Chapter 3

The Yin and Yang of **Brainstorming**

"Every good brainstorming session starts with a 15-minute discussion of *Star Trek*."

—Noah Falstein, quoting Ron Gilbert

The truth about brainstorming is this: Brainstorming is not blue sky, and blue sky is not brainstorming. They might have elements in common. And in fact one might beget the other. But still, they are decidedly *not* the same.

Blue sky is all about the sky's the limit and imagining all possibilities. But at the end of the day the reality is that you can't have everything you want—you can't have all possibilities, and you can't say yes to everything. You can *start* that way in blue sky. Yet sooner or later, usually sooner, you have to hone in on one idea for your game and turn that concept into a game people will love to play. This is where you start to narrow your focus on what you *really* want, and can have, in the game. And that's where brainstorming comes into play.

Let's use the metaphor of writing. One way to look at this is that blue sky is much like stream-of-consciousness writing. Whatever you think, you write. No holds barred, no rules, no limits. Just get it out there, down on paper. Brainstorming, on the other hand, is more like editing—it's taking that stream-of-consciousness work and molding it into something that can be grokked by others. You organize the thoughts into some semblance of order, make them cohesive, cut things out, add new ideas where needed, and you have something imminently useable—a good first draft.

Noah Falstein looks at brainstorming this way: "There are a lot of rules you read about brainstorming that are available in non-game books, for example, how to teach corporate executives to brainstorm. I consider those to be training-wheel rules that are good if you've never done it before. But if you have any experience, they can actually slow you down.

"One example you hear about all the time is, 'Don't criticize; don't stifle the process by judging; every idea is a good idea.' Under corporate circum-

stances, that might be useful. But all hardcore game designers criticize each other left and right. The difference is they don't take it personally. It's okay to critique. That way only the strongest elements survive."

Falstein sees a strong correlation between the discerning of ideas that occurs during a good brainstorming session and Darwin's "survival of the fittest" postulate. He adds, "Darwinism is very appropriate to correlate with game design."

Avoid Clichés like the Plague!

Hairless Lab Rat concept art. Image © 2006 Backbone Entertainment. Death Jr., the Death Jr. characters and logo are trademarks of Backbone Entertainment. (See color plates.)

The biggest problem inherent in the brainstorming process is that clichés and stereotypes are *always* the first thing to come up as the "best" ideas or solutions in a game. There's a reason for that—television, film, books, and other games are full of them. Daily conversations are full of them. The world is full of them. The problem is that they're not very interesting.

Case in point. We need a non-player character in a game. We're going to make her a little old lady. Describe what she's like.

Stop. Think about that for a second. Describe what a little old lady looks like.

You already have a picture in your head. Maybe she's wearing a frumpy black dress with a little white flower print, knee-high nylon stockings that are sagging around her skinny little legs, and non-descript black shoes. She has wrinkly skin, white hair pulled up in a bun behind her head, glasses slipping off the end of her nose. Maybe she carries a cane.

The trouble is that when people are developing any component of a game, like a character in this case, they usually get as far as the stereotype and then stop.

Your challenge is to go beyond cliché.

How do you do that? Easy. Here are the steps:

(1) Don't fight clichés and stereotypes. They're gonna come out, and the sooner you get them out of the way, the sooner you can start getting beyond them.

(2) After you've exhausted the stereotypes and clichés, go to the *opposite* of them. Let's take granny, for example. Black shoes become genuine alligator cowboy boots. Or bunny slippers. Or bright red Converse sneakers. Each of these changes instantly gives some new dimension to her character, and each gives us a very different sense about who we're dealing with here. Let's change her cane. Maybe it's a broomstick. Or a cue stick. Maybe she pokes people with it. Maybe she whacks people over the head

with it. Cliché? Okay, maybe it's hollow and she carries her whiskey in it. And maybe she's wandering around hitting people with it, and she takes a slug of whiskey each time she whacks somebody. Now things are getting interesting.

In brainstorming sessions, always be on the lookout for stereotypes. And then take those clichés to the opposite extreme, twist them around, combine them with non-related things, and turn them on their head.

The simple act of going beyond cliché is really easy to do. And by adding unexpected elements to your game, you will delight your player. It's almost like having Easter eggs[1] in your game. You can have wonderful surprises evolve—granny is a pool-playing, whiskey-drinking, Converse sneaker–wearing piece of work. Maybe she still wears that frumpy black dress and those sagging nylons, but there's something there that says "I'm more than meets the eye, and if you're lucky you might find out a thing or two about me when you play this game." Now there's an interesting little old lady.[2]

If you develop some creative outside-the-box components to your game, you're likely to find creative outside-the-box ways to use them. But if all you have is stereotypes and clichés, all you're going to end up with is predictability. And predictability is definitely not very fun.

Limitations Will Set You Free

In game design, you're going to constantly be presented with the need to brainstorm your way into solutions. Whether it's at the beginning and choosing that *one* best game you hope to turn into a AAA title, or further along when you're designing the best characters for the game, the best story, the best environments, the best mechanics, and the best way to tie it all up so you can actually get the game made. While this kind of deletion of all of those other great ideas you came up with in blue sky might sound at the outset like the opposite of brainstorming, it really is the brainstorming process that helps you codify your ideas and get the work under way.

The key, then, is to know what outcome you want when you begin the brainstorming process. Some examples:

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1 A hidden message or feature found in a game.

2 There is a great "little old lady" character in the animated film *Triplets of Belleville*. She is full of lots of believable, fun, unique characteristics and is utterly delightful despite the fact that she *never speaks a word*. She's a perfect example of beyond cliché.

- We need to figure out how to get the character through this encounter with the villain without the character or the villain dying.
- We need to figure out how to put this (*insert product placement*) in the game in a way that doesn't disrupt the flow, that meets the needs of the marketing group, and that helps the player further his or her way through the game.
- We need to figure out how to change the characteristics of this character because legal came back to us and said we had to.
- We need to figure out how to add this mechanic because marketing said we have to have it in.

The point is this: begin with the end in mind, and then get creative in coming up with solutions by going beyond the easy answer and brainstorming possibilities that are focused and purposeful.

You'll find that when you start working *within* constructs and limitations, something really amazing happens—it frees you up to go in directions you never would have gone before.

Case in point. In Hollywood, network animated shows for children are ruled by something called Standards and Practices, which places very specific restrictions on what can and cannot be done in children's animation. It is because of the Standards and Practices rules that you'll never see Saturday-morning network cartoon characters smoking, ingesting magic potions or pills, shooting at each other with handguns, tying anyone up with ropes, or hitting anyone with a commonly available object like a skillet or a baseball bat.[3]

The reason is that children have been known to see things on cartoons and then act them out in real life, often with devastating results. So when writing animation for kids, the challenge is to come up with some fun devices in the story that are organic and true to the show, fit within the rules of the cartooniverse, and affect the story the way you need them to.

These rules by design create very rigid limitations. However, because of these restrictions, you now have to, and get to, think up some really creative ways to get things done. Here's an example. We had an animated script that put the characters in the Wild West, in other words they were cowboys, and they were faced with many of the typical cowboy problems, not the least of which was unruly cows who, wouldn't you know it, ended up in a stampede. Now, if there were a stampede in real life, real cowboys would chase down

[3] This is why anvils are a favorite cartoon device—they're not typically found around the house, and they're impossibly heavy for a child to throw on somebody's head.

those cows and lasso a few of them and get them under control. But we couldn't do that. Why? Standards and Practices. The last thing you want to do is give kids the idea that it's okay to throw a rope around a cow's neck and pull it into a corral. You can image the results of that play-acting. So, what do you do about the cows?

Time for some brainstorming. In this case, it's pretty easy to see what the restrictions are. You can't change the characters from cows to something else. You can't change the environment. You have to keep things organic. But it's a cartoon, so it doesn't have to be "real," and it should be fun. So, question: how do you corral cows without throwing a rope around them? Easy.

As it turns out, the cowboys are really good at what they do, and this means they're super duper fast at twirling their lassos. They are so fast, in fact, that when they work together twirling their lassos, in unison, aiming them at the same spot on the dusty prairie ground, they create a wind, and that stirs up a dust devil, and that immediately grows into a twister, and the twister goes around and picks up all the cows and conveniently drops them into the corral where they're now safe and sound and the day is saved. And that is a lot more cool than just lassoing a cow. Without the restrictions of Standards and Practices, it is highly doubtful that something that original and fun would have ever made it into the cartoon.

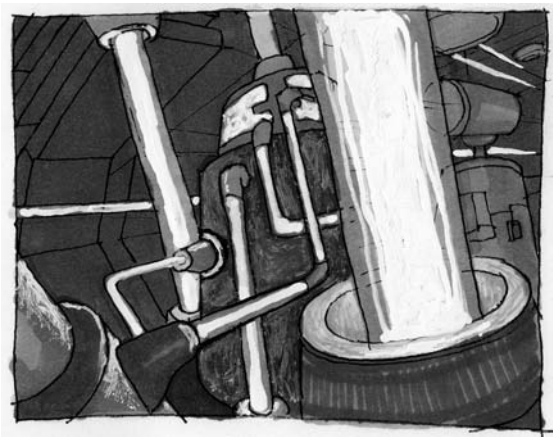
Serious Work Meets Fun and Games

Let's recall once again what should become one of your guiding mantras in game design: every project is different. Also remember that within this truth lies another: while every project is different, all projects have similar components. Brainstorming is one practice that is done consistently throughout the industry.

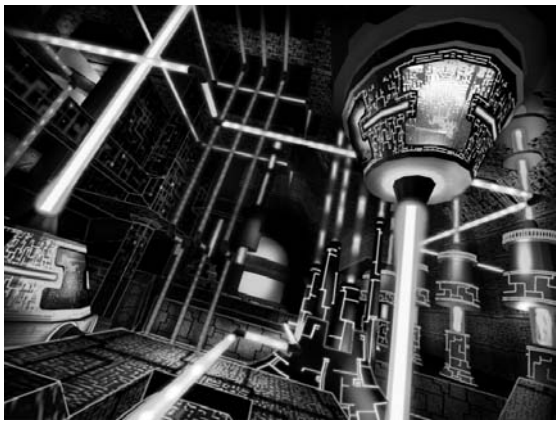
Tracy Fullerton, assistant professor at USC's School of Cinematic Arts, Interactive Media division, and co-director of the Electronic Arts Game Innovation Lab, has first-hand experience with a variety of brainstorming approaches. "Brainstorming is different for every project I've worked on," says Fullerton. "I've seen anything from having 10 to 11 people, half of whom are clients, sitting in a room, to sitting alone at home and brainstorming ideas. I don't prefer either way. The most important thing is you have a goal, you have enough information to work from, you've done enough research where your research is informed, you have an understanding of those problems before you, and you have a creative understanding of what your needs are."

A major theme that runs through the industry regarding the brainstorming process is keeping the balance between work—hashing out the prob-

The most successful brainstorming sessions usually start with some sort of fun and games.



Sketch of factory interior for *Amplitude*. Image provided by Harmonix Music Systems, Inc.



Color sketch labeled Factory Main Conversion Area for *Amplitude*. Image provided by Harmonix Music Systems, Inc.

lems—and inspiring creativity. You need to be sure to allow enough space for the mind to come up with creative solutions to those problems. The good news is that this invariably involves one of the things this industry does best: playing.

Fullerton found that some of the most productive brainstorming sessions she's participated in involved play. In her experience, "Some of the best brainstormers are Imagineers[4]. They often have very large brainstorming sessions, with people from very different backgrounds, and they have physical toys to keep people loose. And somehow, tossing toys around gets the creative ideas flowing, and I find that very successful."

Toys are just one device used to free the mind. "Different facilitators have their different tricks," notes Roger Holzberg, Vice President, Creative, at Walt Disney Parks and Resorts Online. "Typically, blank cards and colored markers get thrown out on the table."

Brainstorming is a critical component of game design to Holzberg and his team. "I have an entire wall of my office that's an erasable whiteboard, and people draw all over it all the time. There's something very freeing about it. And of course there are wonderful icebreakers around, like picking up a toy and describing why it's relevant to you."

Holzberg explains a *pre-brainstorming* experience he participated in that was designed to open up creativity. "We took a piece of paper and folded it into quarters, so we essentially had four pages, and each page was a different page in the story of our life. The first page was the title page, and it was a song—the first song that comes into your head. The next page was the place where you were born, and the number of years you've worked at

[4] Disney Imagineering.

the Disney Company, and that was the table of contents. Next we drew a picture of what our job was like. No matter how bad of an artist you are. And then we drew a picture of what life was like when we were retired.

"When we were finished with the books, we shared them along with the reasons why the elements were there, and it was very open and very revealing. And *then* we began the brainstorming after that, and it was one of the most open and facilitating brainstorming sessions I've ever been a part of."

Holzberg is very big on fostering creativity for his team. "One of the things that I desperately try to get creative teams to do is to find whatever that quiet or loud or crazy or calm or scary or exciting place is that allows them to make the synaptic connections that bring out their creative energy, because the corporate environment and working in cubes can kill it."

Great Minds Think Alike?

The ideal size (for a brainstorming group) is between three to seven people. The more experienced the people are, the closer you can get to three.

—Noah Falstein

Falstein's brainstorming advice is based on over 20 years of experience in the industry and working with such creative giants as Steven Spielberg and George Lucas. "A lot of my experience came from eight years at LucasArts, and we had such an amazing group of people. When Ron (Gilbert), David (Fox), and I worked on *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, the three of us were co-designing as equals. There was some concern about having three strong-willed guys collaborate. We frequently disagreed. Sometimes we would come into a meeting and two of us had one opinion, and the other one wanted to do something else. And as often as not the one would convince the other two."

What Falstein and his co-designers could not have guessed was that based on their success as a team with *Indiana Jones*, they would soon have company brainstorming on a new project.

"Spielberg is a big game player, and he often came by to see what we were doing, and he started calling us for hints when our game came out. So we gave him the name of the three project leaders (Fox, Gilbert, and Falstein), rather than have him go through the hint lines. We spent hours on the phone with him. Sometimes he'd be playing with his son Max on his lap, and I could hear him talking to Max and guiding him through the experience.

"He submitted an idea to us when we were working on *The Dig*,[5] and we worked with him through many brainstorming sessions. One of the high-

[5] Sci-fi adventure game by LucasArts, released in 1995.

lights of my career was in the first couple of brainstorming meetings. It was not just Steven, but George also wanted to be in on that, and I got to run those meetings.

"I've found that what is helpful is to strike a balance between staying focused and letting conversation wander," says Falstein. "I'm going to quote Ron Gilbert on this; he says, 'Every good brainstorming session begins with a 15-minute discussion of *Star Trek*.' These days it might be *Lost*. For a while it was *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

"The thing that's important is that it's some kind of pop-culture thing that everyone has experienced and that has little to do with your session. That's part of the process, and it allows your mind to wander and come back. That's part of the rhythm. I'm really happy that George Lucas and Steven Spielberg are the same way in their brainstorming. Some people don't want to stray at all, and that's a terrible thing to do—there's nothing faster to cutting off creativity."

Brainstorming at Nihilistic

The brainstorming process at Nihilistic begins when Huebner chooses five or six games that seem to be the most promising from the bounty submitted by his employees and calls a company meeting. Here, Huebner conducts the brainstorming sessions, acting as "moderator."

Sample design from original *Zombie* IP at Nihilistic. Image courtesy of Bren Adams for Nihilistic Software.

Sample concept art from original IP—*Zombie* pitch. Image courtesy of Bren Adams for Nihilistic Software. (See color plates.)

"It's a matter of getting all the right people in the room, all the interested parties, and letting them riff off of each other's ideas. As the moderator you get it all gelled. It's like funneled brainstorming, and when it goes well, everyone feels invested, like they had some part in developing or pushing it further."

Huebner says once this process begins, "The scope of brainstorming goes down fast. We describe the ideas to our group in a face-to-face meeting and ask people to make constructive criticism, to point out flaws and make suggestions for improvement. Then we either go to a more thought-out document, or we drop the idea altogether. We winnow it down to three or four IP concepts that go further into development and get additional refinement.

"From that point, we schedule a meeting to talk about each individual pitch. Maybe one's a zombie, one's a role play, one's a sci-fi, and we invite everyone in the company if they're interested to come to the meeting, usually a lunch meeting, and people throw out ideas for the game. We take notes and give them to the original author of the pitch and ask them to take it to the next phase, put in more detail, make a stronger pitch of four to six pages.

"I would love to create a game design and just work on that game design, but that's just not possible. At id, it's flexible game design."

—Tim Willits

"We try to distill the game down to the key features that differentiate it from other games, with a succinct one- to two-line summary, very high level—like *cheesy movie so-and-so* meets *so-and-so*. Then we decide what platform, what about ratings, and the five to ten main selling points. We want to get that information in right up front, for example, *Zombies meets Sim City*—something high level and quick to grasp, and to the point that it is tone setting—and then we describe what the player is doing, tell what the mechanics are, like fighting, shooting, exploring, hiding, what the player's actions are. Those are really the key things we're after."

Brainstorming *CSI*

Brainstorming does not just happen at the beginning of the project—it occurs all the way through. Greg Land, lead designer at Telltale Games on *CSI: 3 Dimensions of Murder* and *CSI: Hard Evidence*, was handed the responsibility of staying true to a major license, which just happens to be the top-rated fictional show on television, bringing in about 25 million viewers a week, according to the Nielsen ratings, and in which 100% of the people who buy the game are fans of the show. But, hey, no pressure. What this boils down to is that authenticity is of the utmost importance to the developers and the publisher, Ubisoft. This often required brainstorming sessions throughout development with people outside of the company.

CSI: Hard Evidence morgue screenshot. Image courtesy of Ubisoft.

"During story development, once we had a set of stories with characters that we really liked, we ran the ideas by the *CSI* writers in L.A. to do a little bit of brainstorming with them. Since they were writers from the show, they had some great insight, and they helped us get a couple of cases on track, to really solidify motives and come up with some extra cool reasons people might behave in interesting ways.

"Part of my job is gathering a lot of feedback, so first I take a pass at getting as many people to look at the design as I humanly can, and I listen to what they have to say and address it to the best of my ability. Fortunately I had some really good people around me who had some excellent input, and it helped the story.

"Once we had story ideas—the plot, who's the killer, how they did it, why they did it—I would assign each story to a particular writer for three to four weeks and have them develop a two-page detailed treatment and then a full-length screenplay that lays down all the details of the case, including evidence, when you can get warrants, that type of thing."

Brainstorming *Buzz Lightyear* in Two Different Worlds

"For a very long time, since many years ago at Walt Disney Imagineering, we've dreamed about how we could create gameplay elements that make our product compelling to teens and tweens. And a big part of what we do in our parks and resorts with the advanced projects group is to work on that," explains Roger Holzberg. "There clearly is a generation who grew up with video games, and video games are part of their language. And the *Buzz Lightyear* attraction talks that language like no other; it's a ride through a video game. It became a compelling part of that experience to take this ride out into the virtual world."

The challenge of *Buzz Lightyear Astro Blasters Online* was to figure out how to merge the gameplay online in real time with players riding the attraction in the park. And it had to be launched as part of Disney's 50th anniversary. "It's really the idea of Tomorrowland," notes Holzberg, "where the real world meets the virtual space and these two come together and play. Impacting the attraction during the course of play—well, it's a very interesting phenomenon when you're playing online. The online gameplay is a lot more robust and deeper, even though it's the same length as the attraction gameplay in the ride.

"In the park, they get in a ride vehicle, and each person has two laser blasters. Buzz gives them an assignment to collect batteries, which have been stolen by his evil nemesis, so you can get enough power to defeat him. As you ride through the ride you use your blasters to hit the targets. The targets have a score, and you're playing against one another to get the highest score, and to get the highest score as a team in your vehicle.

"We took that concept and thought how cool it would be to play online where you match one-on-one with the players in the attraction. You're teleported into a game where you are attached to a ride vehicle. So the players online are wedded with the players in real time, with exactly the same pace and speed as a ride vehicle at the park, and you have similar perspectives."

Bringing the online world into a real-time interaction with people riding in the game at the park, Holzberg's team used some solid first-person shooter game strategies.

"There's functionality online where you can rescue little green men, and when you rescue a little green man you turn on a special target in the ride. When these targets are hit by people in the ride, it increases your overall team score and enables your team to do better. People in the ride who don't know about the online play think the specials are randomly turning on, but actually it's the player online who's turning on those specials. It's a really fun, dynamic, cool game."

When you're working in an arena that has never been explored before, that crucial first step is brainstorming. And not just brainstorming, but *effective* brainstorming that goes from "Wouldn't it be cool if we could do this," to "Here's how we're gonna do this." There's not just one way to get there. But there are good examples of how people do it. Holzberg's group has created a new approach to facilitate that process.

"Just recently we developed a process with the creative directors that is twofold—two answers to this question. First we do a 'creative pitch-off,' and then we do a 'creative pitch-in.' The creative pitch-in I open up to the entire organization, and when we as senior managers cast our core team of a project, we like to begin the creative process with a pitch-in. An email is sent to the entire organization inviting them to participate in the pitch-in. They get the topic, and we're all connected online so we can share sketches or whatever.

"The project creative team leads the pitch-in, and everybody within the organization is invited to pitch an idea that will make the creative genesis of the project groundbreaking. Pitch-ins can be prepared ahead of time—they usually get a week or two notice, and I give special credit to partners who work on one together; for example, if a tech director partners with a flash designer or a biz dev person and those two give a pitch-in together, that's rewarded. They get an extremely brief period of time to give their pitch, and they're on the clock. So the first half of the pitch-in is a free-form spanning of ideas.

"Then we clear the room for a few minutes, and the senior directors in the room, along with the senior project leaders, aggregate the ideas into categories: ideas that are similar, ideas that have to be explored further, ideas that are aligned with business objectives of the company. Then we bring everybody back in and the pitchers are put back into those groups and they come up with more ideas. Then the creative team goes away with that supply of fresh, raw, unedited, creative ideas, and they use them to develop the project."

Of all the people I've worked with in the industry, Holzberg has just about the highest regard for fostering creativity that I've encountered. He honors the creative process. And he gives space and time to creatively work.

"The other thing I try to live by as a law in working with creative folks is to enable them to find the space where they can be truly creative and put the right ideas together. When I say creative folks, I include product management, business development, and tech folks. If there's a lesson to be learned from great partnerships, it's that great creative vision doesn't live alone. Walt Disney would not have existed without his brother Roy, the 'business guy.'

"One of my favorite, favorite points that Malcolm Gladwell makes in one of his early chapters of *Blink* is around the reason why the head acquisitions person at the Getty could not see that the Greek statue they were about to pay $10 million for was a fake when several contemporaries saw it immediately. She was overwhelmed with business pressure, and that hampered her ability to see creatively."

Whether you're spending $10 million on a statue or designing a game, the pressure of the business needs can easily seep into the daily realities of the team trying to pull it all off. And there's nothing worse than pressure to squash creativity. But the good news is that you can get away from it and break free of its hold, and I'd venture to say that's more true in this industry than in any other. We know how to play.

Holzberg offers his antidote. "The financial pressures from business development, the product pressure from the product-management team, the financial pressure from the finance folks, can crush the technical creativity or story or gameplay or creative spark out of a person. And for me, one of the smartest things you can do to start brainstorming is send people out to the park to run, send them to a theme park and let them ride rides, get them out of the office and let them get to a different place. For me, I know where the best creative connections come to me when I work, and I encourage everybody to find those spaces for themselves."

Brainstorming Exercise

Choose a topic that relates to a game that you want to either narrow in scope or come up with a fix for. It could be a game you want to do, or a game that's already on the market that you think could be better.

Get two to five people together for a brainstorming session on this topic. You should be clear who's going to be the moderator of this session before you start.

Spend the first 10 to 15 minutes or so playing with toys, filling out Mad Libs, drawing, playing a game, etc., or talking about a new movie, cartoon, TV show, etc.—anything but the topic at hand.

At a natural break in the play time, start the discussion of the topic you've chosen. It's the moderator's job to keep the topic going and to note the creative ideas and solutions proposed by the group.

Brainstorming Checklist

- ❑ Start your brainstorming sessions with something fun that is *not* about the problem you're trying to solve or the task at hand—play.
- ❑ Begin with the end in mind—know what you're brainstorming toward and what you want to accomplish.
- ❑ Go beyond clichés—let the clichés and stereotypes come out, then take them in the opposite direction, and twist things around until you come up with interesting and fun solutions.
- ❑ Let the conversation ebb and flow throughout the brainstorming session to keep creativity flowing—the mind works in mysterious ways, so let it.