casual connect
magazine

ALL WAYS FOR EVERYONE

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CONTENTS

ON THE COVER:

The cover for this issue of *Casual Connect* was created by the art team at DRAGON ALTAR GAMES, with the concept by Artyom Fedorischev, the art director of the company.

For more information, please contact Veronica Lisovina: veronica. lisovina@casualconnect.org or visit: www.dragonaltar.com.

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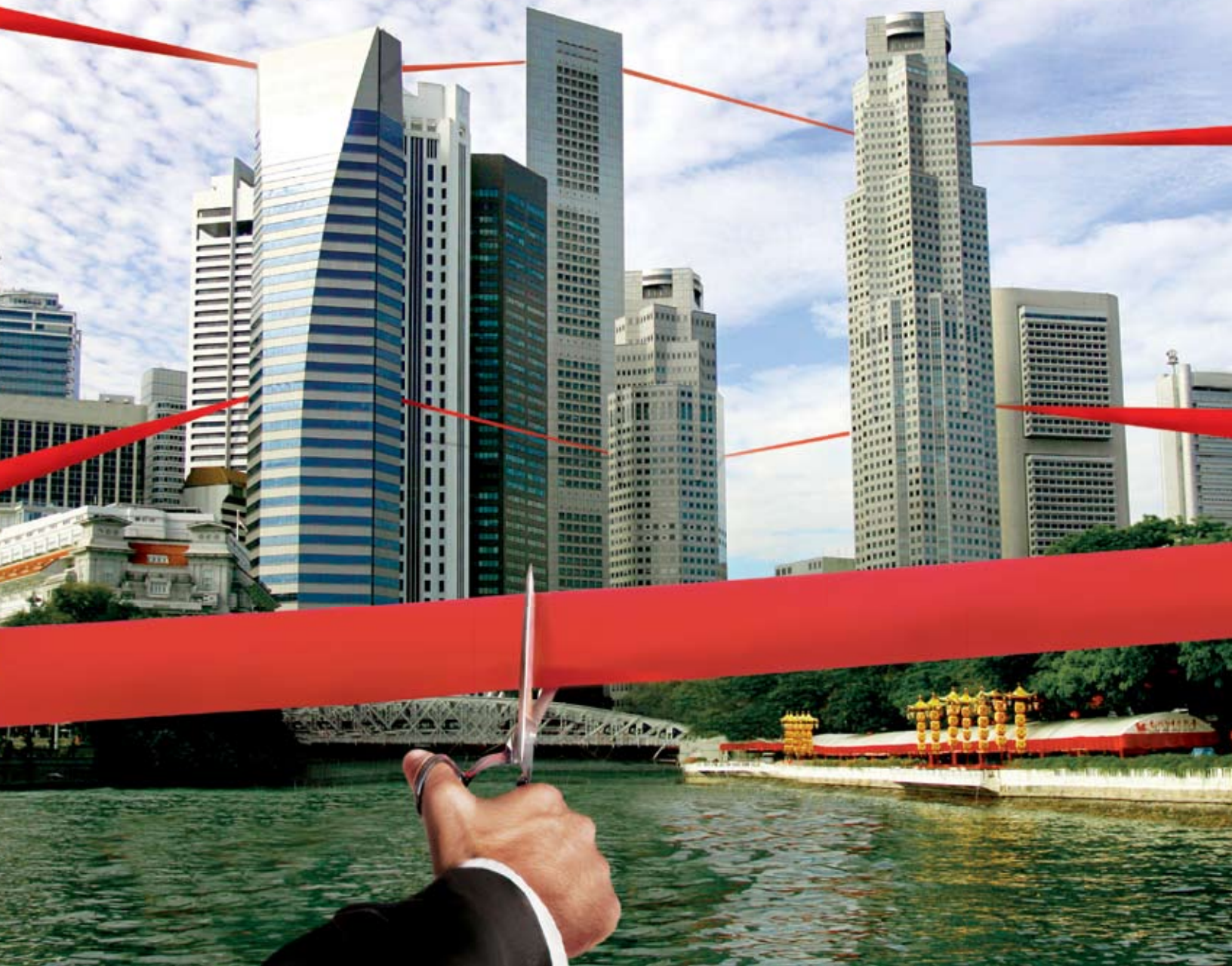
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Winter 2009

CASUAL CONNECT MAGAZINE

Letter from the Director

Do yourself a favor: Stop reading the newspaper. Not forever, but just until you've finished reading this magazine. You'll thank yourself later, because as you read this issue of Casual Connect, several thoughts should cross your mind:

1. *The casual games industry is going to be just fine.* In spite of the grim headlines, it's an industry that continues to put smiles on people's faces, day after day after day. Even during recessions.

2. *This is a really cool industry to be associated with.* It's an industry full of energy and fresh ideas. It's dominated by smart people who see virtue in fun. Who wouldn't want to hang out with people like that?

3. *We can do this.*

    Yes, it's true: The economy is in the dumper. Even the smartest people don't really know what the future holds. They just know that it's going to be "tough" for a while before it gets better.

    It will get better, of course. There's no doubt about that. And when the fear has subsided and the dust from the crash has finally started to settle, we'll look around ourselves and notice that there have been both winners and losers—those who somehow came out of the downturn poised for greater success, and those who didn't quite make it.

    The more I travel and the more of you I meet, the more convinced I become that we will be among those who make it. But it won't be easy. The realignment of the world's economy provides a good excuse for all of us to reassess our business objectives and focus on what is truly important. We must be intelligent about the choices we make and bold where it makes good strategic sense. If we're smart about it, we'll emerge from the other end of this dark tunnel and immediately reach for our sunglasses—because, of course, our future's so bright.

    I really do believe that.

    Sincerely,

    Jessica

Jessica can be reached at jessica@casualconnect.org.

Four Keys to Unlocking China

Advice for Companies Looking to Enter the Chinese Casual Games Market

By Marc van der Chijs

As acting CEO of SPIL GAMES Asia, Marc van der Chijs is responsible for all company game portals in the Asian market as well as the in-house game development studio, Zlong Games. With a Master's degree in Business Economics from Maastricht University, his background is firmly rooted in business management and technology. Prior to joining SPIL GAMES, Marc co-founded and was an active board member of the leading Chinese video site Tudou.com. From 1996 through 2002, Marc held several management positions at automobile manufacturer Daimler in Stuttgart and Beijing. You can reach Marc at marc.vanderchijs@casualconnect.org.

The number of Chinese Internet users has grown tremendously over the past several years, to the point that now China has the biggest online population in the world with over 298 million Internet users. Casual games have exploded onto the market with overwhelming adoption by local consumers. Business models have evolved as well, and many developers and publishers are highly profitable, earning their income from both advertising and the sale of in-game items. The opportunity is there; however, to be the most successful in this space there are several things that developers and publishers should know before entering the Chinese casual games market.

The 1st Key: Know the Local Laws

Certain licenses are required to operate in China, and securing those licenses is typically the biggest hurdle for foreign game companies to clear in order to be active in China. The most important license is the ICP (Internet Culture Permit) that allows so-called value-added telecom business. Without this license, you cannot even operate a website in China. Foreign companies need to set up a joint-venture with a Chinese company in order to obtain this license. Furthermore, non-Chinese games have to be checked by the Ministry of Culture before they can be published, a process which takes about 30 days. If the game is not approved, the ministry will state the reasons why, and the game must be modified and submitted for approval again.

Some of the top web games already have hundreds of thousands of players and the expectation is that the top web games will soon rival the top PC-based MMO games.

The 2nd Key: Understand the Leading Business Models

Generally, the Chinese do not want to pay for games because they know that all of the games are available for free through piracy. Accordingly, China has developed its own business models for games. All games are available for free as a download or pre-installed in Internet bars. In the beginning, most game companies charged subscription fees, but almost all of them now have changed their business models to in-game transactions. This turned out to be a much more profitable approach for developers and publishers than subscriptions because of the low-barrier to entry for players to get into the game. For casual flash games, the model is free-to-play as well, but in this case advertising is used as the primary revenue model because people are not as willing to engage in micro-payments for shorter, more condensed games.

The 3rd Key: Work with Local Publishers

It is generally easiest to work with local Chinese publishers, as they know the market and know how to most effectively promote games and portals. Starting from scratch in China is possible, but most companies tend to fail because China's gaming and Internet market is very different from any other in the world. Companies seem to underestimate the significance of those differences, and time and again foreign game companies put lots of money into China without achieving the results they desire.

The top publishers for browser-based MMO games (massively multiplayer online games) are Shanda, The9, 9You, Tencent (QQ), and Netease. For casual flash games, the top publishers are 4399.com, Game.com.cn and Xiaoyouxi.com. Both Game.com.cn and Xiaoyouxi.com are operated by SPIL GAMES Asia.

For distribution, the leading online portals for casual flash games are 4399.com, Game.com.cn, Xiaoyouxi.com and 7k7k.com. For browser-based MMO games (also called web games), the main players are Shanda, which receives a lot of its traffic from their other games, and QQ, which gets its traffic primarily from its IM client. In addition, webgame.com.cn is a relatively new site that is attracting quite a bit of traffic already.

The 4th Key: Stay on Top of the Latest Market Tends

Currently, the four most popular casual game genres are action-style fighting games, puzzles, shooters, and platform games. Developers should initially focus on these genres in order to get publishers interested in their games, and publishers should focus on these genres to attract traffic.

Newcomers should also be aware that mobile games have become increasingly popular over the last few years. There are over 500 million mobile phone users in China, and over half of these users have a mobile phone that is Internet-enabled. In 2009, 3G will be further rolled out in China and the expectation is that this will increase the amount of Internet usage on mobile phones exponentially. Right now, most users still download games to their phones, but once a faster connection is available, Adobe Flash Lite technology will enable people to start playing online games on their phones as well. This is a huge opportunity for the online game industry in China.

Online browser-based MMO games (i.e. web games) will continue to grow further in 2009. Some of the top web games already have hundreds of thousands of players and the expectation is that the top web games will soon rival the top PC-based MMO games. One reason is that web games can be played in Internet cafes without first downloading the client, and a lot of people in China go online in these Internet bars. In addition, it's important to note that these web games get the bulk of their revenue from the sale of in-game items. As stated previously, developers should consider a micro-payment revenue model for monetizing these games rather than subscriptions.

Some Final Words of Advice

- **Empower Your Managers**—Competition in China is tough, and you will need to react quickly if there are changes in the market. For this reason, the local management should have a lot of freedom to make decisions and take action. If your management team in China always has to wait for approval from headquarters, you will not be able to compete on an equal footing with local competitors.
- **Hire Someone Who Knows China**—If a manager is successful in Europe or the US, it does not mean that he or she will also be successful in China. It takes a different mindset to work effectively in China. Rather than put someone from the head office in charge, often it is the best strategy to appoint a local industry professional or at least someone with a lot of management experience in China to run the business.
- **Commit to the Long-term**—And finally, China is a long-term market. Even though the market potential is great, it takes time to build up an audience. For example, at SPIL GAMES it took us almost two years to grow our portal traffic from our initial launch to 10 million players per month; but within the last nine months alone we've grown our monthly portal traffic to 30 million visitors. Don't expect to break even in the first year—plan at least three years for that. ∎

China's gaming and Internet market is very different from any other in the world…and time and again foreign game companies put lots of money into China without achieving the results they desire.

Slowing But Still Growing

Games Market in China

By Allison Luong

Allison Luong is the Founder and Managing Director of Pearl Research, where she is responsible for the overall management and strategic direction of the San Francisco- and China-based research and consulting firm. She leads Pearl Research's ongoing analysis of the interactive entertainment, gaming, wireless, and Internet markets. She is also the executive editor of RedlineChina.com, Pearl Research's news portal dedicated to China's technology markets. Allison graduated from the University of California at Berkeley. You can reach her at allison.luong@casualconnect.org.

Online game companies are rushing to acquire new licensing opportunities, increase development capabilities, and search for opportunities to license games to overseas game operators—especially in the US and Vietnam.

The Chinese online games market has proven to be resilient in the latter half of 2008, but the outlook for 2009 remains uncertain. In Q3 2008, revenues for the top five game publishers (Shanda, Tencent, NetEase, The9, and Perfect World) were up 15% quarter-over-quarter and 63% year-over-year. These five companies generated a combined RMB 3,036 million ($433.7 million). Still, growth rates have slowed down from the 70% seen in 2007, according to Pearl Research's latest analyses.

The overall market grew due the appreciation of the Chinese currency against the US dollar, strong new releases such as Tencent's *Dungeon and Fighter,* and expansion pack updates for popular titles such as Sohu's *TLBB*. Those online game publishers that under-performed (such as The9 and NetDragon) cited factors such as the seasonal impact of school summer holidays, lack of new releases, the Beijing 2008 Olympics, pirate servers, and the negative effect of the global financial crisis.

Figure 1: Q3 2008 Top 5 Game Companies			
Game Company	Q3 2008 Revenue	QoQ Growth	YoY Growth
Shanda	RMB 891.5 million	11%	41%
Tencent	RMB 679.9 million	50%	195%
NetEase	RMB 675.1 million	14%	44%
The9	RMB 408.4 million	-10%	29%
Perfect World	RMB 381.1 million	14%	79%
TOTAL FOR TOP 5	RMB 3,036 million ($433.7 million)	15%	63%
Source: Company data. These figures cover the games division only.			

Pearl Research believes that the market is beginning to see a shift as companies with stronger game portfolios are beginning to rise above the competitors with weaker game portfolios. As a result, online game companies are rushing to acquire new licensing opportunities and to increase development capabilities—while searching for opportunities to license games to overseas game operators, especially in the U.S. and Vietnam.

Key Highlights:

- Media company Tencent achieved an exceptional third quarter with the success of its titles *Dungeon and Fighter, QQ Dancer,* and online shooter *Crossfire*. The company grew its online game revenues by 50% quarter-over-quarter to 679.9 million RMB ($99.7 million) as a result of the strong performance of these titles.

  With the global financial crisis, the company was expecting the fourth quarter to be weaker. Tencent's online advertising unit was expected to face a greater impact than its online games unit, due to online advertising's low average spending per user and per transaction.

- Game operator The9 (NASDAQ: NCTY), best known for operating Blizzard's *World of Warcraft* in China, had a challenging quarter in Q3 2008. The company is still continuing its strategy of aggressive diversification in order to wean itself away from its dependence on *World of Warcraft,* which accounts for more than 90% of its revenues. It is quickly filling up its pipeline with in-house and licensed titles while preparing for the expansion pack *World of Warcraft: Wrath of the Lich King*. The eagerly-awaited expansion pack is expected to boost revenues for The9.

  Net revenues for The9 stood at 408.4 million RMB ($60.2 million), a decrease of 10% quarter-over-quarter and an increase of 29% year-over-year.

- Game operator Shanda (NASDAQ:SNDA) continued play its role as the top online games company with a steady quarter of growth. The company released 42 new expansion packs for its large portfolio of games along with two new MMORPGs and two new casual games. In December

2008, the company continued to expand by investing in two webgame community operators.

Revenues from casual games were RMB 119.7 million ($17.6 million), an increase of 46% year-over-year and 11% quarter-over-quarter. Revenues from MMORPGs were RMB 771.8 million ($113.2 million), an increase of 40% year-over-year and 11% quarter-over-quarter.

• Chinese media company Sohu (NASDAQ: SOHU) produced a strong quarter with the help of its overseas market growth combined with the revitalization of *Blade Online*. The company's flagship title, *TLBB*, has been licensed in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Vietnam allowing Sohu to increase its overseas game revenue by 25% quarter-over-quarter to RMB 18.5 million ($2.7 million). A major expansion pack for the four year old game *Blade Online*

was also released, giving the company a slight overall boost in revenues.

Sohu garnered online gaming revenue of RMB 374.3 million ($54.6 million), up 330% year-on-year and 14% quarter-on-quarter. The game *TLBB* represented 94% of Sohu's online games revenues.

• NetEase (NASDAQ:NTES) is continuing to ride the success of *Fantasy Westward Journey* series. With the recent acquisition of operating rights to Blizzard's *Starcraft 2*, the company is expected to lessen its dependence on the aging *Fantasy Westward Journey*. During the quarter, NetEase also released *Legend of Westward Journey*, an item-based version of the popular *Westward Journey* series for open beta.

Revenues from online games were RMB 675.1 million ($99.4 million) for the third quarter of 2008, up 14% quarter-over-quarter and 44% year-over-year.

In conclusion, the Chinese online games market is starting to bifurcate. Game operators The9 and NetDragon had a difficult quarter due to their lack of new content and succumbed to the external pressures of recession and unfavorable exchange rates. Other online game companies such as Shanda and NetEase were still able to post quarterly growth increases with the help of new titles and expansion packs.

Pearl Research believes the Chinese online game industry has displayed resilience due to the free-to-play and micro-transactions business model. The low cost of micro-transactions means that users are less likely to cut back on a relatively low expense. In addition, gamers are less likely to abandon the MMORPGs to which they are loyal. However, like their US counterparts, game operators in China are tightening their belts, watching their expenses closely and planning for a slower 2009. ■

Building a Casual Games Company from the Ground Up

Lessons Learned in Portugal

Portugal is a very small country and has no previous history in technology development and investments. Several years ago, Portugal's government saw the most promising talents in technological research leaving the country to study abroad. Many of these bright minds were then recruited by companies in other countries. This caused the government in Portugal to invest aggressively in this area in an attempt to keep some of these great minds at home. The government created many different incentives for technology companies, providing GAMEINVEST the opportunity to begin building what has become one of the country's first game development companies.

GAMEINVEST was created in 2006 when Portugal's new wave of technology discussions started, and as investment opportunities opened up it became an attractive option to Portuguese investors. As the casual games industry continues to grow worldwide, we expect to see more countries following this trend and entering into the market. From our experience establishing GAMEINVEST in Portugal, we've gathered the following pieces of advice for those looking to expand into emerging markets.

Step 1: Gather Sufficient Funding from Local Investors

To become a prominent game developer in an emerging country—and a company strong enough to compete in the worldwide arena—companies often need to secure funding in the first stages of development.

Our first game was licensed to a major international publisher for distribution in the U.S., Europe, and Australia. The relationship with this distributor started with a cold call.

Spend the time to create a comprehensive and compelling business plan in order to make your venture attractive enough to investors to attract adequate funding. When developing the business plan, include data to support your projections. It's challenging to find a balance between showing passion for the projects and the creativity involved while also showing evidence with solid numbers that the projects will succeed. Keep in mind that in order to secure their interest, you will need to demonstrate to potential investors that your enterprise can provide sufficient return to justify their investment.

Also keep in mind that in an emerging country with no previous history of videogame development, it's likely that the investors reviewing your business plan are not familiar with the casual games industry, nor do they understand the potential and size of the market. It's your responsibility to inform and educate investors about the current market for casual games in other countries and relate that to the growth potential in the emerging country. *[The CGA's Casual Games Market Report is designed to be presented to those new to or outside of the casual games industry. Make sure to keep a couple of copies on hand for your investors. —ed.]* You will also need to justify the choices laid out in the business plan and explain the strategy behind those choices.

And finally, learn all you can about the business. Try to put yourself in the shoes of investors and try to imagine what questions they would like answered. And most importantly, be bold. Knock on all possible doors and you'll see that if you have a strong proposal some doors will open up for you.

Step 2: Assemble a Solid Team

Our approach to building the development team is slightly unconventional. Unlike other development studios that usually start with a team of developers, when GAMEINVEST first launched, we didn't have an in-house development team. The founder of the company worked as project evaluator of proposals that were brought to him by studios, and after selecting the projects in which to invest, he and another team member worked as the project managers and game producers. As we acquired adequate funding, then we began looking for designers, programmers, artists, etc. to begin building an internal development team.

Finding talent to build a game development team in a country with technology constraints and almost no experience in the games industry is very difficult. While locating experienced developers

By Mariana Cardoso

GAMEINVEST has an experienced and dedicated management team led by General Manager Mariana Cardoso, who is responsible for the strategy implementation, business development, and operational management of the company and all of its gaming and animation products. Mariana holds a B.A. in Marketing from the Institute of Visual Arts, Design, and Marketing (IADE) in Portugal, as well as a Certificate in Marketing from New York University. In addition to her work at GAMEINVEST, Mariana is actively involved in the IGDA (International Game Developers Association) and WIGI (Women in Games International). Before joining GAMEINVEST, Mariana worked at YDreams Mobile Entertainment, where she was responsible for the launch of several notable mobile titles, including Cristiano Ronaldo Underworld Football. *Mariana's global experience in the media and technology industries also includes work at Siemens in Lisbon, Reynardus and Moya Advertising in New York, and Latina Europa's "Channel Zero" project, an online Portuguese music television channel. Mariana can be reached at mariana.cardoso@casualconnect.org.*

Building a Casual Games Company from the Ground Up

Lessons Learned in Portugal

Some of GameInvest's popular titles

in an emerging country may be a challenge, the good news is that there likely are a lot of gamers in the community and people that are interested in getting into the industry. Relying on transferable skills has been key for us inasmuch as many of our team members have come from related industries such as mobile entertainment. Also, you may find that the designers and programmers you recruit are avid hardcore gamers and will need to be introduced to casual gaming styles and techniques. It's important to educate your development team about your primary audience.

Overall, we've grown a well-rounded internal team with both male and female developers, and now we have a pool of great talent for projects. Even so, we are always on the lookout for new partnerships and new talent, and we do our best to look outside the box and try to envision how great and talented people, working in completely different business areas, could also be successful in developing casual games.

Even if you build an outstanding in-house development team, outsourcing can be very important and valuable to a start-up company. Outsourcing can help a small game development company grow quickly by enabling the company to produce more games in a shorter period of time and to develop for multiple platforms simultaneously. In addition, outsourcing can free up the internal development team to focus on other areas such as research.

Step 3: Acquire Authorization to Develop for Multiple Platforms

Casual games have spread to numerous platforms including the PC, Xbox 360, Nintendo Wii, DS, PlayStation Portable, etc. We recommend developing for multiple platforms to increase opportunities and channels for distribution and to reach larger audiences with your games.

The process to gain authorization to develop for these platforms is challenging and at times very slow. You'll need to answer a series of questions about your company's background and structure and provide a detailed description of your past, current, and future game titles. Getting approval to develop for various platforms requires an investment of both time and money, and development kits can be quite expensive for smaller development studios that don't have adequate funding. However, we highly recommend investing to acquire authorization as this has proved to be a very important and strategic move for our company. By securing authorization to develop for all major platforms, GAMEINVEST has signaled its financial stability, gained credibility, and strengthened its negotiating position with publishers and distributors.

Step 4: Build Your Distribution Channels

First, identify your target market. Are you looking to distribute locally or globally? This will determine the partners you seek for publishing and distribution. Building a network and relationships with distributors takes time, especially when you're the first in your country to reach out for game distribution. Expect that your business development team will need at least one year to build an adequate network of contacts and create a steady dialogue with major publishers and distributors both in online and retail markets. As you establish solid relationships within the distribution channel, you'll gain the additional benefit of having multiple publishers open to evaluating game ideas, providing feedback and advice.

The "secret" behind building a good network is to learn your target market and know the major players, what they're looking for, and what games fit in their catalogs. Attend trade shows and conferences, and leverage them for valuable business meetings. Prior to your meetings, prepare presentation materials to showcase your products and game concepts.

As I said before, be bold: Talk to everyone, and you may be surprised to learn who will be picking your next game for their catalog. For example, our first game (*Toy Shop* for the DS) was licensed to a major international publisher for distribution in the U.S., Europe, and Australia. The relationship with this distributor started with a cold call. In my initial experience as an Account Manager, I simply picked up the phone and called the business development head in the publishing house. My pitch started with introducing the company and our games. I started building a relationship that ultimately got us our first deal.

Ultimately, you should view publishers and distributors as partners with your company. If you show flexibility and a willingness to work together, you will secure not only a good deal, but a lasting relationship with that partner for future opportunities.

Final Thoughts

We hope that these tips will help guide you in establishing the casual games industry and developing your company locally. Remember, although there are many steps and challenges to overcome in building a successfully operating casual game development company in an emerging country, the end result is a pipeline of game projects, a pool of local talent, and a network of valuable relationships in the industry. ∎

Screenshots from Enigma *(top) and* Hospital Hustle *(bottom).*

Turning on the GAS
A Profile of Casual Gamers in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland

"Thirty-five-year-old women are the typical casual game consumers"—by now we have all learned this hackneyed phrase by heart. But what does it tell you? Not much, really—at least if you're talking about our company's home market of German-speaking countries.

To begin, let me share with you something few people know or believe, namely: The volume of the overall European games market (estimated volume: 7.3 billion) is larger than that of North America (6.9 billion).[1] The biggest countries in European gaming are the UK (a market heavily dominated by consoles) and Germany. The point is that if you understand the consumer in German-speaking territories (Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and tiny Lichtenstein—commonly referred to as "GAS"), you will increase your return per title released.

If you ask most Germans whether they consider themselves to be gamers, they will say "no"; but these people do buy games—in fact, more and more games every year. (The estimated annual casual games market growth rate for GAS over the last three years is 30%). In addition, over the last two-to-three years we've seen a huge step forward in consumers' acceptance of casual games as well as in the overall acceptance of computer games. That advancement is the result of a big influx of high quality casual games into the market. Add to this the huge consumer population (around 100 million people, 64% of whom are aged 30 to 80) and you see the GAS market potential.

Let us take a look at the casual player profile in GAS (based on INTENIUM's user base). The gender skew is nothing new: Women who play casual games outnumber men roughly three to one. (*Chart 1*).

Then, let's go deeper and see what type of households our consumers live in. One can see that nearly 40% of players live in two-person households (*Chart 2*).

Chart 1. Gender of casual players in GAS.

Chart 2. Household size for consumers in GAS.

Two other important factors to consider in profiling consumers are education and income.

So as you can see we are dealing with very few people with college degrees (*Chart 3*). That is why we tend to react skeptically when developers propose game ideas which show high intellectual potential, or which require some special knowledge or interest in art or literature, or which have very nice but complicated stories. Before writing your game concept, it is best to have an *average* consumer in mind and create something that such a person would choose to buy. Think always about very obvious general interest topics. Of course, there is always room for niche products; but if you produce them, you must be willing to lose *or* win a fortune. Hidden object games started out as niche products, after all.

Yet another myth many believe in is that in Germany people earn a lot. However, roughly half of Germans make less than €1500 per month (see *Chart 4, pg. 14*), and that income has to cover medical insurance, rent, and other obligations. Consequently, INTENIUM's pricing policy calls for a lower SRP than is typical in the U.S.

As far as genres go, the most popular in German-speaking territories are match-three, hidden object, and

Chart 3. Educational Level

By Konstantin Nikulin

Konstantin Nikulin was Development Manager at Gazprom. After completion of an internship at the Hamburg Chamber of Commerce, he started his entrepreneurial activities in the media and IT branches in Germany. In 1998, he founded a company in Kaliningrad, and in 2000 incorporated INTENIUM GmbH in Hamburg. Nikulin is managing the areas of Strategic Partnerships and Production. He holds a degree in Aerospace Engineering. He can be reached at konstantin.nikulin@casualconnect.org.

There is a clear connection between the GAS market and North America: With very few exceptions, what is popular in the U.S. will be very popular in GAS within 18 to 24 months.

1 *Interactive Software Federation of Europe's Key Facts: The Profile of the European Video Gamer 2007 and Video Gamers in Europe 2008.*

Editor's Note: At 1.3 USD to the EURO, the size of the USA market as calculated by the ESA would be 7.3 billion EURO. In other words, given the current exchange rate, the European and USA videogame markets are nearly identical in size. Furthermore, given the larger population of the EU, USA consumers spend 48% more per capita.

Turning on the GAS

A Profile of Casual Gamers in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland

time management. In this respect, there is a clear connection between the GAS market and North America: With very few exceptions, what is popular in the U.S. will be very popular in GAS within 18 to 24 months. Such a gap exists in almost every business sphere you might analyze. So when you see a new genre or game-mechanic emerging, you can be fairly certain that within one or two years there will be demand for it in Europe. Don't shelve your game after a year of distribution—give it one more chance in Europe.

While time management games are popular in Germany, games employing restaurant management, babysitting, and care-giving are not. While there are many theories as to why this might be, one is that historically American women have a stronger entrepreneurial flair than European women. The German culture is to "leave work at work"—so there is little interest in thinking of where to invest money or how to serve customers during off-hours. Also, when German women say "we are for healthy food and we do not eat hamburgers," they mean it. This not as a fashionable slogan, but a part of their life. For our consumers, casual games are a means of immersing themselves into a world in which they feel comfortable, self-assured and all-mighty. Immersing themselves into the world of business may seem alien to them, which may also explain why they stay away from games in which they are asked to grow a business or to build a fast-food empire.

Also, keep in mind that for other distributors and publishers the target group profile may be very different from our customer base. What does that mean for developers? Different games sell better in different channels. You just have to try to find the right channel for your titles. After all, the main thing is the emotional charge you bring in with your game. Your goal is to fulfill the fantasies of casual gamers—no matter what language they speak. ◼

Household Income

90%
23.4%
17.3%
14%
9.4%
9.1%

| Up to 1000 Eur | Up to 1500 Eur | Up to 2000 Eur | Up to 2500 Eur | Up to 3000 Eur | More than 3000 Eur |
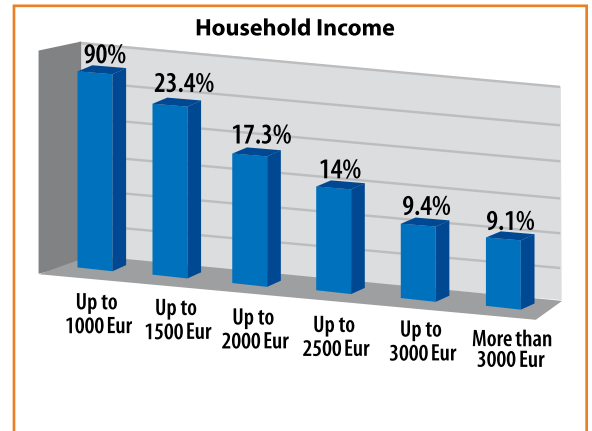
Chart 4. Monthly Household Income
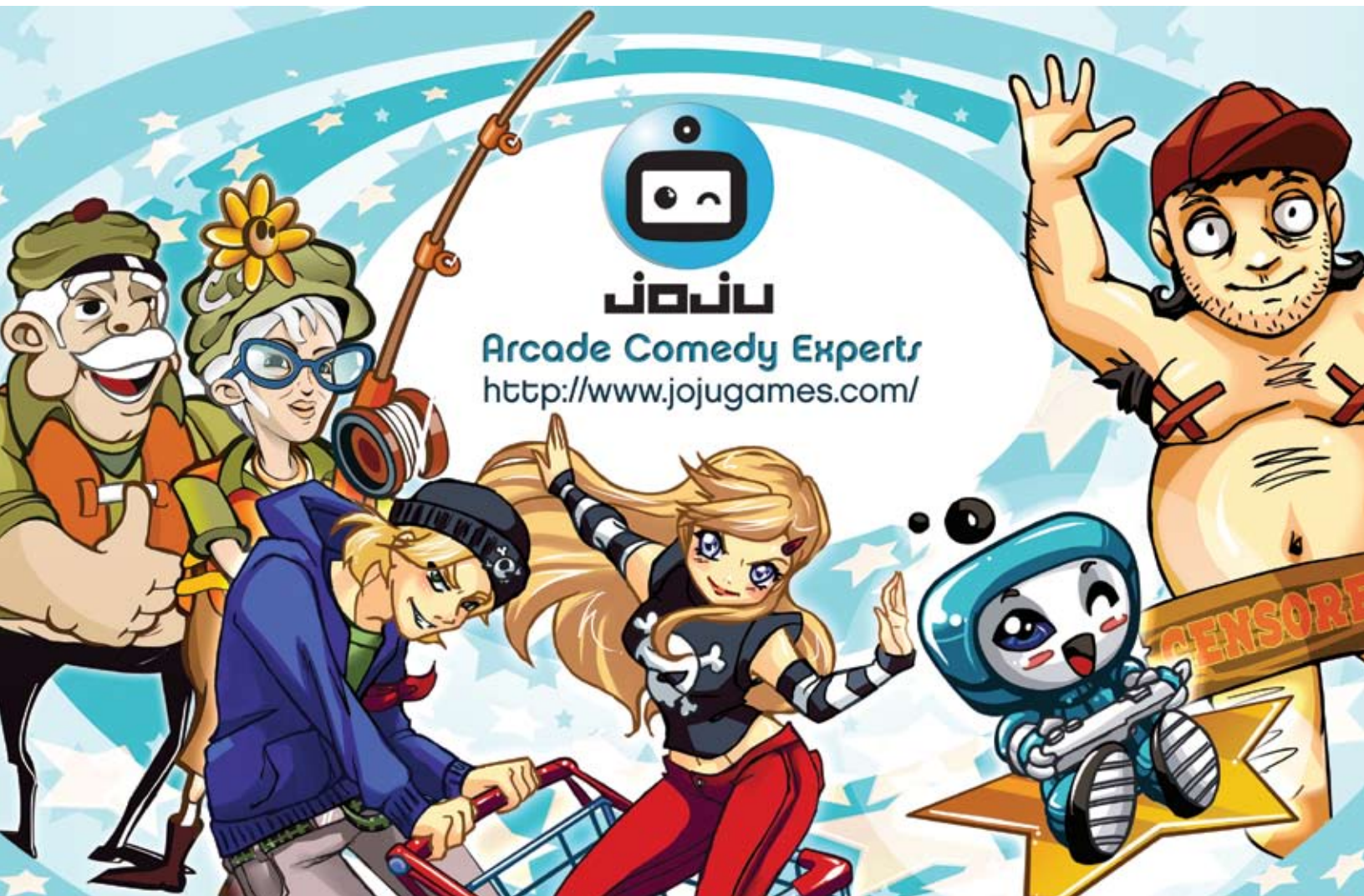
Repeat Business: It's The Name of the Game

Growing Passionate Communities Through e-Newsletters

O ne sale from a customer is good. Convincing that customer to stick around and buy more games is, of course, better. And generating new customers from existing ones is best.

In other words, in today's challenging marketplace, "repeat business" is the holy grail. You want to attract clients who love your games (and why shouldn't they?)—and then foster a relationship with them so that making incremental sales afterwards is a breeze. Heck, once gamers are convinced of your studio's brilliance, all you should need to do is remind them you've just released a new gem and there should be no reason to convince them again. Not only will they buy, but hopefully they'll also tell their friends, who'll tell their friends. . . .

There are many tools you can utilize to ensure you are top of mind—from proper branding inside your game to ensuring premium placement of new games on all the top portals. One trick often overlooked is to stay in touch with your customers and to make them part of your community—and one of the best places to do that is online. Gamers are already downloading your casual games online, they're coming to your website, and so it makes sense for you to send them some kind of additional online communication to help grow your relationship with them.

Arguably the communication tool of choice—the one that is most cost-effective—is an e-mail newsletter, delivered, say, once a month or corresponding to new products launches. With the correct platform, the right message, and a good e-mail subscription list, you can maintain a consistent message and stay top-of-mind with your clientele.

Successful e-mail marketing programs aren't only about getting high "open rates." They're about building strong, long-term relationships with subscribers. Here are some tips for doing it right:

It All Starts with the Database

Once gamers are convinced of your studio's brilliance, all you should need to do is remind them you've just released a new gem and there should be no reason to convince them again.

By Paul "The Game Master" Hyman

Paul "The Game Master" Hyman has covered the videogames industry for well over a dozen years; he currently writes for Gamasutra. com, Game Developer *magazine, and* The Hollywood Reporter, *among others. He is also editor-in-chief of www.OpenMoves.com/games, an e-newsletter marketing firm whose clients include videogame companies. E-mail Paul at paul.hyman@casualconnect.org.*

While getting users to your website is not an easy task, Ernie Ramirez from Reflexive and Paul Thelen from Big Fish Games are both strong proponents of the power of using your game brands to drive users to your website.[1] If you create a great game and distribute to the major portals, many users will find your website without you trying—by employing a simple Google search.

So, when one of these gamers arrives at your website and gives up her e-mail address to download your game or register it, you've already established a certain level of trust and begun a relationship with her. But is this going to be a one-night stand or a marriage? That depends on whether you can wow her so that, when you're ready to pop the question on your next game, she's most likely to say "yes."

If your website doesn't currently capture e-mail addresses of visitors, you need to do something about that, pronto! Make it necessary for visitors to your site to sign in with their e-mail addresses, or create a contest or giveaway that requires them to provide their addresses. Then make sure to get those addresses into a database so that they can be used for further marketing. Ultimately a sale on your website is worth more in both customer loyalty and increased sales price than a sale on a major portal. Your database should be a growing gold mine, the place to which you're going to keep coming back for more gold. The bigger the mine, the more gold you're going to find.

Keep The Conversation Going

If gamers loved your most recent game, there's a good chance they are looking around for something else you created. Have something to offer? Or is the next game still in production? If the

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1 For more information, read Paul and Ernie's past articles: http://www.casualconnect.org/content/business/ thelen-gamestomarket.html; http://www.casualconnect.org/content/business/Thelen-industry.html; http://www. casualconnect.org/content/Amsterdam/RamirezWinter07.html

Repeat Business: It's The Name of the Game

Growing Passionate Communities Through e-Newsletters

> *The goal is to establish a long-term relationship because "long-term" means more money from a repeat customer.*

latter, you're going to need to keep your fans enthralled until the release date, which means giving them some value or some extra fun.

There's plenty you can offer your audience in between games: tips and tricks, contests, coming attractions, gamer reviews and comments, interviews with your design team, screenshots of upcoming games, and so on. Remember that the goal is to establish a long-term relationship because "long-term" means more money from a repeat customer.

Don't Get Tongue-Tied!

But let's face it. Your studio's strength is creating great casual games, not sending out e-mail marketing campaigns. There are many companies that started off with good intentions of building their own e-newsletters and then, two or three months down the road, when they got busy with their own core activities, the online communication fell to the wayside.

Before you launch a community-building e-newsletter, have a solid plan of how you're going to execute it. A meeting with your team is a good idea to decide what it's going to take for you to design, write, produce, deliver, and track something professional—and to keep your database up-to-date. What will it take to have someone who can take a few days each month to do the job right? Or will you send less-frequent e-mails just around product launches?

Like A Jigsaw Puzzle

It's important to understand that effective marketing is made up of multiple pieces like a jigsaw puzzle; it's a portfolio of activities that you are employing to create awareness of your brand, to stay in touch with your customers and prospects, and to get feedback from them as well.

If your only communication with your fans is through your website, or via advertising, an e-newsletter can offer one advantage that the other vehicles can't: you control the timing and content of the message. For example, if you have the portfolio to support it, the newsletter could be sent every month on an ongoing basis. You can't guarantee that people will look at your website every month. And you may not be able to afford to advertise every month. But you can't afford *not* to communicate with your clients at critical junctures. That's where e-newsletters come in!

What's the Upside?

Most game companies that have launched successful e-newsletters find that there are three advantages to keeping them going:

(1) **Your database grows.** One of the first things gamers tend to do when they think a game is really cool—or when they get a new piece of information about a game—is tell their friends. And if their buds recommend a game or a studio, you can be sure that other gamers will follow.

(2) **A bigger database means more sales.** Now you've got more gamers who know about how much fun your games are. If you continue to interest them with good content and more great games, sales are likely to increase.

(3) **Brand equity expands.** An investment in brand-building is an investment in future sales growth. As more people learn your company's name and associate it with quality games, they'll be more inclined to buy your next offering—often simply because you're offering it

What Might Be the Downside?

One obvious downside to e-newsletters is that they cost money (and time) to create. That's money and time that could be used for other purposes. So if you're not in the mood to increase your e-marketing activities right now, or if you're considering cutting your ad and marketing budgets, you might see an e-newsletter as an unnecessary expense.

Several samples of e-newsletters designed to build long-term relationships with consumers.

A tracking tool like this one can report 24/7 on who opened an e-newsletter, who read what, who forwarded it and to whom.

At the same time, many developers have outsourced most of their marketing and relationship management to a publisher or to major portals. They don't have direct customer relationships or a website that would enable them to begin cultivating such relationships. Before they could even think about creating a newsletter, significant work would need to be performed on their own website to allow for the purchase of the games, the gathering of names, and the building of a database. For such developers, an e-newsletter would require more than just time and expense; it would require a whole new way of doing business.

It Takes Work

Casual game developers are fortunate. Your fan base is out there talking to each other, enjoying your products, asking questions, and anticipating your next game. That doesn't happen very often in other businesses. You're selling fun to a community that is passionate about what you do. And communities—especially passionate communities—build databases. And databases generate prospects—who buy even more games—but only if you take the time and make the effort to reach out to them.

Remember, as in "real life," relationships only work when you work at them. ∎

If your only communication with your fans is through your website, or via advertising, an e-newsletter can offer one advantage that the other vehicles can't: you control the timing and content of the message.
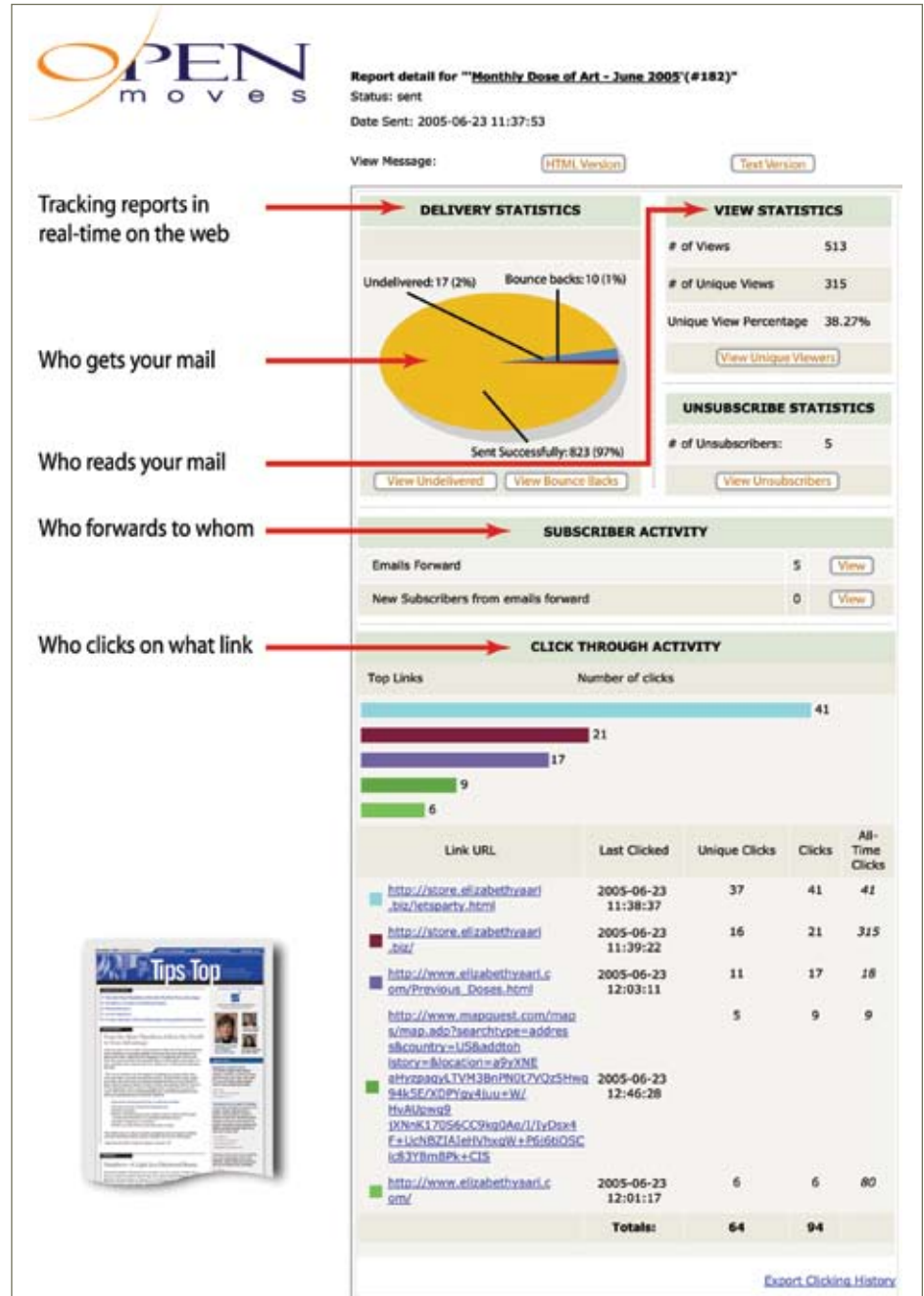
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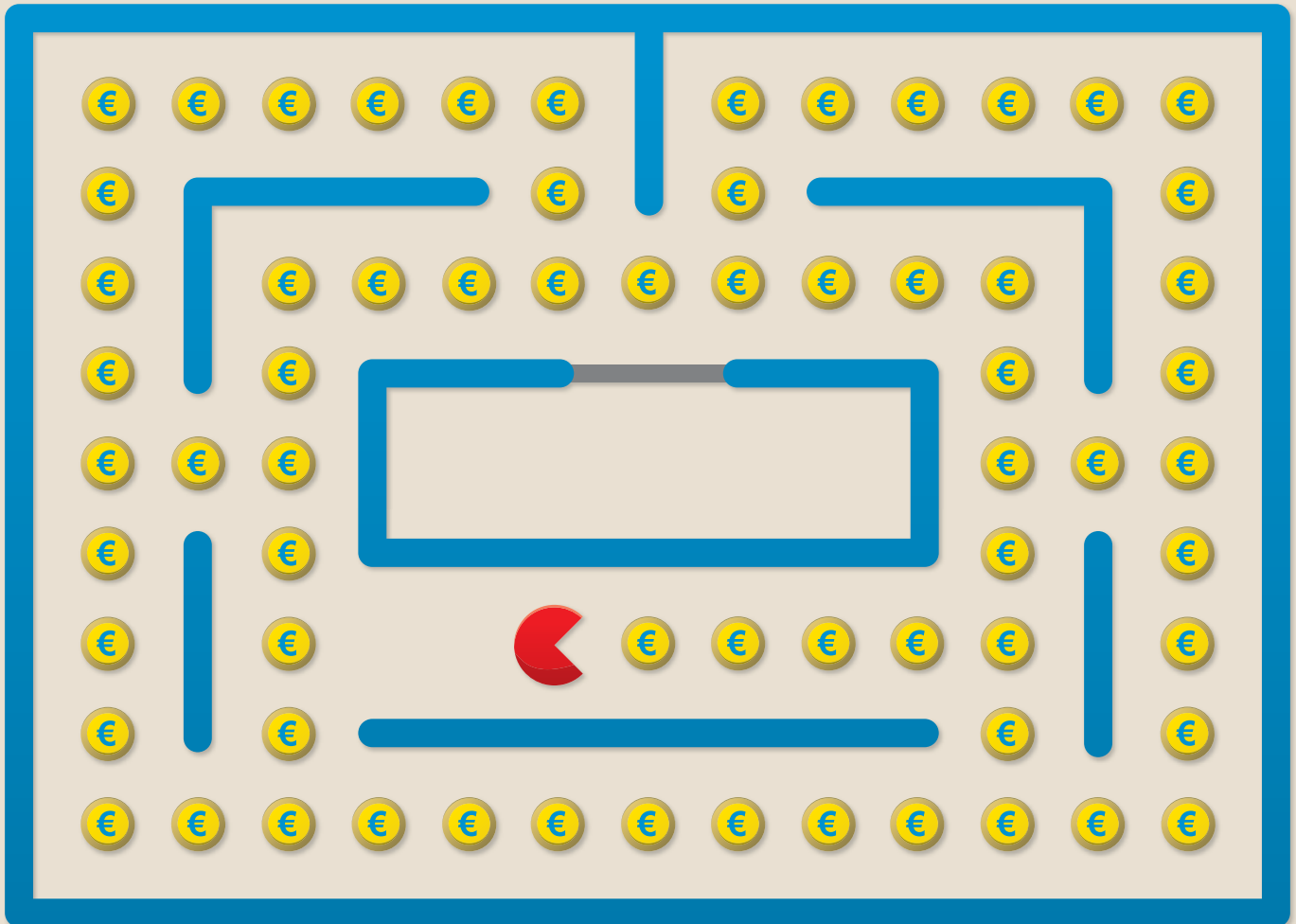
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Little Hands, Big Needs!

The Golden Rules of Creating Games for Preschoolers

At Nick Jr., we are well aware that preschoolers are very discerning customers. They know quality and they want it! Their attention spans are very limited and if they are frustrated, even briefly, you will lose their attention. Therefore, we endeavor to consistently bring preschoolers the highest level of fun (mixed with education)—and to design our games so that they are never frustrating for our wee users. There should never be a reason to call Mom to the computer or console to help! Games for preschoolers must be engaging and funny. Our games must have fun, humor, large pay-offs, and cuteness. Of course, use of their favorite characters doesn't hurt.

With so many preschoolers using game devices, we have been surprised to see so few titles in the market that take into consideration a preschooler's unique needs. The vast majority of titles in the market seem to be simplified versions of adult games, instead of games that are designed with the cognitive and physical limitations of preschoolers in mind. As we have watched preschoolers play these titles, we have found that this lack of attention to their needs results in a consumer that is quickly bored, easily frustrated, and unfortunately very cranky (and not just because they need a nap!).

We spend a lot of time in homes, in research facilities, in game stores, and in our usability lab watching young kids play with our games; seeing what they enjoy and what they have difficulty managing; and gathering parent feedback. From our thousands of hours of research, we have learned a few key "golden rules" that we'd like to share.

> *It's priceless to watch young children "connect" with your game and see them squeal with delight when they win (which they always think they do).*

By J. Alison Bryant and Jordana Drell

By J. Alison Bryant and Jordana Drell

Dr. J. Alison Bryant is Senior Research Director of Brand & Consumer Insights and Digital Analytics for the Nickelodeon/ MTV Networks Kids & Family Group. She leads Nick's efforts to understand the digital lives of kids and families, conducting research on a variety of digital platforms (online, console and handheld gaming, interactive television, mobile), and manages research for the magazine group. J. Alison Bryant can be reached at j.alison. bryant@casualconnect.org.

Jordana Drell is the Director of Preschool Games in the Nickelodeon Kids and Family Games Group. Jordana is responsible for Nick Jr. games across all platforms including, NickJr.com, NickJrArcade.com, myNOGGIN. com, mobile, console and handheld. She produced the first game for preschoolers on the Wii, Diego Safari Rescue. *Before joining Nickelodeon, Jordana was a Producer in the Interactive Group at Sesame Workshop where she produced numerous Flash games for Sesamestreet.com and produced an Emmy nominated Interactive Television service for Cablevision. Jordana can be reached at jordana.drell@casualconnect.org.*

The Golden Rules

To make a great game for preschoolers, one must remember that:

- **Preschoolers can't read.** Yes, we know that isn't a new finding, but it is critical for game design. All communication in a game—instructions, hints, timeouts, congratulations—must be in voiceover and must have clear graphic instructions.
- **Preschoolers need clear instructions.** In that same vein, games for preschoolers must have meticulously clear instructions. The more detailed and direct the instructional lines, the better!
- **Preschoolers need simple processes.** Multi-step processes (this means even two tasks) must be approached with great caution and only implemented in games designed for older preschoolers. For example, if a game requires the child to feed the dog and *then* give it water, the instructions must be not only delivered before the initial action, but also repeated again every step of the way.
- **Preschoolers need large hot spots.** Preschoolers' motor skills are still developing. In the same way that they have trouble coloring within the lines, preschoolers have a difficult time getting the input device (such as the mouse, stylus, or Wii-mote) to get where they want it to go. To compensate for this, preschooler games must have large hot spots. This is another way that we avoid a frustrated little gamer.
- **Preschoolers have short attention spans.** We can't stress enough the wandering attention of the preschool set. Therefore, when they are playing a game and their attention strays (leaving the game to idle), it is important that the game then gently encourage them to continue playing and remind them of their task.

Little Hands, Big Needs!

The Golden Rules of Creating Games for Preschoolers

- **Preschoolers will not always get the right answer.** Having a tiered hint structure to respond to wrong answers is required. The hint structure that we employ is:
  - 1st Wrong Answer: No, that's not right.
  - 2nd Wrong Answer: Nope, that's not it. I'm going to give you a clue to help you find what you are looking for.
  - 3rd Wrong Answer: Here you go. This is what you were looking for (with a visual highlight).
- **Preschoolers need visual cues.** Again, given their limited attention spans, visual cues really are important. When you are pointing something out to preschoolers on the screen, make sure to highlight it. It helps them understand the instructions and to figure out how to modify their behavior to succeed in the game-play.

This may seem like a lot of "extra" effort to reach a relatively small audience, but here are two key things to keep in mind: First, by engaging preschoolers in positive, rewarding, and challenging game-play, you are cultivating a future kid/teen/adult gamer (and possibly a game designer!); second, and perhaps most importantly, it's priceless to watch young children "connect" with your game and see them squeal with delight when they win (which they always think they do). It's what motivates us to do what we do at Nick Jr. ∎

With so many preschoolers using game devices, we have been surprised to see so few titles in the market that take into consideration a preschooler's unique needs.

Game-play Statistics

Videogames have become a common part of children's everyday play, and are even reaching the lives of preschoolers. As many as 29% of children under six in the U.S. have played console video games, and 18% have played hand-held ones.[1] Although the first videogames were developed for and enjoyed by young adults, such play is no longer exclusively reserved for the grown-ups in the home.[2] While the number of American preschoolers who regularly play videogames may appear low at first (11%), the percentages of those who have console and handheld videogame players in the home are actually quite high, at 50% and 28% respectively.[3] Given young children's insatiable eagerness to learn, coupled with the fact that they are clearly surrounded by these media, we predict that preschoolers will both continue and increasingly begin to adopt videogames for personal enjoyment.

Although the majority of gaming equipment is still designed for a much older target audience, once a game system enters the household it is fair game for all family members, including the youngest. Portable systems, and the Nintendo handheld systems in particular (the DS and the previous GameBoy iteration) have done a particularly good job of penetrating the younger market. According to NPD, the Nintendo handhelds make up almost half of the entire videogame system market in the U.S. for children under 12.[4] In 2007, 18% of two-to-five-year-olds in the U.S. played with the Nintendo GameBoy and 8% played with a DS.[5]

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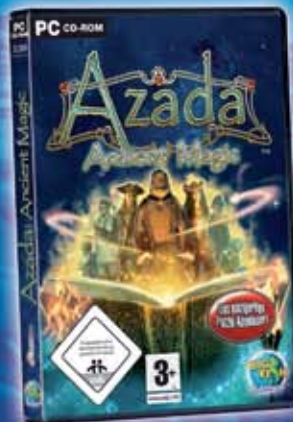
2. Funk, J.B. (2009). Video games. In V.C. Strasburger, B.J. Wilson, & A. B. Jordan. *Children, Adolescents, and the Media.* (2nd ed., pp. 225-240). Los Angeles: Sage.

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4. NPD. (May 2008). *Kids in the Digital Age.* Presentation at ToyCon 2008. Phoenix, AZ.

5. NPD. (September 2007). *Kids and Gaming.* Port Washington, NY.

Your #1 casual game partners for Germany!

iPhone: The Next Big Casual Gaming Platform

Mulling Over the Gaming Prospects of Apple's Handset

By Stuart Dredge

Stuart Dredge is a UK-based journalist covering mobile entertainment, gaming, the music industry, and consumer technology. He currently writes for Steel Media's Pocket Gamer and PocketGamer. Biz websites, writing about mobile games for consumers and the industry. He has previously worked at Informa Telecoms & Media on its Mobile Games Analyst and Mobile Media reports, with previous posts at Official Dreamcast Magazine, T3 and Mobile Choice. Besides Pocket Gamer, he also writes for music industry publication Music Ally, as well as New Media Age. Stuart can be reached at stuart.dredge@casualconnect.org.

You can't overstate the impact that Apple's iPhone and iPod Touch had on mobile gaming in 2008. The company's entry into the market with its App Store was a huge rock thrown into the mobile games pond, sending out waves that rocked everybody—rival handset makers, mobile operators, developers, and publishers alike.

Since it launched in July, more than 200 million applications have been downloaded from the App Store, with a big chunk of those being games. There have been high-profile success stories too. Sega sold more than 300,000 downloads of *Super Monkey Ball* in two months at $9.99 a pop, while indie developer Steve Detemer made $250,000 of revenues from his *Trism* game in the same time period. Meanwhile, in November 2008, Gameloft announced that the App Store was now its single biggest sales channel. In a matter of months, iPhone and iPod Touch emerged as major gaming platforms in their own right.

Towards the end of the year, Apple executives embarked on a media tour in which their main message was that their devices were set to compete with and ultimately overtake the Nintendo DS and Sony PSP as the preeminent handheld gaming platform. Yet much of that rhetoric focused on graphical processing power and the next wave of supposedly PSP-quality iPhone games.

People who buy Apple's devices are discovering that they love games, but many of them wouldn't describe themselves as gamers.

Although true up to a point, such boasts obscure one of the key drivers of the App Store's popularity: casual games. People who buy Apple's devices are discovering that they love games, but many of them wouldn't describe themselves as gamers.

So while there's a big audience for console conversions like *Super Monkey Ball* and *Need For Speed Undercover,* there's an equally big (if not bigger) opportunity for casual games. That's something the big casual firms have realized, seizing back the IP that they've previously licensed out for mobile platforms.

PopCap released *Bejeweled 2* for iPhone, for example, while PlayFirst did the same for *Diner Dash* and *Daycare Nightmare,* and RealArcade brought *Sally's Salon* and *Collapse! Chaos* to the App Store. All these firms are likely to ramp up their release schedules in 2009, but they'll face competition. Mobile giant Gameloft has the largest stable of iPhone games, including casual titles like *Platinum Solitaire, Diamond Twister,* and *Block Breaker Deluxe 2.* And a legion of indie developers are aiming to "do a *Trism*" with their casual games—the likes of IUGO, TAG Games, FinBlade, and Pangea Software are all worth watching.

So what trends and challenges lie in store for casual gaming on the iPhone in 2009? The first concerns pricing and competition. In short, the competition is fierce, and the downward pressure on pricing is immense. There are thousands of games available at the App Store, many of which are free or ultra-cheap. Cutting through the clutter and making your game a hit is increasingly challenging.

On the plus side, the fact that websites can deep-link to App Store product pages is encouraging developers to try innovative marketing and PR campaigns to make their games a success. Sites like Pocket Gamer, IGN Wireless, Touch Arcade, and Slide To Play are building buzz around the best and most innovative iPhone games, while the long-established ecosystem of Apple-focused blogs can drive huge traffic in the direction of cool titles.

Meanwhile, savvy developers are using YouTube videos and blogs to create anticipation around their forthcoming titles. There's a lot of clutter on the App Store, but with

Live Poker, Diner Dash, and Platinum Solitaire for the iPhone

imagination and persistence, you can cut through if your game is good enough.

The next trend in iPhone gaming is connectivity. Interestingly, indie developers were among the first to launch connected iPhone games, with standout titles being Tapulous' *Tap Tap Revenge,* Phil Hassey's *Galcon,* Polarbit's *Raging Thunder,* Punch Entertainment's *Reign Of Swords,* and Danielle Cassley and Jason Citron's two *Aurora Feint* games.

Not all of these games are casual *per se,* but they show the way independent developers have taken the idea of connected iPhone gaming by the scruff of the neck. They also indicate that server-side skills and community management will become important skill-sets for iPhone casual game developers in the coming months.

A related trend is the expansion onto iPhone of social gaming—as seen on Facebook and other social network. Indeed, two of the biggest Facebook social games firms launched their first iPhone games in the latter part of 2008.

SGN launched a series of free sporty motion-sensing titles, including *iGolf, iBaseball, iBowl,* and *iBasketball.* Meanwhile, rival Zynga launched a free multiplayer poker game, *Live Poker,* as well as a premium paid-for edition. At the time of writing, the biggest Facebook games publisher, Playfish, is expected to follow them to iPhone in the near future.

Social gaming will be really powerful on iPhone, as games tie in with players' existing networks of friends on the social networks. Indeed, when Facebook announced its Facebook Connect technology, it highlighted the way it could work for iPhone applications—and specifically games.

Even so, there are surely pitfalls for the iPhone games market in 2009. Too many low-quality games and not enough tools for consumers to find the gems could harm the platform, as could a sudden invasion of dubious branded titles or poorly thought-out console ports. Casual games firms flinging money into iPhone development may end up with their fingers burnt if their titles don't become hits.

Nevertheless, it's well worth getting excited about the iPhone and the opportunities it affords developers and publishers in the casual space. Now that Apple has the bit between its teeth on pitching iPhone and iPod Touch as gaming devices, improvements to the App Store will surely be made in 2009.

Tap Tap Revenge, Auroroa Feint II, and Trism, more iPhone games
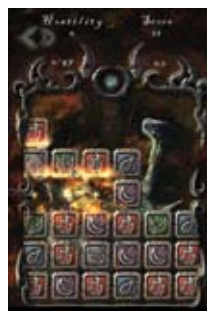
The competition is fierce, and the downward pressure on pricing is immense. There are thousands of games available at the App Store, many of which are free or ultra-cheap. Cutting through the clutter and making your game a hit is increasingly challenging.

Meanwhile, as developers continue to gain experience with the platform, the quality of the best iPhone games will continue to rise, as will the base of interested players. A mobile platform that offers easy development, (relatively) painless distribution, and impressive revenues for high-quality titles? It's manna from heaven for casual games firms. ∎

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Top 10 Mobile Games of 2008

Pocket Gamer Picks the Most Innovative and Engaging Mobile Games of the Year

It's been quite a year for Java gaming. Since New Year's Day, the aging platform has been joined in the ring by a beefed up N-Gage, which is aiming for total domination of the portable gaming market, and Apple's App Store, which actually seems to be achieving it. You'd have forgiven Java for folding up its stall and beating a dignified retreat, but instead it's fought back with its best year ever.

There have been big name releases, of course, in *Spielberg's Boom Blox* and *Peggle*, the casual successor to *Tetris*'s long held throne. *Tetris* itself also makes an appearance, in the form of *Tetris Pop*, EA's masterful riff on the formula.

However, the striking thing about this top 10 is that the games are largely unique to mobile and Java, and the range of genres on this platform is less casual than you might expect. Want a rich RPG experience? Looking for a solid resource management game? Care for a bit of open world mayhem? You needn't go farther than the phone in your pocket.

10. *Car Jack Streets* (TAG Games / I-play)

In the same year that *GTAIV* lit up the console world, TAG Games—a studio set up by members of the original *GTA* team—was working on its own sandbox felony simulator: *Car Jack Streets*. Taking a top-down perspective, it resembles the game that set the genre rolling, but it's no retro remake. *Car Jack Streets* is a great game in its own right, unique in its use of real-time to structure goals. It sees you working your way out from under a hefty debt by completing various open-world missions, and you have to make enough to pay your debtor every week, come hell or high water. It could have backfired, but this ingenious mechanic works. Try as you might to get out, it pulls you back in.

> *The striking thing about this top 10 is that the games are largely unique to mobile and Java, and the range of genres on this platform is less casual than you might expect.*

9. *Furiae* (Resolution Interactive)

The conventional wisdom states that the mobile phone is suitable only for casual titles, and the conventional wisdom might have a point. Wherever you stand on this argument, however, it's clear that many mobile developers take hardcore gaming very seriously, and no genre is more hardcore than RPG. Resolution Interactive's *Furiae* makes virtually no concessions to the casual trend. The only sense in which it inevitably differs from its mainstream peers is that of scale. In all other areas—the dramatic coming-of-age storyline, the turn-based combat, the beautiful art direction—it's the real thing.

8. *Spielberg's Boom Blox* (EA Mobile)

When EA announced that it would be making a game for the Wii in association with Steven Spielberg, we expected a rocket-propelled fiasco. The final product surprised us all, and its mobile counterpart—also overseen by the great director—was an even greater surprise, particularly since it doesn't employ the motion control that famously inspired Spielberg to get involved in the first place. Instead, it's a neat, tactile puzzler in which the object is to dislodge a number of blocks by throwing a smaller number of cannonballs at them, aiming for ricochets, chains, and combos. A worthy single-player game, *Boom Blox* stands out because of its level editor and

By Rob Hearn

Having entered the industry through the now closed MonsterMob-portal, where he worked as staff writer, Rob Hearn is now one of the longest-serving mobile games journalists in the business and Pocket Gamer's newest editor. Rob holds a master's degree in creative writing, and in his spare moments since joining Steel Media he's found time to blog about the games industry for Shiny Media and write for The Escapist. Rob can be reached at rob.hearn@casualconnect.org.

Pocket Gamer is Europe's leading source of news, reviews and insight into the mobile and handheld games market. On the consumer side www.pocketgamer.co.uk serves over 1.2 million page views per month online plus another 300,000 via bespoke mobile WAP and iPhone application. Its first localized portal www.pocketgamer.fr has just launched in France. For more information on Pocket Gamer contact Chris James (chris@steelmedia. co.uk).

Top 10 Mobile Games of 2008

*Pocket Gamer Picks the Most Innovative and Engaging
Mobile Games of the Year*

Racing is a well-served genre on mobile, but it wasn't till Rally Master Pro arrived that we got to see what a mobile phone was capable of doing.

the community feature that lets you share your creations with others.

7. *Tetris Pop* (EA Mobile)

Most conversations about the mobile games industry eventually reach the subject of *Tetris* and its seemingly intractable residence in every top 10 sales chart. To many, this represents a somewhat depressing reality of the business: Innovation is doomed to go unrewarded. In *Tetris Pop,* EA has cannily introduced fresh ideas without swimming too far from the safe shore of its biggest brand. On the outside it's *Tetris*, but on the inside there's a lot more. Comprising 17 mini-games based on the simple mechanic of tessellating blocks, it's a perfectly executed riff on the original game rather than a reprise of it.

6. *Townsmen 5* (Handygames)

The thing about the *Townsmen* series is that it's much better than it needs to be. It's not a big cross-platform title, after all, and few people outside mobile gaming circles are likely to have heard of it. A consumer who does brave this over something more familiar probably won't expect much. Thankfully, they'll find themselves with a richer and more detailed strategy game than anything else available on mobile, so good that most of its rivals appear hopelessly shallow by comparison. It may not be the most glamorous resource management game on the market, but it's probably the most comprehensive.

5. *Peggle* (PopCap)

It was popular on PC, but for many *Peggle* didn't really arrive till it became available for iPod. Once freed from the constraints of the big screen, it blossomed into a peerless, portable time killer, and it was clear that the mobile game would be a

winner when it finally arrived. It is. Modelled on the Japanese arcade game pachinko, *Peggle* is mesmerizing in the same way a pinball machine or a slot machine is. It's largely a game of chance, but the rewards come often enough to persuade you that the next ball might just be the one that clears the screen in a highly improbable sequence of bleeping, bonus-spuming ricochets.

4. *Party Island: Pool 2-in-1* (Digital Chocolate)

Digital Chocolate's *DChoc Cafe* series was a success by any standards, combining a polished community interface with several tabletop games made to the publisher's characteristic high standards. Compared with its successor *Party Island,* however, it was just a dusty prototype. Having rolled out on Facebook first, *Party Island* is a much more vibrant, colourful community, and the games that take place in its exotic world are much more likely to appeal. You play solitaire to fill time, after all, while you go looking for a pool table. With customizable avatars, dozens of awards to collect, and a solid pool game at its centre, *Party Island: Pool 2-in-1* is the first in a very promising franchise.

3. *Playman Summer Games* (Mr Goodliving/Real)

The summer of sport may be behind us, but *Playman Summer Games* was no fair weather game. *Playman* is one of the most venerable series exclusively available on mobile, and with *Summer Games*—released to capitalize on 2008's Beijing Olympics—developer Mr Goodliving managed to beat its own personal best with a game that manages to be both perfect for short bursts and, thanks to horrendous addictiveness, impossible to play in short bursts. The control scheme is largely based on the joystick wagglers of previous generations, but tweaked so that you have to master both manual technique and mental alertness. The scope for improving your own times is huge, and you could easily wear out your phone in pursuit of the perfect time.

2. *Rally Master Pro* (Fishlabs)

It's been a busy year for the most well-respected developer in the industry, and any one of the four Fishlabs games Pocket Gamer has reviewed so far in 2008 would deserve a place on this list. It was *Rally Master Pro* that scored highest, though, winning a coveted Platinum award. Racing is a well-served genre on mobile, but it wasn't till *Rally Master Pro* arrived that we got to see what a mobile phone was capable of doing. Not only does it utterly belittle the efforts of its rivals with an astonishing 27 tracks, visible real-time damage, and a range of scaling options, but it runs perfectly. This is the benchmark other racing games will be struggling to reach for some time to come.

1. *SimCity Metropolis* (EA Mobile)

If last year's dire *Simpsons* game caused anyone to question EA's commitment to mobile gaming, this has been a year of answers. Not only is the publisher doing an excellent job of converting its PC and console titles to the small screen, but with *SimCity Metropolis*—released roughly in parallel with *SimCity Creator*—it has created an addition to the franchise that's entirely exclusive to mobile and which improves upon its predecessor, *SimCity Societies,* in every respect. Colored with the series' trademark humor and a range of well-drawn characters, it sees you building a city during a succession of objective-based levels spread across three islands. This is a far more casual offering than *Townsmen 5,* and as a result there's something in it for just about everyone. ◼

Making Money with "Virtual Money"

How to Avoid Legal Pitfalls When Establishing a Virtual Economy

With Casual Games increasingly financed through micro-transactions, "virtual money" comes into play. The so-called threats of money laundering seem greatly exaggerated and may distract from the fact that virtual money can be an excellent way to both facilitate micro-transactions and to enhance the game-play experience. There are, however, a few legal pitfalls which should be avoided.

Over the course of time, a player accumulates virtual money into an account either as a result of in-game success (as a credit) or through an upfront real cash deposit (made via credit card or by some other means). This virtual currency can then be exchanged for features, upgrades, and in-game assets, thus eliminating the need for costly real-world payments each time a transaction is made. Thus the player might spend virtual silver coins for a medieval dagger (for example) rather charging 21 cents to a credit card. The straightforward, virtual transaction is easy, cost-effective, and—since it takes place within the world of the game itself—completely immersive.

In other words: Virtual money has a lot going for it. But as always seems to be the case when new businesses are emerging, sometimes the law can get in the way of developing new concepts. So it is that some are accusing game publishers of using virtual currency for money laundering. Others insist that publishers need a banking license if they intend to sponsor and maintain a virtual economy. I am happy to report that while I am counsel to several companies that depend on virtual money for revenue, none of them has been accused of money laundering so far, nor has any of them actually obtained a banking license.

Assuming you don't want to get a gambling license, it's best to avoid giving out virtual money as a reward in a game of luck.

Still, we should not take the latter issue too lightly. There are banking regulations in all major western economies, and you should make sure that you comply with them. While details vary and case law is scarce, here's a useful rule of thumb: You are more likely to run into trouble if your game provides a cash-out option. For instance, if you agree to buy the virtual money back, and if the virtual bucks are accepted as a means of payment by third parties, then you are much more likely to be subject to some form of regulation by the government. In case of doubt, it's always a good idea to discuss these issues with a qualified attorney or banking regulator.

The same factors might also be important if you want to steer clear of gambling laws: Most jurisdictions will require you to have a special license for gambling (and they usually do not accept the one you can get so easily in Malta). Assuming you don't want to get a gambling license, it's best to avoid giving out virtual money as a reward in a game of luck.

In fact, generally speaking you are pretty safe if your players cannot win something of actual monetary value within any of your games. Although a cash-out option definitely shows that your virtual money has a certain value, the lack of it does not prove the contrary. (Do you see how quickly legal restrictions complicate the implementation of virtual economies?)

Finally, try to get your EULAs right. While EULAs are a difficult issue on their own, you will want to make sure you do not have to reimburse a player you have had to ban because he was in constant violation of the game's rules. How the EULAs are drafted is important for your bookkeeping and tax declarations as well. Be sure to discuss this with your accountant to avoid having all the value of your virtual money treated as "contingent liabilities"—which is to say that you could end up having to reimburse your players for lost value if you don't set up your EULA properly. You might also want to find out if and when you can have a player's unused virtual money expire—just as many prepaid telephone cards do.

Sound complicated? It might be, especially as there is still a lot of uncertainty. But remember that some of the most profitable companies of this industry are financed through virtual money, and their business appears to be more sustainable than of some banks dealing with "real" money. It's just further proof that, whenever a good idea surfaces, smart people will find a way to take advantage of it. Don't hesitate to create a virtual economy if it makes sense for your company, but make sure that you proceed with appropriate caution and expert counsel. ■

By Andreas Lober

Dr. Andreas Lober studied law in Tübingen, Germany, and Aix-en-Provence, France. He is a lawyer qualified in Germany and holds a French "maîtrise en droit—mention droit international" from the University of Aix en Provence as well as a doctor's degree from Tübingen University. He was admitted to the bar in 2001, joined SchulteRiesenkampff in 2003 and became a partner of the firm in 2006. His book Virtuelle Welten werden real *was published by Telepolis in 2007. Andreas is a frequent speaker on topics of interest for the gaming industry in Germany as well as internationally. A gaming enthusiast since the early days of home computers, Andreas has done work in the gaming space since 1991. Today, Andreas is counsel to some of the leading developers and publishers of computer games and virtual worlds. He is especially known for his expertise with respect to online-gaming. Andreas can be reached at: andreas.lober@casualconnect.org.*

Two Profitable Business Models for Casual Games

Analyzing Free-to-Play/Micro-transactions and Subscriptions

By Gene Hoffman

Gene Hoffman, Jr. is Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Vindicia. Previously Mr. Hoffman co-founded eMusic in January 1998 and served as President, Chief Executive Officer, and a Director. As head of eMusic, Mr. Hoffman was featured on the cover of Forbes *magazine as a member of the July 1999 E-Gang, and named one of the 100 most influential entrepreneurs in technology in* Upside *magazine's November 2000 Elite 100. Mr. Hoffman led the acquisition of eMusic by Vivendi/Universal in June 2001. Before founding eMusic Mr. Hoffman was Director of Business Development and Director of Interactive Marketing of Pretty Good Privacy. Mr. Hoffman joined Pretty Good Privacy after it acquired PrivNet, Inc., an Internet privacy software company, where he was co-founder, Director and Executive Vice President. He can be reached at gene.hoffman@casualconnect.org.*

While there are numerous revenue models available to publishers, the focus of this article will be to offer some numerical analysis on two of the more successful online models that have recently found their way into the casual gaming world: free-to-play/micro-transactions and subscriptions. At the heart of both models is the notion of average customer lifetime value (ACLV), which is simply the economic value of that customer from a publisher's perspective. Let's review the different characteristics of each model, the subtle variations possible within each, and highlight the different tradeoffs that publishers need to evaluate as they decide on the optimal business model for them.

Free-to-Play/Micro-transactions

The fundamental economic principle at play in a free-to-play/micro-transaction model is the idea that every person who is attracted to the game has a different payment threshold that can be met by the model. In other words, there is available pricing, including zero, for every gamer's budget. The calculation of average customer lifetime value is inherently more difficult in this model. However, a good approximation of the revenue success of the model can be obtained by charting the growth in average revenue per player per month (which would also account for the players who pay nothing). Variables that influence this number include the percent of visitors who register, the percent of registrants who pay, the number of purchases made per month, the average order size, and the drop-off rate.

Every FTP/micro-transaction publisher needs to factor into the model the cost of serving the population that pays nothing and ensure that those paying nothing are economically subsidized by those who do pay. For example, assume 100,000 people play a particular FTP game, and of those 20% pay on a regular basis and on average spend $20/month. In any given month, that $400,000 in monthly revenue needs to more than cover the costs of serving the other 80,000 players who are playing for free. This is inherently different than a subscription model in which everyone pays and theoretically covers the marginal costs of serving that population.

Also FTP/micro-transaction publishers who have any risk of a third-party gray market absolutely have to allocate budget and personnel to pull together a top-notch fraud solution. When your offering can be used by black hats to print money, no single fraud vendor will be sufficient; in addition, your internal team must actively manage which new game merchants to accept based on their likelihood to commit fraud. Unfortunately, FTP/micro-transactions don't generate the same sort of regular transactions that enable one to calculate a reliable chargeback rate (a key indicator in determining fraud probability)—a problem subscription-based games don't have to deal with.

One mistake we see that FTP/micro-transaction game designers make is to not follow the maxim of giving away what is free to you. This comes in two forms in the FTP world. First, when aggregating micro-transactions to avoid high processing costs, FTP publishers should not worry that some transactions are lost on the downside as the marginal cost of delivering the virtual good is very low. For instance, sometimes a good customer's payment method doesn't work for one reason or another. The inability to capture such a transaction does not in any way lower its perceived value.

> *A pure subscription model by its very nature will implicitly keep out some part of the player population for whom the subscription price is "too high." To combat this, a publisher might consider a tiered subscription model in which the first tier is free-to-play.*

The second form is that many FTP systems that offer player-to-player commerce don't execute on a strategy of making good a legitimate buyer who bought from a legitimate seller. When an FTP game receives a chargeback on a virtual good that has already been resold to a high value and legitimate customer, the right answer is to create a new copy of that good and make sure the valid buyer gets to keep the virtual item. For example, if a legitimate customer has purchased 100 gold pieces from someone who has used a stolen credit card to buy them, an FTP publisher should not remove those gold pieces from the legitimate customer's account.

Subscriptions

Calculating the average lifetime value of a customer in a subscription model is done by multiplying the monthly subscription price by the average life of the customer. If a typical subscriber stays for 24 months @ $6 per month, then the ACLV is $144. Publishers therefore focus explicitly on increasing the number of months any subscriber stays, assuming fixed pricing. There are also specific payment issues that come into play that can affect the monthly number including expired credit cards and cards whose account number have changed. For example, our experience has shown that focused attention on minimizing payment failures can lead to a *six percentage point* increase in retention. Off a base of 100,000 gamers with the per subscriber rates noted above, this could potentially drive an additional $864,000 in revenue, most of which is pure margin.

Another important factor that drives the economics of the subscription model is the

impact of false positives—the notion that any fraud-screening system will unwittingly keep out otherwise valid customers and their transactions—to the tune of $144 per false positive. Given the high margins associated with online subscription-based games, there is a significant cost to rejecting valid transactions. Eliminating a 1% false positive rate equates to over $140,000 in "recovered" revenue.

At the same time, a pure subscription model by its very nature will implicitly keep out some part of the player population for whom the subscription price is "too high." To combat this, a publisher might consider a tiered subscription model in which the first tier is free-to-play. In addition to evaluating the ACLV, a publisher considering this modified subscription model should also consider how to optimize the conversion rate from free to fee, as well as how to avoid completely devaluing the free player experience relative to that of the paying subscriber.

Conclusion

No matter what model you choose to pursue, don't be shy about the real value of your game. Even though the economy outside the game industry has changed, it is time to have the confidence of the quality of your game and ask for the return on that quality from your players. Prices of subscriptions or virtual goods encode information about how much value you place on your game. If you're wrong about how valuable your game is, the market of new players will communicate that to you with a slow pace of sign-ups or interactions. It is always far easier to move your prices down than it is to raise the "sticker" price of your subscription.

With a base of 100,000 subscribers, a six percentage point increase in retention could potentially drive an additional $864,000 in revenue— most of which is pure margin.

However, you just might find that asking for a real price will in fact help in your quest to make the gaming experience that much better. You may learn, for example, that your game isn't very good, either because people don't buy it or because those who do start to complain to you about it. As you respond to the marketplace with improvements and enhancements, you'll find yourself in a virtuous feedback loop, with more and better players driving more and better game-play experiences—and higher and higher perceived value. ◼

Every person who is attracted to a game has a different payment threshold that can be met by the free-to-play/micro-transaction model. In other words, there is available pricing, including zero, for every gamer's budget.

The Evolution of Digital Distribution

New Economic Models Reflect Shifts in Consumption

By Agnes Heydari

Agnes Heydari is the PR&Communication Manager at Nexway, where she is primarily responsible for the development of Nexway brand image in media and the entertainment industry. Prior to this position, she was involved in IT management and telecommunications marketing. She holds a Master's Degree in Marketing. Agnes can be reached at: agnes.heydari@casualconnect.org.

We have included this article to act as an overview of the macro shift in the games industry from retail to electronic. If you are new to casual games, this article is for you. —ed.

It used to be that the only way to purchase a new game was to visit a local retailer. As consumers became more comfortable with e-commerce, the inevitable next step was to introduce digital distribution, whereby consumers could purchase new software and videogames and receive them immediately, without having to wait in line at the store to pay for the disks or CD. Over the years, digital distribution has taken on a vital role in the growth of the gaming industry.

A Variety of Emerging Models

Online MMO games played a critical role in the expansion of digital distribution. Although online MMOs have grown rapidly since the introduction of *Meridian 59* in 1996, the biggest boost to the size of the market came with the release of *World of Warcraft* in 2004. Not only was *World of Warcraft* a success, but it far outstripped any other subscription-based MMO games to date, becoming in the process the market share leader in both North America and Europe. Direct downloading drastically changed the marketplace, shortening the value chain to the point that a single entity could at the same time serve as developer, publisher, distributor, and reseller.

At the same time, high-speed Internet made it possible to directly download even the massive files of videogames, enabling hardcore gamers to play their favorite game at midnight on the day it was released. In Europe, for example, the DL Gamer platform is especially dedicated to all PC gamers who want to access the online multiplayer game universe. State-of-the-art in digital downloading, this new platform provides a buy-and-download model, pre-paid subscription cards, as well as pre-order offers.

Although subscription-based pricing models are commonplace, a number of variations have emerged over the years. For example, a standard subscription model might require gamers to pay a monthly fee either through a prepaid card or credit card. Sometimes gamers are provided a 30-day window in which to sample a game before being required to pay a subscription fee. During that "free" window there is often a restriction placed on game levels and functionality. At any time a player can upgrade to the full version of the game by subscribing for a month or more or by purchasing the game outright.

As an alternative to subscriptions, some publishers allow you to download their games for free, but you have to buy "items" if you want to enjoy the game fully. In Europe, this free-to-play model has developed successfully to the point that now 90% of all "item selling" comes through free-to-play. Free play and item selling provide new incentives aimed at increasing customer retention.

Direct downloading drastically changed the marketplace, shortening the value chain to the point that a single entity could at the same time serve as developer, publisher, distributor, and reseller.

Advertising-supported games, which provide free play that is "sponsored" by advertisers, are developing as well.

What has driven the emergence of these various distribution models is the goal of enabling as many gamers as possible to play videogames as easily as possible. Accordingly, publishers tend to adapt their economic models to the peculiarities of each country or region. For example, in most countries you pay a monthly subscription fee to play *World of Warcraft;* but in Korea, your price is determined by how long you play the game.

Impact of the Economic Crisis

What is the likely impact of the global economic crisis in which we find ourselves? One implication is that there will be a reduction in advertising support for free or sponsored games. In addition, forecasts indicated that in 2009 the global market for mobile devices could shrink by 1 to 2% in volume—suggesting that there could be a decline in sales of mobile games as well.

In contrast, forecasters are projecting continued growth in e-commerce. According to the GfK Institute, in collaboration with the Fevad (Federation of

E-commerce & Distance selling), sales in France of cultural goods via the Internet should reach over 2.7 billion Euros in 2008 and continue to grow in 2009. What's more, they are projecting 21 million online consumers—an increase of 3 million compared to 2007.

At the same time, purchase behavior is evolving as consumers increasingly prefer to purchase software via download. So it should come as no surprise that brick-and-mortar retailers are devoting less and less shelf-space to software and videogames. What intensifies this trend away from traditional retail distribution is the emergence of new consumption modes more suitable for digital distribution, including the try-then-buy model for software or the free-to-play model for videogames. These new models, in turn, enable publishers to rely more and more on segmented offers crafted to closely meet the expectations of individual end-customers. Meanwhile, blogs and other community sites are becoming increasingly

What intensifies the trend away from traditional retail distribution is the emergence of new consumption modes more suitable for digital distribution.

important as a source of user recommendations in the purchase process.

As the digital marketplace continues to grow and strengthen, we could see more creativity and more small players affecting the distribution of videogames. The videogame 2.0 could emerge, with development tools that will enable users to create their own content, objects, characters, and levels—and to share the results with their community via the Internet. The impact of such user development will not merely extend the life-cycle of a given game; these content

consumers/producers also promise to become a wellspring of new services, ideas, usages, and economic models. How such consumers may affect the future of digital distribution one can merely speculate. ■

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The Evolution of Merchandising

Taking Advantage of Long-tail Distribution

By Rick Marazzani

Rick Marazzani is a 14-year veteran of the mass-market games business and the Director of Content for Exent. In his position, Rick helps find and bring in new titles to the games-on-demand service. He also manages the existing content to best delight and entertain subscribers. Rick can be reached at rick.marazzani@ casualconnect.org.

The basis for selecting a title for distribution should not be "Will this convert at a certain percentage?" but rather "Will this game delight and entertain?"

In the beginning, there were games on floppy disks sold in plastic bags at hobby stores.

Out of that primordial ooze, the humble floppies begat CD-ROMs adorned in full-color shrink wrapped boxes, shipped from warehouses to retail stores via a robust packaged goods distribution system, with manufacturing, merchandisers, and end caps.

With the dawn of the Internet, game distribution became smarter. The ecosystem had finally adapted to the bits and bytes nature of computer games. Digital distribution, virtual storage space, and streaming bits would free games from old-fashioned packaged goods conceits and empower innovation, diversification, and open distribution to the widest audience possible. And it was good.

Well, almost. The dominant casual game portals look a lot more like a platypus, stuck between two stages of evolution. Granted, printing, palettes, and forklifts are a thing of the past, but there are still vestigial barriers to shelf-space, distribution, discovery, and revenue.

The next step in the evolution of merchandising should take advantage of all that the Internet has to offer: negligible storage and distribution costs, unlimited shelf space, long shelf life, and efficient discovery of content. Companies like Amazon and Netflix are using the capabilities of the Web to make more money off of more content, not just the featured hits. This business strategy is summed up in "The Long Tail" by Chris Anderson.[1]

Anderson says: "For too long we've been suffering the tyranny of lowest-common-denominator fare, subjected to brain-dead summer blockbusters and manufactured pop. Why? Economics. Many of our assumptions about popular taste are actually artifacts of poor supply-and-demand matching—a market response to inefficient distribution."

As the Nudist Said to the Tailor: "So What?"

So, what would a 21st century online games distribution model offer to players and publishers? With the negligible costs of storing and distributing titles, there should be no limits on catalog size. Add a reasonable subscription, and combine this with ease of discovery/recommendation, and this gives players unlimited choice, and publishers the opportunity to monetize their entire catalog.

A handful of game distributors have evolved and are tapping into the Long Tail and capitalizing on the possibilities of online distribution. Gametap, Exent, Metaboli, and Yummy all offer a huge catalog of PC games, on demand, at a fixed monthly subscription for users. Consumers pay a monthly fee to have access to hundreds of games, and publishers get a reliable recurring revenue stream for every minute played. Consumers appreciate the advantages offered by Long Tail subscription services for movies (Netflix), music (Rhapsody), and now games: great value, selection, and convenience.

So what does a long tail of revenue for a casual game look like? iWin provided us with a chart (see *Chart 1*) showing sales of the original *Jewel Quest* over the past few years. Not every game will be as big a hit or have as long a tail as *Jewel Quest,* but every game will benefit from long-tail distribution. In the Long Tail, a catalog of older games can earn as much as recent releases, and the whole will grow over time.
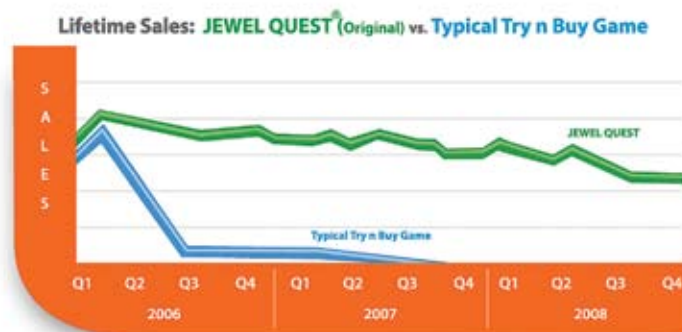

Chart 1: This chart shows the sales of the original *Jewel Quest* **across all business models (trial-to-purchase, on demand, etc.) compared to what sales of a typical trial-to-purchase only game.**

Hit driven casual game sites rely on merchandising a few games via a Top Ten list to make most of their money. As Anderson points out, Long Tail businesses like Amazon, iTunes and Netflix flip the 80-20 rule on its ear. This holds true for games, too. We have found that 99% of Exent's 1,300 games earn revenue in a given month.

Why the Long Tail Helps Us Innovate

In the dominant trial-to-purchase model of online casual game distribution, virtual shelf space is limited to games that "convert"—which is to say, games that are bought by players after the 60-minute demo. A game can be terrific, but if it doesn't catch players' attention enough to convince them to pay up after 60 minutes, it will not get shelf space. In practice, less than 2% of casual downloads convert into sales. This results in the selection of games based on 60 minutes of play rather than long-term playability.

The basis for selecting a title for distribution should not be "Will this convert at a certain percentage?" but rather "Will this game delight and entertain?" The wisdom of the crowd can be trusted to find what is fun for them as there is no barrier to trying another game—they are all already paid for through the monthly charge. Thus, the Long Tail available in the subscription model rewards variety and innovation.

Long-tail distribution frees developers to be creative and experiment. You can hedge your innovative bets against the audience and revenue that will find your new game via Long Tail. If the game is a success on-demand, you can leverage those numbers to sell your game into mobile, PC retail, and console, even if it is not a good fit for trial-to-purchase portals.

Subscription Rewards Sticky and Addictive Games

The revenue potential for a title on subscription is unlimited. Rather than allowing free play to all users, for a 2% chance at $19, every subscription title earns money for every minute played (since titles earn based on their pro rata share of total minutes played). So not only is it possible to earn the same $19 in the purchase model, you can readily earn twice that amount with a sticky game the user loves. There is no risk releasing a game on the subscription platforms, since those users have already paid their subscription and are unlikely to spend elsewhere for entertainment. In order to tap into the millions of dollars in royalties that Publishers earn each quarter through games-on-demand services, all you need to do is make sure your games are on the service.

Over the past thirty years, games have changed with the platforms. Finally, e-commerce for games has evolved to provide the benefits of the online ecosystem. Shelf space, discovery, and distribution are all more efficient than ever, with developers and publishers readily finding audiences—and revenue—for their entire portfolio of games. ■

The revenue potential for a title on subscription is unlimited. Rather than allowing free play to all users, for a 2% chance at $19, every subscription title earns money for every minute played.

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1 Chris Anderson, "The Long Tail," *Wired*, October 2004. Anderson has also written a book of the same name, now available in a revised updated paperback edition, published by Hyperion.

Creating Games to Prompt Social Change

Embracing the Greater Good

By Michael Sorrenti

Michael Sorrenti is the president of Game Pill Inc., an interactive studio that specializes in online game development and interactive marketing. Michael can be reached at michael.sorrenti@ casualconnect.org.

Although Game Pill has been involved with online media and game development for a while now, when we were approached by Global Kids to help them create a game we were caught a bit off guard—not because being approached to create a game is anything new, but because of the topic of the game we were to create. This would not be your typical driving or side-scrolling adventure game. There would be no widgets to collect or monsters to fight. Instead, Global Kids wanted us to build a game about . . . Hurricane Katrina.

Soon after being approached, we did some research and found out all about Global Kids. They are pioneers in the field of socially-conscious online games. Through the Playing 4 Keeps program, young people at Canarsie High School in Brooklyn gain the skills necessary to design challenging games about world issues. Once the design is complete, the game is then produced and taken to market.

While we love creating game concepts and seeing our games being played, there has always been the question of how our games affect people's lives for the better. So after giving the idea some thought, we decided to take the challenge and to help the Global Kids team and students. Our mission: Create a game that creates social change by educating both the students and the public about Hurricane Katrina and disaster readiness.

The question was: How would we do all of that while still building a game that is fun to play?

Our Game Plan

Getting the Students Involved: The first item of business was to decide how to best engage the students. We decided that they should be involved in as many facets of the game creation as possible. They had a final say on the character design, character name, overall look and feel of the game, final dialogue choices, items located within the game, and music. By making the students part of all aspects of game design, they learned not only about the process of creating a game, but also about the real world historical event, the people of New Orleans and how they were affected, the items that were crucial to survival, and more.

> *You must sacrifice time to help others—which in turn increases your chances of losing your life.*

Integrating Education and Game-play: The next critical step was to figure out how to make the game challenging while remaining true to the events of Hurricane Katrina. Doing this was no easy feat. After deliberation, we decided as a team to make *local heroes* a central theme by focusing on the challenges such people faced in the days leading up to and after the disaster. By personalizing the game-play, we enabled both students and players to appreciate the issues faced by the residents affected by this disaster.

We decided to make the goal of the game to help fellow residents while finding your mother who has been lost. To emphasize the urgency of the situation, we included a level timer which depicts the sun setting slowly—the better to drive home the fact that (quite literally) "you don't have all day." This element of limited time creates a dramatic tension in the game as you must sacrifice time to help others—which in turn increases your chances of losing your life or your mother's life in the course of the game.
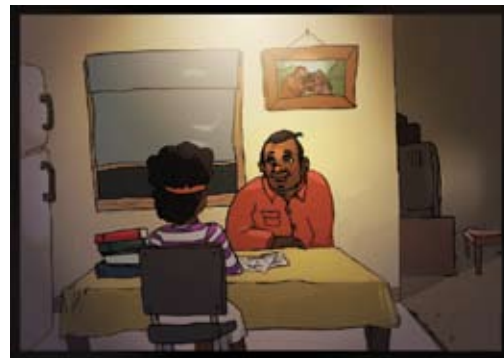
Games Build Awareness and Change

During the course of the project, it became apparent just how effective social games are at allowing players to interact with and immerse themselves in real issues being faced by real people around the world. Through such games you can become intimately familiar (for example) with the plight of a child in Darfur searching for water, or with the difficulties faced by a citizen roaming the streets of New Orleans after the levees have been breached.

Specifically, games are effective as a learning medium because they allow for an immersive experience in which you are required to consider the physical and moral challenges facing people living in places and encountering challenges very different from your own. If you are trying to convey the seriousness of hunger, a photograph is helpful, a video clip even better. But if, in addition to such imagery, you can enable the viewer to experience firsthand the difficulties of finding food, your message regarding people in hunger will be that much more effective.

Listed below are some good examples of social games created to enact social change:

- *Tempest in Crescent City:* http://tempestincrescentcity.ning.com/game
- *Darfur is Dying*: http://www.darfurisdying.com/
- *Ayiti:* http://ayiti.newzcrew.org/ayitiunicef/

There is no medium which can send a message quite as powerfully as a well-executed game. As a growing industry with a global reach, we should all consider carefully how casual gaming can be an effective medium for large corporations, charities, educational institutions, and news organizations that would like to distribute learning outcomes in a meaningful and sticky way—especially for younger audiences. ■

Games are effective as a learning medium because they allow for an immersive experience in which you are required to consider the physical and moral challenges facing people living in places and encountering challenges very different from your own.

Reflecting on My First Casual Experience
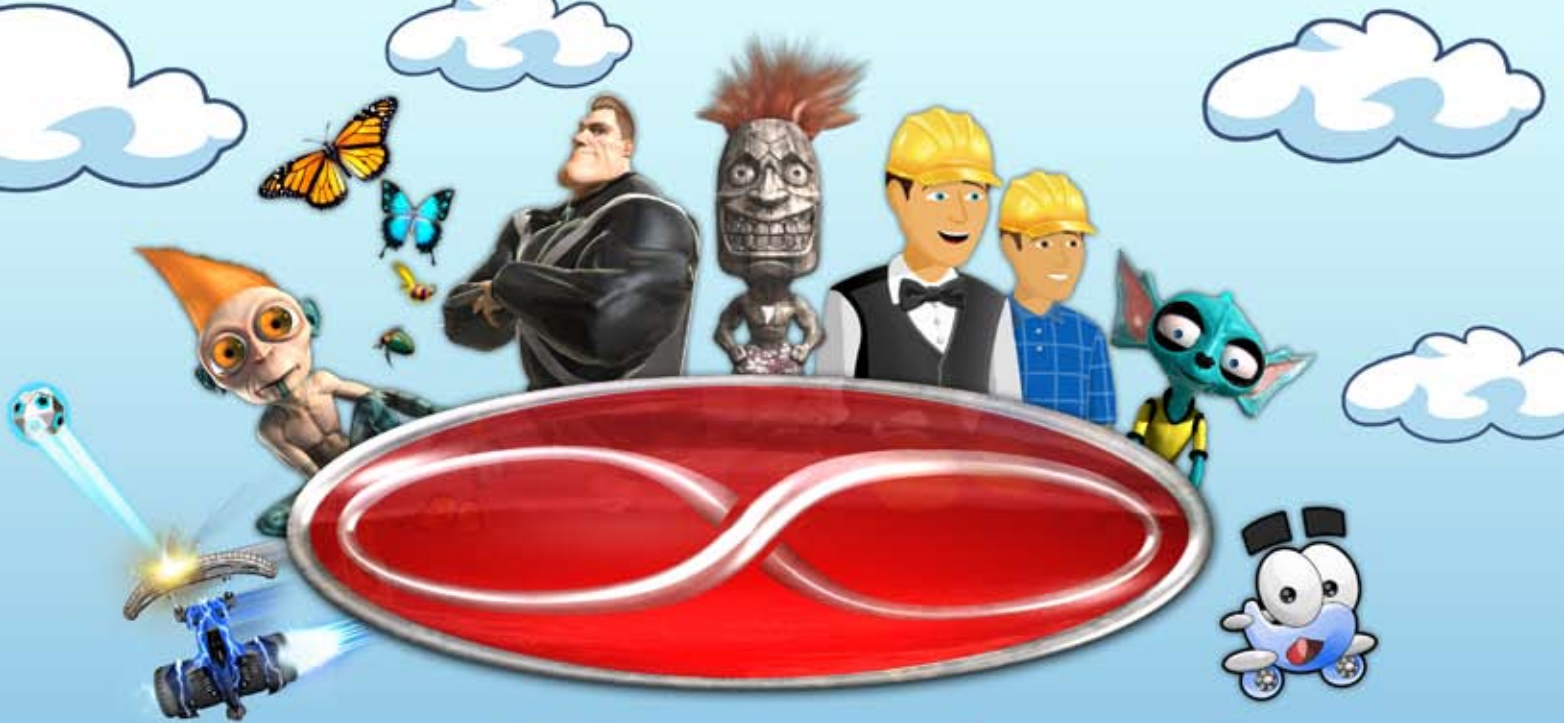
From Stable Career to Entrepreneur

While attending my first Casual Connect conference, I was immediately impressed with the large number of talented people—producers, artists, musicians—whose passions led them from large companies and successful stable careers to be a part of the thriving casual games space.

Each of their stories is different, but a common theme is evident: *A passion to create something new and inspired led many to seek independence from corporate life and defined rules.* In short, the industry is full of people like me.

A few short months after Casual Connect, I too made the journey from stable career to entrepreneur. In case there are any more out there like me, this article is for you.

My Path to Independence

For the last ten years or so, I have held down a corporate job while freelancing as a composer. Then in September 2007, I walked away from my comfortable Human Resources Director position (which I had held since 2001) in order to focus all my efforts on Walz Music. Family and friends were supportive, yet skeptical—but to be honest, so was I. Nevertheless, I had to follow my heart and do what I love. I never thought I'd own my own business, but all of a sudden I was my own boss and was making my own rules and creating music for a living.

Most of us are not prepared or encouraged in the slightest to think for ourselves, which is why so many people who wish they could take the leap of self-employment are so afraid. Sarah and Paul Edwards explain succinctly in their book, *Secrets of Self-Employment,* that as kids, we are given rules: feeding times, schedules, expectations. In school the role of rule-giver is transferred from our parents to our teachers. Once we are out of school and take a job, our bosses take over as our wardens—an arrangement we accept in exchange for a regular paycheck. For many people, that arrangement is truly best.

by Aaron Walz

Aaron Walz is the Owner & Lead Composer at Walz Music. Aaron founded Walz Music in September of 2007 to focus on composition, production and sound design for video games & other media. Aaron can be reached at aaron.walz@ casualconnect.org.

I had to follow my heart and do what I love. I never thought I'd own my own business, but all of a sudden I was my own boss and was making my own rules and creating music for a living.

Why Casual Games?

If you're not the sort of person who is happy with the structure and rules of life as a subordinate, the casual games industry is the perfect place to make a leap towards something new: the rules are not yet fully defined, ingenuity and passion are essential (and rewarded), and everyone involved has the opportunity to make a huge impact on the future of the industry. It may not be a job at a large corporation—with all the familiar benefits and comforts—but in this emerging industry we have the opportunity make our own paths and our own rules.

The casual games industry and the Casual Games Association essentially started from little more than a few passionate individuals who had swum in the mighty ocean of console and hardcore computer games. These new creators (and in fact the games themselves) were in a lifeboat floating out on the vast sea without a captain, exploring new territory. There is little room for excessive self-doubt in such a venture, so you must invest in yourself and learn how to do all sorts of things you never thought you'd do. This is exactly what the casual games industry has done. What started as a glimmer of hope and a sprinkling of passion has evolved into a financially solvent endeavor and vibrant, well recognized industry.

Getting Broken In

The Casual Games Association's members (as witnessed at Casual Connect) are more alive and full of opportunity and talent than I had imagined—and perhaps a bit more serious than I had anticipated.

Reflecting on My First Casual Experience

From Stable Career to Entrepreneur

My first "casual" meeting was with three gentlemen in suits who sat poised around me like cannons, high on a turret, ready to shoot me down if my music didn't meet their approval. I was caught off guard, but after numerous meetings, parties and a couple of dinners, I was broken in. I approached the second day with less worry and desire to impress and a simple intention of letting the music speak for itself.

Connecting with Others

Of course, what I had really been looking forward to was the conference content focusing on my trade, the Audio Track. Led successfully by Matt Johnston, the Audio Track was a great experience because it fostered incredible camaraderie. I loved watching and participating in each presentation. Greg Rahn of Soundmindz opened my eyes to the world of hearing-impaired and handicapped accessible games. I spoke about composition techniques. The Mutato guys recorded some great things live—I still have the hungry man sounds in my head! (You had to be there.) Barry from Soundrangers discussed the pros and cons of custom and library audio. Kane from Somatone spoke about running an audio development business and offered some great communication tips for audio designers and game developers. We even had a sonic flambé, during which industry pros critiqued our tracks anonymously, with some mock brutality and several handfuls of humor. Most of all, I enjoyed hanging out and getting to know these musicians—some of whom had worked previously for much larger companies before deciding to participate in this new, exciting industry.

Looking Toward the Future

I felt proud to be a part of something so successful, evolving, and full of opportunities. At the same time, however, I couldn't ignore the frequent references to the growth and maturation of this industry: the intense and expensive marketing, the in-game advertising and other revenue-building schemes, the large corporate commissions, the quest to license rights to movie titles and trademarks, the battles for publishing exclusivity, the growing development budgets—not to mention the extravagance and fanciness that Paul Thelen of Big Fish Games warned about in his keynote presentation. Is this what the creators of casual games had in mind when they started in this industry? It's not hard to imagine where all of this is headed.

It is unknown what lies in the future of casual games. But the future is what we make of it. We are best off focusing our energies on the quality of the game-play, the design, the art, the story, and (of course) the music. If we care about the art and soul of the games we create with our talent and time—while balancing big business, growth, and financial viability—we can remain true to the spirit of the industry. Otherwise, we run the risk of losing the lighthearted, fun soul of casual games. ■

Breaking Into Casual Games

My Path to Independence

L ike many people in this industry, I have been passionate about creating videogames since my high school years in the mid '80s. At that time, options to develop, store, and distribute software were so limited that I provided Xerox copies of the actual game code to my friends. Since then, I have developed games for many different devices as a hobby—until I decided to get serious.

In October of 2005, I was exploring ways to take advantage of faster processor speeds, and it was then that I decided to start programming brain-challenging games. I enjoyed creating games so much that, with no business plan and no sales, I kept on coding while my wife and kids slept. I was creating games that I liked to play, sharing them with my friends, listening to their feedback, and improving graphics and game-play.[1]

Getting Started

At that time, I knew nothing about the casual gaming industry, and all the decisions that I took were based on my outsider experience and instinct. I decided to offer trial downloads, and rather than placing limits on how long a trial session could last, instead I limited the number of moves per session, thus allowing the user to run the trial perpetually. I tried to get exposure on game portals I found by searching the Internet, but my games' quality was so low that I got rejected by all of them.

I sold my first game as baKno in February 2006. I sold just one game that month, and for several months, sales were dry. Fortunately I was not discouraged. On the contrary, I was excited about getting sales. I saw the potential of what a good game could do, and I kept programming and updating games.

I enjoyed creating games so much that, with no business plan and no sales, I kept on coding while my wife and kids slept.

In December 2006, baKno released its first successful game, *MacPool*, and the ball started to roll. I began to read about this industry and found a goldmine of information in every Casual Games Association publication which was mailed to my home. From the free articles and presentations on the Casual Connect website, I was able to structure my ideas and prioritize my efforts. I developed a few more games, and at the same time, I tried to improve the overall baKno experience—both on the website and in the games. But most important, I paid special attention to current customers, fixing bugs and developing requested features.

Making The Jump to Independence

After two years of midnight programming, in October 2007 I started to work full time to provide baKno with the required traction it needed to become a profitable development studio. I did not take the decision to leave my stable job lightly and tried to minimize the risk with some planning. By selling my position at the company where I was working, I was able to secure a financial cushion for the coming venture. Since there was no need to have office space, I decided to work from home—which at the same time helped to cut commuting time and associated expenses. And my family's health insurance was covered by my wife's job. (Needless to say, she has been very supportive in this process.)

Taking advice I had gotten from some *Casual Connect* articles, my first move was to build a solid community by:

(1) Improving the communication to our gamers with a monthly newsletter
(2) Creating a communication channel between them with a forum
(3) Adding online and on-game global scores and ranking tables
(4) Allowing for user-generated content

I refer to baKno as "we" because around that time I started to delegate some of the company's functions to contracted professionals. During this past year, baKno has been successful in attracting

by Andres Martinez

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1 For more about passionate game design, see Eric Lamendola's "Hitting the Jackpot", *Casual Connect*, Summer 2008.

Breaking Into Casual Games

My Path to Independence

> *I began to read about this industry and found a goldmine of information in every Casual Games Association publication which was mailed to my home.*

creative talent from Latin America and the U.S.—graphic artists, modelers, and musicians who contacted baKno to offer their outsourced services. There is an inherent risk that comes with operating as a distributed organization such as baKno, but with some control mechanisms in place and thorough communication, such risk can be minimized. And as luck would have it, when you find the right people everything seems to run incredibly well.

Some Things Go Wrong, Some Things Go Right

One area in which we have a mix of more failures than successes is marketing (not yet delegated, obviously). I have tried but failed to get exposure through well-known downloading sites, Google ad-words, and direct mailing campaigns. I have failed in my attempts to establish relationships with leading distributors and leading in-game advertising providers. Among those marketing activities with good results for baKno are sending out press releases, distributing our newsletter, and integrating some of our games with Facebook. One particular marketing initiative we are proud off is our Game Coins program.

Game Coins are like paying for gaming at the arcade. It is an alternative way to pay as you play instead of purchasing a full game license. With Game Coins, baKno's customers are able to play a full game session for just 10 cents. It has been well-received, especially in economies where a 10- or 20-dollar game is expensive. We also plan to use Game Coins further as incentives for other campaigns, as game rewards, and as a currency for micro-transactions..

Creativity vs. User Familiarity

baKno has never stopped creating games and developing new features for existing ones. Fortunately, creativity has not been a limitation—we have many ideas to implement and surely more will come. But when it comes time to decide which one will get developed next, the decision is not an easy one.

Contrary to the innovate-innovate-innovate tendency, our experience is that when we innovate too much, we don't sell that much. Well-known familiar mechanics sell better to our audience, but maybe it is because our audience is not the average 35-year-old women. Instead, a big percentage of our customers are males over 50 years old.

Therefore, a new development might be a board game, like chess for example. But as we strive to innovate within that constraint, we ask three basic questions during the development process:

1. Is the game very easy to grasp and start playing?
2. Is the game playable using only the mouse and/or the directional keys?
3. Does the game convey the same playing experience as the original game?

Three Years' Worth of Advice

To conclude, I want to summarize what I've learned and pass along a few words of advice to any developer or graphic artist who is thinking about becoming independent, or any independent who wants to swim against the current by self-publishing its titles like baKno.

1. Motivation: It is not enough to be a well-prepared and experienced professional to survive as an independent one. Look inside yourself, and proceed only if you find true passion for the art of creating games.
2. Focus: There are still unexploited audiences to tap into, but grabbing their attention is a challenge full of distractions and discouragements. Define your target audience and never lose sight off it.
3. Teamwork: We read everywhere that people are the most important asset of any company. It is true. Try to surround yourself with the best team you can.
4. Cautiousness: If within the next year you see that baKno is no longer in business, forget number two and sign with a publisher. ∎

gamecity:Hamburg
by Hamburg@work

Goodies for a Start

The gaming location Hamburg is booming and the City State is taking care of it:

Office Space for Start-Ups in the gamecity:Port. Right in the heart of St.Pauli Hamburg offers dedicated offices for companies which want to start in Germany's second largest city.

Prototype-Funding for companies which develop games in our city: Up to 100.000 € as an interest free loan. A jury of experts from the industry advises the local government.

Active Network for the games industry: 1,700 people in 150 companies in Hamburg actively participate in our events, workshops and meetings.

Free of charge Service due to the Public Private Partnership with Hamburg@work we can offer assistance in setting up business as well as all help with bureaucratic matters.

gamecity:Lab a joint project of the HAW (University for Applied Sciences) and gamecity:Hamburg generate prototypical developments and applied researches.

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Seeking and Finding a Quirky, Fun Game

Discoveries Along the Way to Making Pictureka! Museum Mayhem

By Mike Wabschall

In his role as Associate Producer, Mike Wabschall is integral to the production of several of Pogo. com's connected downloadables. Most recently, he shipped Pictureka! Museum Mayhem *on the PC, online, and at retail. Mike is an experienced developer of entertainment and education titles. He has produced and designed handheld, online, and CD-ROM titles with game publishers such as THQ, Disney Interactive, and Vivendi Games. Mike received his B.S. in Radio-Television-Film from the University of Texas at Austin. He can be reached at mike.wabschall@ casualconnect.org.*

*P*icteureka! Museum Mayhem is the first digital game based on the popular board game *Pictureka*! made by Hasbro. In the digital game, an unknown culprit has gotten into the museum after hours and jumbled all of the exhibits. As the new museum curator, you must re-establish order as quickly as possible by searching for hidden objects that are listed on clue cards. Find all of the items listed in a category to clear cards. Each card helps rebuild and re-organize the museum, re-opening another exhibit. It's up to you to restore the museum before time is up and its reputation is ruined.

What follows are some lessons learned over the course of developing the game.

Take Advantage of the Diversity of Your Team

The *Pictureka! Museum Mayhem* team was started by three engineers working in Pogo's new office in Austin, Texas. It was a newly assembled team, including many people who had never worked together before and some who had never worked in the casual games industry. Instead of being discouraged by our different backgrounds we embraced our diversity. For example, the team included a number of board game enthusiasts who really helped us analyze what the board game designer created and what made it fun. Their enthusiasm and expertise was critical to creating a fun digital version of the game. They came up with great tweaks and additions to the rules that enabled us to create a single-player experience from a multiplayer board game.

Additionally, we had team members from Europe, Asia, and Canada. They gave us insight into how various images and categories would be interpreted by our wide audience base. Their input showed us early on that the game would be more fun if we loosened up the category definitions to allow for the diverse interpretations various players might make.

> *It became apparent early on that we had some fairly large challenges to face as we took a game designed to be played by families around a dinner table and converted it into a single-player experience on the computer.*

the museum curator

Leverage Your Medium to Customize the Player Experience

From the get-go, we wanted to really understand the core game-play. Using the original board game, we held several play sessions at work and hosted some game nights with friends and family. It became apparent early on that we had some fairly large challenges to face as we took a game designed to be played by families around a dinner table and converted it into a single-player experience on the computer.

For instance, since we were converting a multiplayer game into a single-player game, we needed to find a way to create a dynamic and compelling play session to keep players engaged over a long period of time. In addition, the limited screen-size forced us to shrink the nine tiles of the board game down to the equivalent of two tiles.

During our board game play sessions, we noticed that experienced players had an advantage over novices as they learned—or perhaps more accurately, absorbed and memorized—the location of key characters. To minimize this effect in the board game, the nine tiles used to construct the board are swapped, flipped, and rotated throughout the game so that the game board is constantly changing. Due to our limitations in screen space, we wanted to take the randomization of the board game a step further to keep people from memorizing the board. The digital medium enabled us to swap, flip, and rotate individual images instead of tiles. We created a tool to generate millions of possible image layouts so that every play session featured a new game board. Then we made the board truly dynamic by making it change as you play. When you click on a correct item it is replaced with a new one.

The dynamic board also solved our biggest challenge of all, which was the limited screen real estate. The board game uses a large playfield. Consequently, you can only focus on a small portion of the board at a time as your vision bounces back and forth to scan for matches. We wanted to encourage that same frantic searching even though we were working with the limited resolution of a small screen. The dynamic game board enabled us to match the image density of the board game while preventing players from mentally mapping the playfield. In this way we were able to keep the game from becoming a memorization game rather than a seek-and-find game.

Subsequently, we have discovered one other big advantage of our dynamic board: It has become a key differentiator from other seek-and-find games. Games like *Mystery Case Files* have very detailed, pre-rendered, static screens. Players can learn the screens, and repeated plays are never as fresh as the first view. In contrast, when you play *Pictureka! Museum Mayhem,* every session offers a fresh new experience.

Be Flexible, But Don't Bend Backwards

In order to make a single-player version of *Pictureka!,* we had to create official rulings on categories that are open to interpretation. No matter how we cut it, we knew that there would be those who disagreed with our rulings. Does a paper airplane count as one of the "Things that fly"? If it does, then does anything that can be thrown count as something that flies as well? Can't you throw a clock? If you accept a clock as one of the "Things that fly," will the player think you meant that the clock is time and time flies? The images had to match the categories in such a way that it afforded player creativity and wit without being so obscure that the players miss the connection. It was clear from our play-tests and discussions that players would forgive disputes they had with our categorization as long as our rationale was clear and learnable through playing the game. To help players learn the system, we added an event at the end of a round that highlights items on the board that match a given category.

Manage Assets Up Front

In order to make *Pictureka! Museum Mayhem* always feel fresh, we needed a large set of images. In fact, we had over 1,600 image assets. Making the art was tricky. Any changes—no matter how minute—could potentially alter the categories to which the image was assigned. To combat this issue, we provided the artists with a list of primary categories for each unique image so that they knew what they were working towards. The artists had the flexibility to draw whatever they wanted,

In the board game, a player is given one card and 30 seconds to complete the category. In contrast, the online single-player game grants players three minutes at a time—six times as long as the board game. In order to cater to the extended single-player experience, we have added some additional features to the game. We also give players three categories to work with at a time, and we constantly replace those categories with new ones as they are completed to ensure that there is always something new to look for before time runs out. Additionally, we color-code each of the category cards and create color streak bonuses to encourage players to think strategically about the order in which they complete their cards.

Seeking and Finding a Quirky, Fun Game

Discoveries Along the Way to Making Pictureka! Museum Mayhem

Subsequently, we have discovered one other big advantage of our dynamic board: It has become a key differentiator from other seek-and-find games.

as long as it matched the given categories and *Pictureka!* style. While artists stuck to the categories as much as possible, their creativity would often match categories in ways we didn't expect—which meant that we were often reviewing artwork and reconsidering their categorization. No matter how much you plan ahead, you still need to be able to tweak and make changes based upon play tests and feedback. However, managing the assets process up front allowed us a great foundation from which to work.

Conclusion

At the end of the day, *Pictureka! Museum Mayhem* exceeded our expectations. The game is wacky and captures the board game's style. Our team did a fantastic job of accentuating the fun elements from the board game and tuning the game-play for an engaging single-player experience. We enjoyed the opportunity to work with Hasbro to help develop their new brand. Our collaborations enabled us to design a fast-paced seek-and-find game that distinguishes itself from the other titles in its genre. ■

Casual Games Postmortems

Looking Back at Lessons Learned

They say that hindsight is 20/20, which helps explain why we can see things so clearly when we pause to take a look back at where we've been. Think of this article as a long look back over our shoulders. We'll consider six casual games that caught our eye this year to highlight important topics for everyone to think about:

1. *Don't be afraid to try new things.*
2. *Immerse players in the game environment.*
3. *It's all about great game-play.*
4. *Sequels sell.*
5. *Licensed brands must be integrated into the game.*

To gain the benefit of experience (without the pain) we talked to key people at Arcade Lab, Fresh Games, Playrix Entertainment, Game Café, RealGames, and Oberon-Media/I-Play (see complete list at right).—ed.

1. Focus on Being Unique

Game: *Alice Greenfingers*

Developer & Publisher: Arcade Lab, Malmoe, Sweden

When Alice Greenfingers launched, it seemed to be instantly recognized by the casual gaming industry as an exciting new example of what it takes to bring strategy games to the mass market. Why did you decide to make a strategy game and what did you use as inspiration?

Arcade Lab: When we started to create the game, it was just based on some fuzzy ideas and a tile-based game mechanic. The only thing we knew was that we wanted to do a planting and farm game because it seemed to have potential to be both fun and casual. Also, there was no such game on the market yet, so we thought there might be an opportunity for success. The basic game mechanics started to shape up nicely as we began iterating on our basic premise. The addition of strategy and simulation elements was a natural evolution of the game design process.

Examining the other time management games available at the time, we felt they were too stressful and flat for our taste—so we wanted to head in another direction. Many times while we were in the process of designing the game-play, we would seek inspiration from our early game-playing experiences from childhood. We wanted something relaxing to play—like the first *Sim City* game. We often think back on what made lasting impressions from our old favorite games on the 8- and 16-bit formats. Nostalgia has always been one of the biggest sources of inspiration for us.

How did you create a game which would appeal to both hardcore gamers and casual gamers alike?

Arcade Lab: Good question. It wasn't planned. It probably has more to do with the way we work. We do games that we would enjoy playing, using elements of classic videogames that should appeal to many hardcore gamers. Then we "casualize" the most frustrating and "hard to understand" parts, so that the game becomes accessible to casual gamers. In the end, what we are aiming at is simply a game that can be understood and enjoyed by a wide demographic, no matter what the background.

The art style for the Alice Greenfingers strays from most stereotypical game genres—it doesn't look casual, it doesn't look childish, and it definitely doesn't look realistic. What brought you to this art style?

Arcade Lab: We like to stand out from the crowd and we like to make games we enjoy playing. We like handmade pixel graphics, so we embraced this style and allowed *Alice Greenfingers* to look different. I admit it is a big break from the standard casual graphics style, but it turned out to give us some extra

Casual Games Postmortems

Looking Back at Lessons Learned

> *To engage the player right from the start, we made a deliberate choice to include cinematic story scenes with panning, zooming, and voiceovers instead of static comic panels.*

attention. People got curious and wondered how this game that looked so different could be on the top of every Top 10 chart.

Some of the portals had a problem with the graphics at first, since it's not the kind of graphics style that they know "sells." But our initial user testing showed that the casual gamers themselves don't seem to know or care much about technical details like anti-aliased edges or fancily rendered graphics. It seems they liked the unique art style just like we did.

After *Alice Greenfingers* got into the hands of gamers, sales convinced the portals that the gamers did respond well to the unique art style. *Alice Greenfingers* became one of the biggest casual hits of 2007, and is still the most successful casual farming game, even despite many attempts from other companies to clone the game and put weight on standardizing the graphics style.

2. Immerse Players in the Game Environment

Game: *Ranch Rush*
Developer: Aliasworlds Entertainment, Minsk, Belarus
Publisher: Fresh Games, Columbus, Ohio

It seems farm-themed games are all the rage right now, taking over for upwardly mobile restaurateurs. What did you do during development to separate **Ranch Rush** *from the others?*

Fresh Games: We had a simple goal: Release a market-trending game that innovates without alienating the ever-evolving casual consumer. So the same old time-management restaurant theme just didn't interest us.

To give you a little back-story: We were interested in doing a time management game, but we also wanted to push the boundaries to help redefine the genre without breaking what currently works. The rising popularity of farm themes and the flexibility of an outdoor game environment made for a sweet spot combination that was too good to pass up.

Months before starting the project, the developer came to us with the base mechanic, and we were intrigued by the strategy-like twist on the genre. Excited by the possibilities, we purchased the game and proceeded to write a 12-page design document that re-focused time management game-play to give more power to the player, while simplifying level play, progression, and the overall goal.

To engage the player right from the start, we made a deliberate choice to include cinematic story scenes with panning, zooming, and voiceovers instead of static comic panels. We kept the narrative simple and *short* to help the player get to know Sara, to like Sara, to want to help her, and to want to find out what happens next. Another unique element was sprinkling in Sara's journal entries to develop her character and foreshadow game-play using just 30 words each week. We don't like to read long stories and don't think players do either.

Tell us more about your game-play mechanic. From what we read on the GameZebo forums, its seems gamers really like the combination of time management and strategy in **Ranch Rush.** *How did you pull this combination off?*

Fresh Games: The basic sub-mechanic which allowed players to move game elements was in the original build from the developer. As the new producers, it became our responsibility to fine tune, tweak, and add to that base. It was a long and methodical process that required the collaboration of many people in-house.

For us, time management game-play is dominated by "stress of the unknown" and the "immediate tasks" game-play. So how do you add to a proven mechanic that players seem to like without alienating? Our solution for *Ranch Rush* can be broken down into four main game-play design innovations:

1) Give the player their level objective upfront.
2) Give the player control over what tools they use.
3) Give the player unlimited control over space.
4) Give the player the ability to carry-over game-play elements from the ranch as they progress throughout the game.

These four key design additions allow the player to focus on WHAT (to do) and HOW (to do it) over a longer timeframe than previous time management games. Interestingly, some players have commented that they pulled one over on us because they could "break the rules"—yet this flexibility was another deliberate choice. After all, games should be fun!

What was your graphic design process for your characters?

Fresh Games: When we entered the project, there wasn't a main character. We knew this was going to be a very important design element that would help define the whole emotional connection. We had a very specific look we were trying to achieve. We supplied reference art all the way down to Sara's boots for direction. It took about two weeks working with the developer to nail down the facial features, body style, and clothes. But the real connection and "cute factor" come from the character animations in the game—they really give Sara personality.

We wanted the other characters to have a personality and attitude of their own, communicated through visuals and sound as much as possible. It was important to not do a typical farm/ranch menagerie of animals, but to add to the experience with unexpected additions like an ostrich and bees.

If you've ever been to a factory, machines aren't exactly interesting. When the machines took on a life of their own and were fun to watch, we knew we were on to something. Constantly evolving the quirky animated feel of everything in the game helped define the personality of *Ranch Rush.*

Ranch Rush *did a great job of balancing each of the game's levels. Did you have a specific play-balancing process through user testing or did you use a systematic increasing of levels?*

Fresh Games: We like compliments! Before balancing individual levels, it was critical to nail down the shop item unlocking scheme. First we broke down the shop items by type (crops, animals, machines, upgrades) and difficulty (simple items, items with dependencies, click-queue-breakers). Then we mixed the shop items throughout the game to achieve an overall balance of fresh game-play and difficulty.

To balance individual levels, we started with systematic increasing then varied level composition by item type and difficulty to reinforce fresh game-play (which is to say we wanted to keep players on their toes). Final tweaks are always an art, resulting from a mix of user-testing feedback and internal intuition.

How many farm-girls do you know?

Fresh Games: Do you know that we're from Columbus, Ohio—better known sometimes as cow town? So we have lots of farms girls around us! All kidding aside, we don't know any farm girls except the ones we see tending organic food stands in the summer. They remind us of Sara.

How soon can we expect a sequel to **Ranch Rush?**

Fresh Games: We have a lot of interesting things planned for the sequel, along with some innovative brand extensions to other platforms. Look for the story and Sara to evolve in '09 beyond her wildest expectations.

3. It's All About Great Game-play
Game: *Fishdom*
Developer & Publisher: Playrix Entertainment, Vologda, Russia

In many ways, match-three games launched the casual games industry as we know it—but recently they have not had as much success. Did you keep this in mind as you designed **Fishdom?** *Were features such as in-game cash rewards part of the solution?*

Playrix: You are quite right saying that match-three games are not as popular right now as they used to be. But we think that this phenomenon is mainly due to the preference of game developers rather than players. To turn a match-three title into a hit, one needs to add a twist to it. While it is getting harder to accomplish with every passing year, the genre is not dying out. It is just evolving into something more complex and challenging. We realized that we needed to mix match-three with other game-play mechanics to make *Fishdom* a success. Thus, match-three in this particular game is just one of its components—a way to earn cash to decorate and maintain fish tanks. We have devoted a significant amount of time thinking about what else we can add to match-three to make the game stand out.

Fishdom *keeps players interested and challenged steadily through each level. Did you have a specific play-balancing process through user-testing or did you use a logical and systematic method to increase the difficulty of the levels?*

Playrix: We actually did both. But *Fishdom* is a never-ending game with no last level for the player to reach. Right now the player who has reached the highest score completed Level 2,404. We didn't intentionally design that many levels in the game; there is a point when the levels start repeating. We use this trick in the majority of our games and it noticeably helps them stay in top ten charts on the largest portals for extended periods of time.

To keep players interested and challenged throughout each level we use a special technique that adjusts the game to each particular player depending on his or her skills. You can think of it as a "Big Brother," integrated into the game, that watches the player throughout all the levels. If a player is doing great, it will make the subsequent levels more and more difficult. If a player is having troubles, it will make the game easier. However, we are striving to make this process as invisible and unobtrusive as possible. And this approach does work—it makes it fun to play for both a pro and a novice alike.

Fishdom *creates a very relaxing environment. How did you go about designing "relaxing"?*

Playrix: Interestingly enough, *Fishdom*'s relaxing environment turned out to be quite a surprise to us as well! Our main objective in the art design process was to create light, captivating atmosphere with amazingly bright colors and eye-candy fish that are fun to watch. This probably was the key to the relaxing environment. However, we still think that we should have added more humor to the game—so we are already working on this aspect in the sequels to *Fishdom*, creating aquariums with highly entertaining "fish life."

What more can you tell us about a sequel to **Fishdom?**

Playrix: *Fishdom* is a franchise that we plan to keep working on. Moreover, we'll steer away from focusing on just match-three game-play. In Spring of 2009, *Fishdom: Deep Sea Adventure* is coming out. In this new game, the player will be able to use the hidden object game-play mechanic to earn cash. We are also adding a plot and people as the game's main characters. Another title in the *Fishdom* series, the so-called *Fishdom Tycoon,* is going to be a strategy game. We are not afraid of experimenting on our way to perfectly polished games, and we eagerly blend the most popular game genres while striving to create highly-enjoyable and unique products.

To keep players interested and challenged throughout each level we use a special technique that adjusts the game to each particular player depending on his or her skills.

Casual Games Postmortems

Looking Back at Lessons Learned

4. Sequels Sell
Game: *Sally's Spa*
Developer: GamesCafe, Calgary, Canada
Publisher: RealGames, Seattle, Washington

It seems that many sequels increase production values without significantly improving the game-play experience. How did you keep the quality bar high in the sequel to the popular **Sally's Salon?**

Game Café/RealGames: Because first game was very popular, we knew we had something of a winning formula. How much we were going to change that formula was a constant struggle for the team. Though we are not at all afraid of making changes as the series progresses, we really looked at *Sally's Spa* as an opportunity to address all the player feedback from *Sally's Salon* while at the same time honing our craft and pushing ourselves to really crank up the production values.

Some improvements were specifically targeted at making the overall experience more balanced and user friendly. In *Sally's Salon*, the bulk of the services occurred at one station which really created a bottleneck for the player. In *Sally's Spa*, we spread out the services more evenly across all the stations to ensure that if you ever run into a bottleneck, it is more than likely your own doing. Also, in *Sally's Salon*, there were some services that only female customers could get—which created a tricky situation when it came time to balance the game. In *Sally's Spa*, we made sure that both male and female customers could get all the services in the game.

> *Upon completing a chapter, you are given the option to choose the next location you want to go to.*

In some cases, we made changes simply because the team wanted to. Upon completing a chapter in *Sally's Spa*, you are given the option to choose the next location you want to go to. Although players will likely enjoy this feature, we primarily did it to further the growth of the development team. We really wanted to start wrapping our heads around the concept of separating location and difficulty. Also, we really wanted to make the pop-up games that occur for each service more unique, so in *Sally's Spa* each station features a different style of pop-up game. (To see another implementation of this, check out *Sally's Salon DS*. This version was developed by the same team in tandem with *Sally's Spa*).

Without a doubt, the biggest complaint about *Sally's Salon* was that there wasn't enough shopping. We worked very hard to address this issue and made sure that even an expert player would be purchasing upgrades all the way into the final chapter in the game.

The strong attention to graphical detail in **Sally's Spa** *does a great job of drawing the player into the charm and appeal of the environment. What was your approach to the graphic design process?*

Game Café/RealGames: Because we decided to go with "Spa" rather than "Salon 2," we felt it was really important to go all out with the spa theme. From the graphics to the music, we were adamant that the game ooze relaxation. We all know that games offer players an escape, so we worked very hard to make the escape *feel* like a day at the spa. We were well aware of the stark contrast between the stress of "Time Management" game-play and the relaxing spa setting, but we felt that we could create a nice balance between the two.

One thing we knew we wanted to move away from was the walled-in, box-shaped locations of *Sally's Salon*. Because salons tend to be part of a bigger building, the box shapes and pedestrian traffic made sense for *Sally's Salon*. Spas, however, tend to be more secluded and organic in structure, so we worked hard to replicate this as best we could in the game.

In terms of the graphic design process, we sat down and looked at different locations around the world that people associate with high-end spas (New York and Paris). We also looked at locations in which aspects of the modern spa originated (Rome and Japan).

Once we had our locations picked out, we researched what spas in these locations might look like. We took into account whether an open concept might work for the location and what types of material would be used for the physical structure. Finally, we tried to add something iconic for each location and punctuated it with some nice particle effects. Some examples of this are water fountains in Laguna Beach, falling cherry tree leaves in Japan, and tiki torches in Fiji.

As you mentioned earlier, **Sally's Spa** *features a greatly improved game upgrade and shopping system. How did you go about revamping and expanding the upgrades and shopping system?*

Game Café/RealGames: Shopping and upgrades were one of the aspects people enjoyed most about *Sally's Salon*. That said, these were also the largest areas of the game in which we heard a resounding request for improvement. It wasn't that people didn't like the system or the process, they just wanted more—a lot more!

To begin, we never wanted to introduce decorative purchasable items that had absolutely no impact on the game. Every item that affects the game also creates a situation that the game will have to be balanced around.

Though many of the additional upgrades came from good, old-fashioned, creative thinking, some of them were gained by looking at the *Sally's Salon* upgrades and dividing up their impact into multiple purchases. Though it was tricky, it ended

up being a good balance. Players never felt ripped off as a consequence of purchasing something that was completely useless, and we didn't have to deal with upgrades that dramatically changed the game-play multiple times.

After ensuring that we had enough shopping to last players into the final chapter in the game, we took even further measures to both extend and improve the shopping experience by augmenting it with the selling of products. The inclusion of product sales into the game ensured that even players who were saving up their money to make a bigger purchase would still have something to do in the shop after every level.

4. Sequels Sell (continued)
Game: *Mortimer Beckett and the Time Paradox*
Developer: Paprikari, Leskovac, Russia
Publisher: RealGames, Seattle, Washington

How did you decide what features to add to the sequel of **Mortimer Beckett?**

Paprikari/RealGames: We started discussing the sequel even before development on the first game *Mortimer Beckett and the Secrets of Spooky Manor,* was completed. One of the first goals we established was to make each sequel game in the series better than its predecessor. Higher production values were a given, but we also wanted to improve the player experience as much as possible. We had a few of our own ideas about how to accomplish that, but we also listened to feedback from our players for additional suggestions. Accordingly, we reorganized the screen to increase the game-play area, added more complexity by introducing sub-locations and mini games, and added replay value by reshuffling the items' positions and mini games' solutions on each new game start. Overall, the content of *Mortimer Beckett and the Time Paradox* grew to about twice that of the first game.

Mortimer Beckett **has some of the best art and sound quality this year. Can you give us some tips and hints relating to your art and sound design process?**

Paprikari/RealGames: Our graphic artist, Aleksandar Kostic, has previously worked on many TV advertisement videos, music videos, and several motion picture special effect jobs. His vast experience and undisputed talent are the most valuable assets of our studio. Together they guarantee that the visuals in our games will always be the highest quality possible.

The sound is composed and performed by a band of established musicians who really enjoy escaping their typical everyday music work and creating unique sounds for games.

It is easy to see how designers could be tempted to rest on their laurels and create puzzles in the sequel that are very similar to those in the original game. How did your designers ensure the players would find the sequel's puzzles exciting?

Paprikari/RealGames: It has been said that you can't create an appealing game unless you would enjoy playing that game yourself. Ever since we started playing games some twenty years ago, we've particularly enjoyed the adventure genre. That's why we designed the first game by adding adventure elements to the core hidden object game mechanic, and we built that out even further in the sequel. All the puzzles we design and incorporate into our games come from a conglomeration of all the adventure games we've played, the movies we've watched, and the books we've read over time—mixed with our imagination and new ideas.

5. Focus on Brands
Game: *Women's Murder Club—Death in Scarlet*
Developer & Publisher: Oberon Media, Seattle, Washington
Women's Murder Club **License:** James Patterson

Women's Murder Club—Death in Scarlet *was based on the popular* **Women's Murder Club** *James Patterson novels. How did the*

designers keep the mysteries original without spoiling the endings?

Oberon-Media/I-Play: While we used the characters and some of the settings from the novels, the *Death in Scarlet* story is completely new and original, created in collaboration with James Patterson himself. The idea was to deliver a totally new *Women's Murder Club* story in an interactive way, while still remaining true to what makes the novels great. That meant we had to include a great crime mystery as well as lots of interaction and collaboration between the four members of the *Women's Murder Club*. Our hope was that the game would appeal both to casual gamers as well as the legions of *Women's Murder Club* book fans.

Women's Murder Club *goes beyond what you would expect from hidden object mystery. How did your designers come up with such challenging puzzles?*

Oberon-Media/I-Play: Well, the game's designer, Jane Jensen, has created some of the most enduring and challenging adventure games ever, including the massively popular *Gabriel Knight* series. Thus, she's no stranger to creating clever puzzles. One important consideration was to make the puzzles contextual and to make sure they all help move the story along.

Women's Murder Club *had a very engaging story and the graphics were great. What was your design process?*

Oberon-Media/I-Play: At some level, our design process was to bring together an award-winning production team, Jane Jensen, producer Robert Adams, and the world's most popular and prolific storyteller—and to see what would happen! Working closely with Mr. Patterson allowed the team to gain insight into his unique storytelling and creative process and to apply these to the game. What's more, we also benefited from the feedback of a man who knows a great deal about entertaining people but fairly little about games. This challenged the team to take a fresh look at what we were creating and try to come up with a super compelling and interactive way to tell a great story.

Are there plans for more **Women's Murder Club** *games?*

Oberon-Media/I-Play: Absolutely! Look for Lindsay, Claire, Cindy and Jill's next interactive adventure available everywhere in Q1 09. ■

(Thermo)Dynamic Games

Game Design and the Second Law of Thermodynamics

Games often represent a microcosm of life, with simulations following many of the same laws—physical and otherwise—that rule the macrocosm of reality. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the underlying laws of reality offer a nice perspective from which to view game design—and potentially they form a framework to represent the principles of good game design.

One such law I find particularly applicable to the core of many well-known games: *The Second Law of Thermodynamics*. In simplified terms, the Second Law of Thermodynamics states that the entropy of the universe is always increasing. Or even more simply: Systems naturally become less organized over time unless there is some form of organizing energy added to them.

The Second Law and Games

So what does all of this have to do with game design? Good question. Many games thrive on a delicate interplay between order and disorder. Let's take a jigsaw puzzle for example. Obviously we can start with the idea that there is one (and only one) completely ordered, lowest entropy state—the completed puzzle. And, unless you're a cheater, you start playing with a disordered state (high entropy). As you put the puzzle together, you are adding energy into the system by manipulating the pieces on the table according to the rules of the game, which allows you to return the jigsaw puzzle to the lowest entropy state. On the flip side, if you applied energy randomly to the game by repeatedly throwing all of the puzzle pieces in the air hoping they'd form the completed puzzle upon landing, at some point (far longer than the lifespan of the universe) they actually would—at least theoretically. However, this would take an unfathomable amount of energy—far more than if the player applied energy intelligently—because the probability of the puzzle randomly returning to its lowest entropy state is very low.

> *Lesson #1: Achieving low entropy is easiest if you follow the rules of the game intelligently and efficiently.*

Another good example is a Rubik's Cube. Again, you start with a random, disordered state and your goal is to reconfigure the cube to achieve the state of complete order while complying with the rules of the game. If the goal were reversed, and you started with a solved Rubik's Cube and had to create a disordered state, it would obviously be much easier—because you would not have to use any brain power in manipulating the cube. You can quickly place the Rubik's Cube into any of the 43,252,003,274,489,855,999 disordered states (that's 43 quintillion), but there is only one ordered state.

> *Lesson #2: Achieving a state of disorder is easier than achieving a singular state of order.*

Second Law Games and Fun

You might already see the connection between the Second Law and that familiar casual game mantra: easy to learn, but hard to master. The mechanics of twisting the Rubik's Cube or moving a jigsaw puzzle piece is easy enough for a two year old, but mastering the specific rules to order the game system correctly is challenging for most of us. A key feature of this kind of casual game is that often fun, complex strategies emerge from a set of fairly simple rules as you strive for more efficient ways to create organization out of apparent chaos. In other words, you have fun by *working against* the Second Law of Thermodynamics.

A great number of games use these principles to create a fun user experience. In addition to those previously mentioned, such games include those with one unique low entropy state (like slider puzzles, crosswords, and logic games) to games in which your success depends on your ability to achieve a low entropy state within explicit time constraints (such as time management games or games like *Tetris*).

Aside from providing a unique kind of fun in the game space, Second Law games have many advantages. Because such games feature a large number of possible game states, they remain fresh, with a high degree of "replayability." This is why people have enjoyed the same sorts of puzzle games and word games for decades. On the other hand, scripted games which lack multiplayer features or good AI depend on level designers to create the fun. The game-play of a scripted game can quickly become bland or predictable by comparison. Once mastered, scripted games aren't much fun any more.

By Jeremy Mayes

Jeremy Mayes is currently the Director of Game Production at Arkadium, a leading web game solutions developer in New York City, where he leads a large team of artists and programmers both in New York City and Simferopol, Ukraine. He is primarily responsible for designing and creating Flash based casual games (both original titles and advergames) for clients ranging from Fortune 500 companies to small businesses. Jeremy is also one of Arkadium's lead game designers and actively contributes art and animation to various projects. Jeremy can be reached at: jeremy.mayes@casualconnect.org.

Because Second Law games feature a large number of possible game states, they remain fresh, with a high degree of "replayability." This is why people have enjoyed the same sorts of puzzle games and word games for decades.

(Thermo)Dynamic Games

Game Design and the Second Law of Thermodynamics

Creating Second Law Games

Designing a game that challenges players via consequences of the Second Law is actually quite simple. Already we've learned that achieving low entropy is easiest if you follow the rules of the game intelligently and efficiently. We've also learned that achieving a state of disorder is easier than achieving a singular state of order. Those two lessons lead us to what might be called the *Second Law Rules of Game Design:*

1. Develop a system that a player can manipulate according to a set of rules that operate forward or backward in a self-consistent manner.
2. Ensure that there is at least one ordered, *goal state.*

Programming such a game is easy. Since the above system will have more disordered states than ordered states, the logical route is to start with an ordered state, or goal, and work backward. A jigsaw manufacturer doesn't shape each piece individually and hope that they are crafted with enough precision to fit together; rather it starts from a complete image and *cuts it up.* This assures that all of the pieces fit snugly and that there is (at least) one logical solution to the puzzle.

Similarly, the best way to program a game of this type would be to start with a solution, then scramble the system in reverse (employing the same rules that the player will use) until the game has reached the highest level of entropy—or at least a satisfactory level of disorder to present a challenge to the player. Furthermore, you'll want to ensure that there is some randomness to the state of the game each time it begins. To do so, be sure to include at least one random choice when the system is presented with multiple options. Typically, the more random choices the program makes, the greater the number of initial game states there will be.

Examples

To illustrate how the Second Law Rules of Game Design can be used to create exceptional games, consider two examples: *Sudoku* and *Avant Grid*.

Sudoku

Sudoku, popular both in newspapers and online casual game sites, is a great example of a Second Law game. Players have to fill in the missing numbers in a partially completed 9x9 grid in accordance with certain rules. Each

Avant Grid can be played at: http://www.greatdaygames. com/games/avant-grid.aspx

row, column, and 3x3 group of numbers must use each digit from 1 to 9 exactly once.

Let's see how *Sudoku* applies the Second Law Rules of Game Design:

- *Self-consistent rules for the player to follow.* Check. The rules are simple enough to follow and the process of filling in the missing numbers works the same forwards or backwards—there are no logical contradictions to prevent you from designing the goal state first.
- *At least one ordered goal state.* Check. Among a practically infinite array of 6,670 quintillion valid states of a 9x9 *Soduku* board, the player must arrive at the lowest entropy goal state.

Avant Grid

How does one actually come up with a new game following the Second Law Rules? Consider the case of *Avant Grid,* a new web game from Arkadium.

In the game, you are challenged to paint grid squares on a canvas to match the colors of a sketch provided to you. A semi-transparent spray paint can sits at the end of each row and column of the grid. When you click on a grid square, the paint cans from its particular row and column both spray paint onto the square, mixing their colors. Inside of each can you can see several paint "chips" of varying color, and each time a can is discharged it sprays the next color in line.

You must click the grid squares in the correct order, discharging and mixing spray paint on each square, in order to produce the desired painting and beat the level.

The programming for this game is relatively simple. First, the game code creates the goal state: the completed canvas. To do this, it randomly chooses a color for each square from a pool of primary and secondary colors. Then it loads the components of each color into the correlating paint cans. For primary colors such as blue, red, and yellow, the component colors are identical. For instance, two blues mix to make blue. For secondary colors, such as green, the component colors are different primary colors, such as blue

and yellow. Once all of the component colors have been loaded into the paint cans in the correct order, the game is ready to be played.

When a game is programmed in this manner, one of the solutions will obviously be to play in the reverse order of that in which the game was generated. For this particular game, due to the number of squares on the grid and number of colors available, there are usually several solutions.

Avant Grid is a fun and challenging game that requires minimal level design input. Since levels are generated dynamically, the only variables that require a level designer's input are the amount of time given to the player, the number of grid squares, and the variety of available colors for each level.

Conclusion

By playing Second Law games, people learn to think creatively and recognize patterns within the noise—skills that are undoubtedly useful in life outside of the game microcosm. And so long as life continues to provide ample inspiration for game creation, Second Law gamers will struggle (both in the real world and in the virtual one) to find order amidst the apparent chaos. ■

For Further Information
Web:

Information on The Second Law of Thermodynamics: http://en.wikipedia. org/wiki/Second_law_of_thermodynamics

Mathematics of Sudoku: http://en.wikipedia. org/wiki/Mathematics_of_Sudoku

Mathematics of the Rubik's Cube: http:// en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rubik's_cube

Books:

Deep Simplicity: Bringing Order to Chaos and Complexity, by John Gribbin

The Mathematics of Games and Gambling: Second Edition, by Edward Packel

Good, Better, Best Practices

How to Stay Productive in Times of Change

Y ou've got three new messages:
Message 1: *Your boss here. Just wanted to confirm you've run all new projects by legal and we're shipping on time. Also, I need a plan from you outlining how we can ship more next quarter ASAP.*
Message 2 (your key customer): *We need to discuss the last release. It was late and the quality was poor.*
Message 3: *It's me, your project manager. Bad news, we're running late again. More details when you get in.*

Ready for another exciting day in our fast-paced, rapidly changing environment? Fire-drills, night shifts, postmortems—how have these become part of your daily routine? Rapid growth, acquisitions, budget cuts, outsourcing, lay-offs: Your work environment grows rapidly in good times, shrinks even faster in bad times. Teams get created, restructured, off-shored. People get hired, promoted, replaced. Overwhelming changes render your work environment less stable, less productive. Eventually, you'll lose your ability to plan ahead. You'll become reactive and the work culture and attitudes will change for the worse.

Project Manager: *Good morning boss. The new projects are taking much longer than we anticipated and I can't get legal to review and sign off on projects. Also, fixing bugs is taking much longer with the off-shore team. (It's the time difference.) I find myself attending too many meetings, plus I'm running after everyone all day and I don't get to do my work anymore.*

New projects, new processes, new people: Communication has become less efficient, information less available, ownership less defined. Things that used to be simple now take increasingly more time. You sit in a lot more meetings which produce fewer results. Consequently, you have less time to plan ahead and eventually become reactive.

Gaining the Upper Hand

How can you reach your goal of shipping more high-quality projects on time under these conditions? You need to change the way you plan. In addition to planning what to do (Focus) and when (Priority), you need to invest time into planning how you work (Process).

For starters, you need a report that tells you how things are currently being done: Who are the key people involved in shipping a project, what are their high-level tasks and milestones, and what documents and information are passed among them? And you need someone to own that report—someone with technical experience who also understands other aspects of the business, someone with great people- and organization-skills, someone analytical and organized. Someone like your Project Manager.

Project Manager: *That sounds like a great idea but I don't know if anybody will have any time to even meet with me. Actually, I don't have the time either. I'm just too busy getting the release out.*

Undaunted, you explain that the report is critical—and that you need it in one week. At the same time you encourage her to allow all unrelated tasks to be sent your way. Meanwhile, you have to get busy as well: You need to get your customer, your boss, and all team leaders to cooperate or the report will never get done—and things well get even worse.

Project Manager: *Here's the report. Turns out that everybody has a pretty good idea how to do their individual jobs. But wherever responsibility shifts from one team to the other, it gets messy. It's like a gray area. For each of these I set meetings with the involved folks and let them come up with their own solution. I have a feeling that these are the critical parts of the process, where things have been breaking down in the past.*

By Philipp Kemper

Philipp Kemper has worked in the casual games industry since early 2000. After establishing RealArcade as the dominant casual games distribution service in Europe and Japan, Philipp joined Oberon Media in 2005 and implemented best practices across the company. In 2008, Philipp set up his own business to to help complex, fast-moving companies increase productivity. Philipp can be reached at philipp. kemper@casualconnect.org.

Good, Better, Best Practices

How to Stay Productive in Times of Change

Genius! Instead of trying to define a process and impose it on the organization, your Project Manager helped people to come up with their own solution. The report documents communication lines, ownership, and flow of information using a visual language—easy for everybody to understand. The processes are well-abstracted into high-level overviews and easily discoverable level of detail. You ask your Project Manager to put together a simple and easy-to-change application that shows the entire process and allows everybody involved to update their individual tasks. You tell him it has to be ready in one week—no more.

A week later, you get this:

Project Manager: *I didn't have to build an application. A spreadsheet fulfills all your requirements. I added a little diagram that visualizes the status of all projects. The file sits on an FTP server. We call it the Project Dashboard. Now in status meetings, everybody can look at the same information. I also moved the process documentation to a wiki and point to it from within the spreadsheet.*

You set a brief daily meeting with everybody involved and require the dashboard to be updated beforehand—no other reports allowed. Everybody speaks in the same language and uses the same data. The formerly hour-long and ineffective meeting turns into a focused status update. After a few days, the teams realize the importance of eliminating "gray areas" and work to make smooth transitions of responsibility. Quickly, the teams start to refine the process iteratively.

At the end of the next quarter more projects have been shipped on time as a result of the refined process. By planning how to work, gray areas have been turned into areas of focus. Quality and time-to-market have improved as people work hand in hand. The new attitude of cross-team collaboration has increased morale substantially. Everybody seems to enjoy their jobs again. Understandably, your customers are happy—and so is your boss.

Recap

Does all of that sound like a fairytale to you? It doesn't need to. Spending time for planning how you work using the right methodology and tools correctly will allow you to deal with frequent change and its repercussions:

Process Management enables you to define ownership, to clarify communication lines, and to make information available. For it to work, the following are critical:

- Identify the goal (that is, ship more high-quality projects on time).
- Choose the right owner (someone with technical and personal skills who is analytical and experienced).
- Empower the owner (provide focus and establish priorities; help create buy-in on all levels).
- Set a deadline.
- Formalize the current process (identify people, tasks, and information; report the current status).
- Use a language that everybody understands (visual, well abstracted).
- Focus on transitions ("gray areas").
- Empower people to come up with their own solutions (coordinate meetings).

Workflow Engineering allows you to facilitate the process, collecting and sharing information and providing it in context. For it to be effective, the following are critical:

- Implement the exact process.
- Make it easy to change the implemented process.
- Give everybody access to the tool.
- Make the tool the only destination and source for process-related information.
- Enable collaborative documentation.

Invest time into planning how you work in order to stay productive in times of change. Soon you will become good, better, and eventually the best at what you're doing and develop into the market leader.. ■

	SPECIFICATION			DEVELOPMENT			QA			RELEASE		
	Task 1	Task 2	Task 3	Task 1	Task 2	Task 3	Task 1	Task 2	Task 3	Task 1	Task 2	Task 3
Project A				Kate								
Project B										Frank		
Project C										Frank		
Project D											Frank	
Project E												Frank

Project A	Task 1	Task 2	Task 3	Task 1	Task 2	Task 3	Task 1	Task 2	Task 3	Task 1	Task 2	Task 3
Status	Done	Done	Done	Done	Done	Done	Done	Done	Done	Working	Pending	Pending
Responsible	Peter	Paul	Peter	Kate	Ruth	Anne	James	Karl	James	Frank	Frank	Frank
ETA	Jan 05	Jan 06	Jan 08	Jan 12	Jan 14	Jan 16	Jan 20	Jan 22	Jan 24	Jan 26	Jan 28	Feb 03
Time spent	06:00	06:00	10:00	02:00	10:00	08:00	08:00	06:00	10:00	04:30		
Time left	00:00	00:00	00:00	00:00	00:00	00:00	00:00	00:00	00:00	03:30		

In addition to planning what you do (Focus) and when (Priority), you need to invest time into planning how you work (Process)

From Web-based Games to the Nintendo DS

A Production Team's Transitional Journey

For a veteran web-based game studio like Sarbakan, the explosive growth of the "games for everyone" market created new opportunities. Both our clients and publishers were requesting web-based projects of increasingly larger scope while simultaneously showing interest in casual console titles. Sarbakan was well-equipped to deal with larger PC-based games. But console games? That was uncharted territory. Did we dare go there?

After deliberation, the answer was a strategic and excited "yes." After almost a decade of producing web-based games, we felt that console gaming was the next logical step, with the Nintendo DS being a great place to start.

In the world of web-based gaming, our proven expertise had always allowed us to skip a few steps and sell our concepts easily. But we were newcomers to the console world, and although our extensive portfolio did open some doors, waving game designs around just didn't cut it anymore. Even though we had established a solid technological direction, had built our own DS engine, and were loudly shouting "yes we can," it wasn't enough. We quickly realized that not only was it necessary for us to produce technical demos and proofs of concept, we also had to show that Sarbakan could successfully go through an entire production cycle.

Of all the concepts we had fleshed out, *Wordmaster*, a word puzzle game, appeared to be the most likely to help us achieve our goal of a completed Nintendo DS title. The game was light and simple, it responded to a popular casual genre, and it had shown the most potential to get a publishing deal once completed.

And that marked the start of a whole new and challenging journey—one that allowed us to redefine our existing strengths, build a solid console knowledge base, and learn some highly valuable lessons.

By Ann Gauthier

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The Importance of Technology

One thing we have learned is that the bigger the projects you start taking on, the more important it is to continuously develop your technological structure. When we started looking into DS development, we knew that we needed a more balanced and comprehensive R&D approach to technology, design, and artwork in order to successfully support our transition toward an optimal use of the platform's potential.

This became even more important when we realized that, since no existing middleware solution met our needs, we would have to build our own. Unfortunately, *Wordmaster* demonstrated that our initial solution was a little too generic and not specific enough to the word game genre to take full advantage of the system's resources. We were unable to deliver a game that reached its full potential because our engine was too rigid.

Consoles Are Less Forgiving

One major difference between web-based game production and console development is the testing process. When producing a web-based game, you can simply send your games through QA (compatibility, functionality, and linguistics testing) and then you are ready to launch. But on console it is a much more complicated process. You have to prepare your game for certification by the console manufacturer—which means meeting all of the predefined validations. Don't hesitate to double-, triple- and even quadruple-check a game before sending it in for final certification, because failing the certification process can have dire consequences on both your ship date and your relationship with the manufacturer.

From Web-based Games to the Nintendo DS

A Production Team's Transitional Journey

> *Don't hesitate to double-, triple- and even quadruple-check a game before sending it in for final certification, because failing the certification process can have dire consequences on both your ship date and your relationship with the manufacturer.*

With DS game development, we had to take into account a number of technical factors such as available memory, screen size, touch zone, and on-screen elements limitations—most of which were not an issue with PC design. For example, had *Wordmaster* been a PC game, the word puzzles could have been of any length. On the DS, seven-letter words were too long to be properly displayed on-screen, and five-letter words were deemed too easy; so we had to settle for six-letter words. This decision caused concerns about variety and game time.

Beyond its technical boundaries, the DS offers other interesting design challenges through its unique features. How do we make the second screen, the touch screen, or the microphone part of the game-play? We addressed the touch screen design issue by simply having the player hold the DS sideways, like a book, with the left screen acting as the game screen and the right one serving as the writing pad..

Artwork

For an artist, working on a DS project requires more discipline than a PC project. The artist's real DS challenge is to do justice to a licensed intellectual property (IP) in spite of very low resolution ("down to the pixel"), a 256-color palette, and limitations in available memory.

For the most part, *Wordmaster*'s artists had previously worked exclusively on web-based or retail projects. That means they had to rethink the way in which they designed the visual assets. The basic notions remained the same, but they had to understand that everything would be transferred to another platform through an intermediate process that we nicknamed "nitro-ization" (after Nintendo's NITRO-Character software). The low-res 2D portable console world was so different from what they were used to that our artists had

to think about "seconds per frame" rather than "frames per second." Of course, that meant they had to start dramatically reducing the number of frames in their animations.

Even if we were already aware of these notions, applying them was still a challenge. Looking back, we realize that we took a PC approach to *Wordmaster*, and that kept us from reaching optimal results. For example, although reducing the number of frames in *Wordmaster*'s animations would have decreased their fluidity, it would have at the same time increased their variety while consuming less memory. And this well-learned lesson has served to guide our artists in all the console projects that quickly followed.

In Conclusion

Wordmaster enabled us to demonstrate our capabilities on a new platform, and allowed us the opportunity to re-evaluate and adjust our production philosophy, process. and best practices. For a web-based game studio to successfully take on DS development, it requires a strong technological structure, strategic management of all resources, a dedicated team with strong adaptation capabilities, and an understanding of what is at stake.

If our impressive web experience wasn't acknowledged in the console world at first, it sure gave us a sharp learning curve when it came time to produce our second and third DS titles. When we started producing our current XBLA and Wiiware project, we were simply better prepared. But that is a story for another day. ∎

In order to ensure a smooth launch process, we sent *Wordmaster* to an official pre-certification testing lab. This allowed us to confirm that we were on the right track and that our build responded to Nintendo's high quality standards. Once we secured our publishing deal, the pre-certification procedure proved to have been worthwhile, as our game was approved on the first submission.

Game Design

Expectations for console titles are generally higher, and independent developers often end up being compared to the "big guys." Although our strong web-based experience gave us the advantage of knowing the casual players' mindset, our design team quickly needed to get acquainted with all the technical documentation and requirements of the platform, which could have a direct impact on the game structure.

From Theory to Practice
A Phased Approach to User Testing

What is the difference between creating a casual game and shipping a hit title? Certainly there is a vast array of factors—including solid design, talented development team, sufficient production budget, and a strong marketing plan—that contribute to the success of any title. But one often-overlooked key is continued user testing throughout the entire production cycle. That's not to say that it is as simple as building the game and testing it along the way. If it were *that* easy, then there would be less mediocre content available and higher conversion rates across the board. The concept of user testing is incredibly easy to grasp. The practice of doing it, however—and doing it well—is another story.

User testing is not rocket science, but doing it correctly so that the testing yields useful results is hard and requires multiple testing cycles. In a sense, it is similar to the continued stages of crash testing automotive companies go through while engineering and developing new cars. Engineers continually road test and crash vehicles, analyze the data, refine designs, re-engineer, and then retest.

Testing games follows the same process: develop a concept, test, develop a design, test, build the game, test, redesign and rebuild the game, *crash* test, then re-engineer and retest. This process can be applied to the development of any game title, be it an educational game, a core console game, or a casual downloadable game. However, in casual development this iterative process is especially important because of the end user. People who play and purchase casual games are discerning consumers, but they aren't always the most sophisticated online gamers. They grew up on cards, boards, and perhaps *Pong* paddles; they weren't born with fourteen button control devices in hand. This crowd of end users requires additional cycles of diligent user testing to further refine, simplify, and perfectly balance UI and level design.

From its inception, PlayFirst has spent significant resources refining a formula for creating and launching hit games. We have come up with a five phase research program in an attempt to turn consumer testing into more of a science. Our methodology looks like this: Informal Usability, Formal Usability, Internal PlayDate, First Peek, and Public Beta.

by Aaron Norstad

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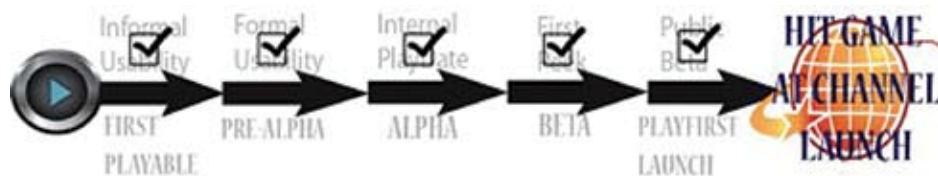
We see strong ROI from our testing methodology, and *Casual Connect* asked us to share our experience by defining and stepping through these five phases in an effort to explain how to put the theory into practice. The take home message is: test often, test smart, re-engineer, and re-test.

Step One: Informal Usability

Testing isn't cheap, and redesigning based on usability feedback is even more expensive. The entire idea of iterative testing is to find issues as quickly and cheaply as possible—to make sure the product being developed actually entertains the target market as much as the designer feels the game should. Therefore, it is beneficial to begin performing informal testing as early in the development cycle as possible; however you must balance the need for early feedback with the need to make sure the game is ready to test. Testing too early may result in false negatives simply because the game mechanic just isn't playable. For this reason, we try to map the First Playable as a marker for when to begin doing Informal Usability.

From Theory to Practice

A Phased Approach to User Testing

The entire idea of iterative testing is to find issues as quickly and cheaply as possible—to make sure the product being developed actually entertains the target market as much as the designer feels the game should.

- **Objective**: The goal of Informal Usability is to refine the game concept and design and then make any changes necessary to get the Pre-Alpha build ready for more formal usability testing.
- **Methodology**: During Informal Usability we bring people from the target market in to our office to spend 30 to 60 minutes playing the First Playable build. It is best when administered by an impartial third party. We have a Marketing Brand Manager run these test sessions, and in a pinch we'll use the game's Designer or Producer. The preferred method is to have a game build that includes tutorials in place so a user can just sit down and begin playing with very little instruction. If the game doesn't have necessary tutorial scaffolding, then we conduct the test sessions with minimal guidance and watch the users stumble along rather than directing them how to play.

    We use various San Francisco Bay Area websites to recruit users for Informal Usability. This can be done fairly easily in most metropolitan areas by posting game testing ads on various community sites. Prepare a well-crafted qualifier document to use for selecting test candidates, and then begin *interviewing* candidates to narrow down the final pool of testers. We offer a small monetary payment along with free game coupons for the service of performing the usability tests.

- **Time Period:** Informal Usability should take place over two-to-six weeks building up to Pre-Alpha. That said, it is the one test phase that can and should continue throughout all of production up through Beta. Phases of user testing can also begin prior to First Playable; however, those earlier phases would be more like paper and prototype testing and should have a different set of goals and criteria related to teasing out potential design issues. (One we're always looking to determine as quickly as possible: "Is it fun?")

- **Best Practice:** Be objective, ask open questions without leading the testers, take good notes, and apply the results to make game design changes. Also, be sure to know the audience. It is great to sample a large cross-section of users, but temper results that come from users outside of the core demographic. Ideally, the testing is focused on core users with people outside of the core group supplementing the testing. For example: Does your mom like you? Then she's not a good tester. Friends and family are great for initial prototype testing, and potentially late cycle testing, but not usability testing. Finally, make sure not to recycle testers from the pool of candidates. It's not a good practice to be in the business of training professional testers.

- **The Scariest Moment I've Ever Had at a Usability Session:** It wasn't seeing people cry (which has happened by the way), but hearing our Creative Director look a game designer in the eye and say "the big issue you have with your game is that you don't have a game." After many months of design and development, one can imagine this didn't go over very well. Incidentally, after the usability test we spent six months putting "a game" into the game, and it paid off. The game performed below average in Usability but then had a 4.28 (out of 5) ranking in First Peek with 36% of users saying they would purchase the game. That's great!

Step Two: Formal Usability

Building from the rounds of Informal Usability and iterating on design changes, the next phase of user testing is to take a solid and stable Pre-Alpha build into a formal research center to conduct Formal Usability studies.

- **Objective:** Identify authentic consumer experiences with the first 45 minutes of game play. The take-away is a detailed report capturing user rankings with top 10 bullet lists of what is and isn't working in the game,

along with suggested solutions for addressing what isn't working.

- **Methodology:** Use a professional third-party facilitator conducting formal tests that are recorded on DVD. Design and development teams are on-site (or patched in via video conference) watching the usability studies in real-time. PlayFirst uses XEO Design (www.xeodesign.com) in Oakland, California, for most Formal Usability studies.

- **Time Period:** The Usability Study is one intense day of six to eight individual one-hour study sessions. The entire Formal Usability phase takes about three weeks: Week One is the kickoff, writing the test plan and recruiting users; Week Two is the pilot test (dry run) and the Usability Study; and Week Three is Usability analysis and review.

- **Best Practices:** All key design decision makers on the development team should be present for the Formal Usability study. This is the most critical part of Usability. Spending a day working together and watching real users play and respond to the game live and in person is invaluable. Have an open mind, and expect the unexpected. Regardless of type of game, there is always something new to discover. Typically the biggest concerns turn out to be non-issues and the features thought to be most locked down often have the biggest usability issues and require the most redesign work.

    The morning after the Usability, gather everyone together and debrief to thoroughly understand all of the issues before beginning to work on solutions. As a publisher, we have found that experiencing usability testing together with one or more members of the development team is a critical component of maintaining alignment through often difficult decisions surrounding goals, scope, budget and schedule.

Step Three: Internal "PlayDate"

PlayFirst has a fairly rigorous QA Alpha test cycle requiring a game to be feature-complete with a representation of all functionality and no missing assets before being approved for the Alpha milestone. Once a game hits that milestone it is then ready for an internal testing cycle we call PlayDate.

- **Objective:** Identify issues and red flags with game mechanic, design, and look and feel in preparation for the First Peek release.
- **Methodology:** Employees at PlayFirst play the first hour of the game and fill out a survey with feedback.
- **Time Period:** It is one hour of testing, completed by various people over the course of one or two days. Occasionally, though rare, a second PlayDate is conducted later in development as a way to substantiate design changes.
- **Best Practice:** The people working at PlayFirst come from a large and varied talent pool. We have found over time that the organization as a whole is very good at predicting sales performance of a game once it hits the market. Timing this phase of testing is key to ensure the next phase is a success and yields optimal testing data. What is most important about the PlayDate phase is to obtain tangible feedback that can be acted upon and implemented in preparation for the First Peek phase. For developers that do not have fifty or more employees, you might need to be creative in coming up with a cheap but "clean" testing pool. You could consider some combination of friends, family and your most loyal end users.
- **Favorite All-time Quote from an Internal PlayDate:** "I was starting to enjoy the game, but the headache-inducing clanking sound was so ear-piercing I couldn't stand to play the game longer than three minutes." Interesting note: This quote was specific to the PlayFirst title, *Mahjong Roadshow*. Although we fixed this sound effect, the game never turned a corner. It performed mildly or below average at each phase and its First Peek ranking is noted below. The game unfortunately never performed once hitting the market. It's an example of what can happen when you somewhat ignore the data telling you the game will be a miss with your target market.

Step Four: "First Peek"

Nothing is more eye-opening than reading feedback from a thousand real users stating why they hate a feature or why they love the game's audio, art, or story. Actually, the one thing that is even more telling is seeing the real metrics data capturing how users played the game. It is very interesting to read survey feedback stating

one thing and then to review the metrics data indicating the complete opposite.

Using PlayFirst's Playground SDK as the development architecture gives us the ability to easily track this data. As a process, PlayFirst has an analyst who works with the developer to create a metrics dictionary detailing the specific play session information we want to collect. Then, working from the hooks within the SDK framework, the developer is able to code the metrics and easily build a First Peek version of the game source.

- **Objective:** The business models for the casual download space are ever-evolving, but the core model is still focused on the 60-minute trial. For this reason, the main object of First Peek is to finely tune the game for the 60-minute trial in preparation for the final version of the shippable game.
- **Methodology:** A 60-minute content limited build is released to several thousand users in the PlayFirst beta community. Users fill out a survey at the end of the trial, and metrics data is collected and tabulated at the end of the First Peek phase.
- **Time Period:** The First Peek version is made available for one week and during that period users can play the trial and submit feedback. A large bulk of feedback comes within the first few days, which then allows the development team to immediately begin analyzing data and begin considering changes.
- **Outcome**: First Peek is the most telling phase of user testing. Two incredibly useful pieces of information are gleaned: quantitative data that shows how users actually played the game, including data points such as where users got stuck and how many click strokes were made to complete a level; and the qualitative feedback with overall exit survey rankings. The quantitative data is used for level tuning, sometimes level redesign, and game-play balancing. It is also used as a measurement of success, or failure, of specific game features. The survey rankings have great accuracy at predicting a game's conversion rate once launched to the public. It is a one to five ranking system, with five ranking best. The data has proven that users ranking a five have a high probability of purchasing, and thus the total percentage of fives is a marker for a game's potential performance. For example,

someone may say "I love this game and I can't wait to buy it," but then will rank it a three. That user may download the game, but most likely will never purchase it.

The chart below puts this ranking phenomenon into context by providing an inside look at how various games have performed in First Peek. Any time over 35% of people rate a game a five (out of five), it's good. Anything above 40% is *really* good. On the other hand, anything below 30% isn't great, and anything below 20% is bad.

SAMPLE FIRST PEEK RANKINGS

(Percent of Users Rating the Game 5 out of 5)

- *Mahjong Roadshow**—17%
- *Fashion Dash*—30%
- *Dairy Dash*—39%
- *Chocolatier*—41%
- *Pet Shop Hop*—42%
- *Doggie Dash*—43%
- *Dream Chronicles*—43%
- *Diner Dash: Hometown Hero*—65%
- *Wedding Dash*—68%

*Mahjong Roadshow is a baseline comparison of a game that did not perform very well in First Peek or after launch

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- **Best Practice:** At PlayFirst, First Peek is a little bit like Groundhog Day in that depending on the outcome it tells how far or how close a game is to hitting a launch date. The critical business decision is to use the data wisely to determine how much more time and resources should be put into a game. If a game has an average ranking and a large number of users identify a specific problem, then we must make a business decision: Will the eventual rate of conversion be sufficiently high to justify the time and cost of "fixing" the problem?

In addition to the potential financial impact of addressing changes after First Peek, it is equally important to make sure a game is ready to go into First Peek. If we release into First Peek a game that we know has a flaw, it means we'll have 500 to 1,000 users spending time telling us about that flaw. It ends up being a partial waste of time and the data

From Theory to Practice

A Phased Approach to User Testing

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collected is less valuable. Similarly, it's critical to ensure that specific features we want user feedback on are in the game and functioning properly. It may seem obvious, but we learned this lesson the hard way. (For instance, if you want to get reactions to voiceover dialogue, make sure the audio is actually audible.)

Step Five: Public Beta

After months of development, four tough phases of user testing, and the grueling QA cycles, the game is ready to go live on www.playfirst.com. This is when the game developers sit back, and when the PlayFirst producers, marketing, sales, and PR folks really kick into gear.

- *Objective:* Track sales, watch forum posts, read reviews, pay attention to leader boards, and prepare for Channel Launch.
- *Methodology:* Marketing rolls out go-to-market launch plan, PR begins building a buzz, press begins reviewing the game, and then the game launches on the PlayFirst site. Teams immediately begin tracking performance.
- *Time Period:* Public Beta continues for the first six weeks after the game launches on PlayFirst, after which the game begins going live on partner sites.
- *Best Practice:* Pay close attention to performance. Watch what users are saying, track customer service reports for any odd

issues, and be patient. There is a tendency after a game launches to overreact to what people are saying or to make gross assumptions from early sales reports. There are a few occasions when PlayFirst has made a design change to a game after launch and then re-launched prior releasing it to the Channel. This is only done when the risk is low and confidence is high that the changes will improve conversion. For cases like these, PlayFirst games on PlayFirst.com have an updater technology built in to facilitate updates post-launch so that the entire consumer base is on the same version regardless of when they downloaded the game.

Conclusion

So is this methodology truly a success formula? Well, after this process kicked into gear in the second quarter of 2007, three of the twelve games PlayFirst published in 2007 won Zeeby awards (*Diner Dash: Hometown Hero, Chocolatier,* and *Dream Chronicles*), and five others were huge financial successes. By comparison, several of the games that launched in the beginning of 2007—games that did not go through the full five cycles—did not perform very well. Then 2008 was another breakout year for PlayFirst and

continued to yield great success with hits such as *Dream Chronicles 2: The Eternal Maze, Cooking Dash, Wedding Dash 2: Rings Around the World, Pet Shop Hop, Doggie Dash, Dairy Dash, Parking Dash,* and *Nightshift Legacy: The Jaguar's Eye.* We believe that our hit rate would not have been possible without the insights derived from extensive consumer testing and related development iterations. That isn't to say that everything is done to perfection and that there isn't any room for improvement, but rather that there's extraordinary value in robust testing.

Of course, a phased approach to user testing is by no means original to the PlayFirst publishing model. Furthermore, the practice of such an approach will not guarantee a hit game. There are games that suffer from lack of proper focus in the early phases of testing, which results in poor ratings at the later phases of testing, which in turn leads to mediocre sales performance because proper time and resources weren't applied to making improvements. It is hard to properly conduct the phased approach to user testing, and it takes tremendous collaboration between the design, development, and publishing teams. Making games is fun, but it is painful. Most importantly, it requires humility and a lot of laughter, and a willingness to change. ■

MILESTONE DEFINITIONS

First Playable: This is not a prototype. This is a solid build that has the core game mechanic, several successive levels of game-play (or the equivalent of 15 minutes of game-play), and a combination of placeholder art and audio mixed with polished art and audio.

Pre-Alpha: Mapping to the length of game-play experience, the Pre-Alpha features most of the core game-play functionality and has 30-to-45 minutes of solid game-play.

Alpha: Alpha is a feature-complete build that contains a variety of placeholder assets but isn't missing any assets.

Beta: This build is asset-complete, with design that is locked and frozen. Any design changes during Beta revert back to Alpha.

PlayFirst Launch: This is when the game goes live on www.playfirst.com prior to the general channel launch on all portal sites.