellent work that shows promise in your portfolio. Choose only your best work because, this may be all that the company looks at. Research the company you'd like to apply at and do so in the manner they suggest. If you get called in for an interview, wear a tie, call everyone you meet by Mr. or Mrs. until told otherwise, and write thank you notes to everyone you interviewed with right when you get home. This may sound formal for the gaming industry, but is shows you are serious about the job and it will set you apart.

How do you turn the internship into a job?

In order to turn the internship into a job, you must complete your assigned tasks with outstanding quality and in as short of a time as possible. When your work is being critiqued, listen, ask questions, and make notes as to what they say. If the critic is not your lead or mentor, run the suggestions by them and make the changes accordingly, and make sure to keep those comments and

suggestions in mind when doing future tasks. If you feel like you've been there for awhile and haven't gotten much feedback, ask for it. Even if it's not all good feedback, it's better to find out when you still have time to implement their suggestions.

When you feel comfortable with the routine and pipeline, accept responsibility when new challenges are offered to you and complete them with the same quality and efficiency that you have been. If there is something you'd like to work on, but haven't gotten the chance to, don't be afraid to at least ask.

Meld with the team by walking around and talking to everyone, but be careful not to be annoying. Ask people about how they got into the industry, to see some of their personal work, and for any tips and tricks they may have to make your work better. The more people that know what kind of person you are and what value you bring to the team, the more likely they'll support you when hiring time comes or even lobby the hiring manager on your behalf.

How do you balance school and work?

No matter how cool the internship is and how lame your lit class is, always remember that school comes first! The company you're working at will not be the ones giving you the diploma. Make mom and dad proud by doing well in school and landing a good job when you graduate. Consider what you're getting from your internship and what you're getting from school. You may be getting better training at work, which means you should focus more while you're at work. Make sure you give enough days at the office to let the company know that you're serious about being there. While I was at school full time, I worked three days a week. This was a good balance to let my company know that I wanted to be there. Remember that what you're learning at work will most likely apply to what you're doing at school so your schoolwork will improve and take less time. Talk to your advisor to see if you can get credit for your internship as an elective instead of taking some class you don't have too much interest in. Be sure to take some time off of work to get your midterms and finals done to the best that they can be. You need a competitive portfolio to get a job but solid grades in order to graduate, no matter what your boss says. But make sure you tell your team far enough in advance when you will need to take time off for midterms or finals so they can schedule the project accordingly and aren't counting on you for time you can't give them.

After Graduation.

Even if the internship becomes a full-time job, make sure to stay in touch with your school. They most likely helped you get your foot in the door and you should give back. Offer to do demos to their classes, give talks, critiques, and reach out to other potential intern candidates. This will also make you more valuable to your employer, as you're educating the next group of potential interns and you may have more exposure to the internship candidates than just an interview.

If the internship doesn't turn into a job, make sure you still stay in touch with the people there who you got to know. You never know when an opening

might come up or when they can give you a referral. Industry insiders may know about job openings before everyone else and you can always get the real scoop on potential employers from your friends in the industry.