"Looking for Group"

Life in a Fledgling Video Game Studio

Prepared for:

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by

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With thanks to Guillaume Boucher-Vidal of nine dots

and James Portnow of EXTRA Credits and DigiPen Institute of Technology

ABSTRACT:

Over the past few decades, the video game industry has evolved from the lone wolf visionaries of the 1970s and 1980s into conglomerate powerhouses like Electronic Arts and Activision, but this transition has come with a hefty price. As with any form of artistic expression, the untenable working conditions so common to the industry show themselves in the final product — a detriment to consumers and developers alike. But a new generation of visionaries are striking out against incredible odds to change these practices.

Independent development studios (aka "indies") are eschewing the rigid organizational structures of "old guard" studios. In addition to the decision-makers being more accessible to those who are actually doing the work, these studios place more emphasis on talent and experience than formal education. Furthermore, this former "boys-only club" is breaking into new ground by becoming less male-centric — not only taking a mature approach towards targeting female audiences but actively recruiting women into the development side of the equation.

These changes are revitalizing a stagnant industry. The "old guard" is losing its monopolization as they are forced to compete with indies on two fronts simultaneously — for employees as well as for consumers. The intramural autonomy enjoyed by indie developers is a huge draw for much of the greatest talent in the industry. While they often work just as hard as before, they make a clear distinction between 'suffering for their art' and 'slaving away for the company'.

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INTRODUCTION:

Over the past few decades, the video game industry has evolved from the "lone wolf" visionaries of the 1970s and 1980s to become dominated by corporate powerhouses like Electronic Arts and Activision which are often noted for hostile and oppressive work cultures. But the widespread adoption of the internet has opened the door for lone wolves and other "little guys" — collectively referred to as *indies* — to break into the industry, many with the explicit goal of getting back to the basic principles which were originally responsible for this tremendous growth.

This report highlights notable industry failures brought about by ubiquitously poor working conditions and explores how a few noteworthy groups and individuals are making efforts to improve things for the industry as a whole. With the stagnation of the "safe" big-budget AAA market, consumers are turning towards the less-expensive small-scale games which are taking their place alongside the "old guard" — and, in some instances, beginning to dominate. (DigiPen, 2013)

BACKGROUND:

Once the obscure purview of fringe enthusiasts, video games are coming into their own as a mainstream medium and, like its predecessors, is gradually becoming a medium for purposes beyond 'mere' entertainment. For decades, the United States military has been using video games to train pilots and soldiers to operate aircraft, ground vehicles, and other equipment under combat conditions without the real-world risks. Modern developers are taking advantage of the voluntary nature of gameplay to promote everything from social awareness to job training to general and specific education.

The interactive nature and depth of immersion unique to video games, along with the ever-evolving technology used to present them, have allowed them to become one of the most powerful forms of media extant. But, as with any form of media, the quality of the finished product is heavily reliant upon the conditions under which it is created. "At our best, we're an alchemist's lab, the Ames Research Center, Michelangelo's workshop, and the City Lights bookstore all rolled into one. But, at our worst, we keep the same hours as a sweatshop, we have the maturity level of a preschool, and the fiscal responsibility of a sub-prime mortgage trader." (Portnow, 2013)

Renowned developers such as James Portnow are working hard to educate aspiring developers and reeducate existing ones in an effort to make developing video games as enjoyable as playing them, while former wage-slaves such as Jason Seeley and Guillaume Boucher-Vidal are breaking away to do likewise by founding independent development studios (aka "indies"). Furthermore, this former "boys-only club" is breaking into new ground by becoming less male-centric — not only taking a mature approach towards targeting female audiences but actively recruiting women into the development side of the equation.

A large part of this shift is only possible thanks to the widespread adoption of the internet, which allows developers and consumers to interact directly. Gone are the days when sales were largely restricted to "brick-and-mortar" retailers who were only accessible to developers by way of major publishing corporations. Countless websites dedicated to video games give "the little guys" as much publicity as they do the mainstream powerhouses, while crowdfunding sites such as IndieGoGo and online distributors such as Steam enable consumers (rather than corporate executives who rarely, if ever, even play video games) to determine what video games get produced.

These changes have greatly revitalized a once-stagnant industry outwardly and led to notable reform internally. The intramural autonomy enjoyed by indie developers is a huge draw for much of the greatest talent in the industry.

METHODOLOGY:

A long, storied interest in video games has led to countless investigations over the years as to how they are created. This has resulted in communications with a number of professionals within the industry — some of which whose names are not so much spoken as whispered with reverent awe. While these communications have covered a tremendous breadth of topics ranging from design theory to development methodology, organizational culture and other working conditions play an integral role in the creation process.

Information specifically concerning organizational culture has been gleaned from these sources. Additional information on this subject has been acquired from notable industry publications, from periodicals as well as authoritative internet resources.

The primary sources of information utilized for this report include:

WEBCASTS:

Extra Credits

This web video series was originally started February 17th, 2008 by Daniel Floyd as a presentation for his Art History course at the Savannah College of Art and Design, but quickly garnered the attention of many professionals working in the video game industry. One of these was James Portnow, one of the brain trusts behind the radically-successful *Call of Duty* and *Farmville* franchises. Floyd presently works as an animator at PIXAR Canada, while Portnow runs a consulting firm called Rainmaker Games and teaches game design at DigiPen. The show was catapulted into the international spotlight in May 2012 when their episode on harassment among online gamers prompted the industry behemoth Microsoft to convene a special meeting in response. (DigiPen, 2013)

Regular weekly episodes average eight minutes in length, and the topic of each focuses on a specific aspect of video games and/or the industry which creates them. The particular episodes drawn upon for this report include the one on Working Conditions (Season 3, Episode 15) and various episodes outlining the various roles within a video game development studio and how they are organized.

PUBLICATIONS:

Game Developer Magazine
Game Developer is a now-monthly periodical which reports on the goings-on within the video game industry and regularly features noteworthy articles by professionals within the industry to inform and educate readers who aspire to join their ranks. All past issues are available for free from their archives at http://www.gdcvault.com/.

In addition to annual reports on salaries and demographics within the industry, the magazine regularly features articles addressing working conditions at studios ranging from small startups to major powerhouses.

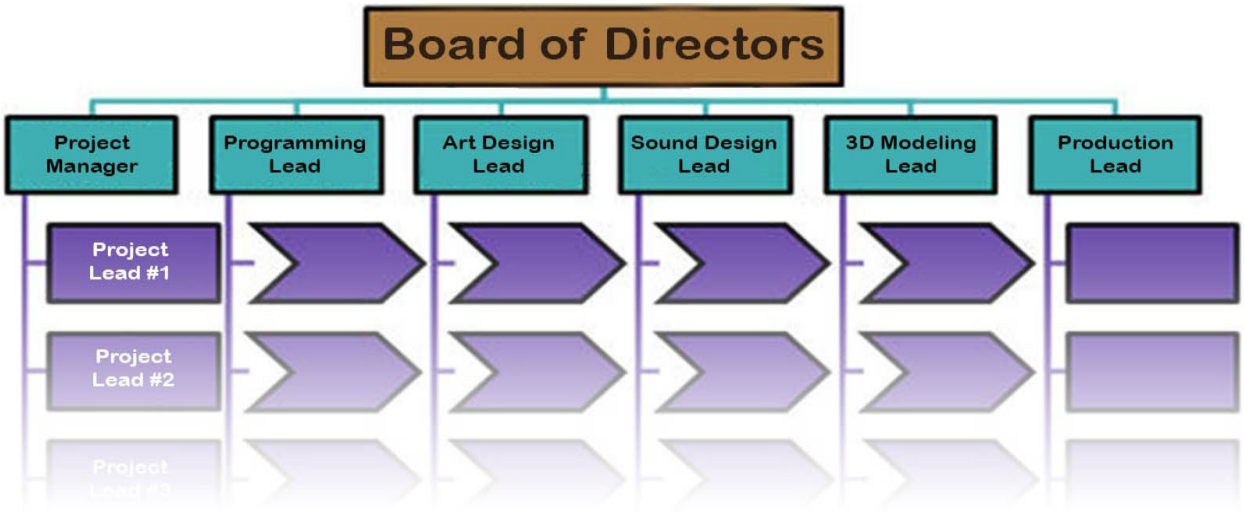
PERSONAL COMMUNICATIONS:

Guillaume Boucher-Vidal, Nine Dots Studio, Quebec, Canada
The *Extra Credits* episode on Working Conditions prompted first contact with Guillaume Boucher-Vidal back on 20 September 2012. Regular communications via email since then have included a wealth of information concerning his past and current experiences in the video game industry.

Guillaume Boucher-Vidal founded Nine Dots Studio in February 2011 with the explicit goal of escaping the poor working conditions and inept management so common to conglomerate powerhouses, citing publishers as "the number one source for these problems". In his experience working for several big-name studios, he discovered that the average game developer quits the industry within five years. This is simply not a sustainable business model when it generally requires a four-year college degree just to obtain an entry-level position. (Boucher-Vidal, 2011)

Jason Seeley, Lookstone Tech, Ogden, Utah
First interviewed on 28 June 2013, Jason Seeley has proven to be another spectacular mentor. A former employee at Electronic Arts, he left in 2005 to found Lookstone Tech, using his formidable programming skills instead to develop custom software solutions for local businesses. He also teaches advanced courses in software design and programming at Weber State University.

FINDINGS:



ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE:

Indie and AAA developers share much of the same organizational structure, resulting in their systems of communication being nearly identical. Rather than the traditional hierarchy of most businesses, video game developers implement an organizational structure resembling a matrix — levels of authority are tiered while each level is also compartmentalized based upon their current project(s).

Individual Developers

The 'trenches' are where 'most of the work gets done'. Individual developers — be they artists, modelers, programmers, or whatever — work in collective groups towards a specific task. Similar to a meritocracy, one individual is delegated as Group Lead by virtue of their experience and proficiency. Although they are ultimately responsible for the group's productivity, they are far more a comrade-in-arms than authoritative. Communication within this structure is largely informal, usually face-to-face or through localized memos and email. The atmosphere in each group is highly fraternal, usually with lax dress codes, and schedule flexibility is managed internally.

Departmental Leads

Next tier up includes Departmental Leads who are responsible for and have authority over their specific disciplines. This tier is considerably more formal — business-casual dress codes, using formal memos and reports, rigid schedules, etc. They primarily work with the Group Leads of their discipline to maintain homogeneous resources and workflows between individual groups, and with the Project Leads to ensure than developmental milestones are met.

Project Leads

While the Project Leads are technically part of the same tier as Departmental Leads, they operate somewhat differently. Schedules are more firm as to *when* a person is working but lax as to *where*, since they are responsible for a diverse collection of groups — which can be working in multiple locations. They rely heavily on electronic means such as email and teleconferences for the bulk of their communications, though they also compile reports — ranging from status reports to project proposals.

Board of Directors

Development studios are overseen by a Board, the size of which varies based upon the size of the studio. They are the ultimate authority for the studio, deciding upon which projects to pursue, what resources to procure, and how to implement them. They tend to have numerous conferences and dress in formal business attire. While they receive and review formal reports from the lower tiers, they rely primarily on letters and memos for downward communications.

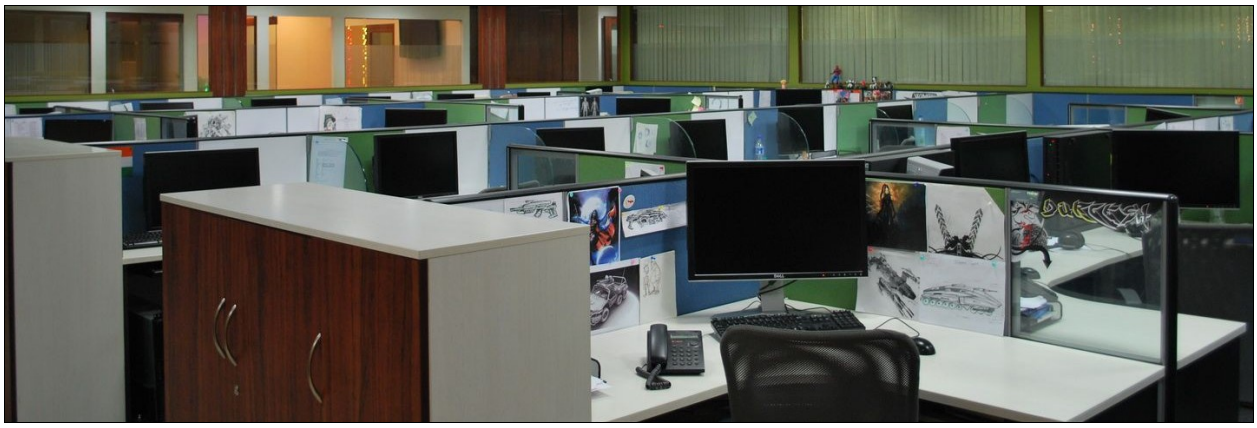
EDUCATIONAL REQUIREMENTS:

Unless an individual creates a name for themselves working independently, such as with a fledgling indie developer, a Bachelors Degree in an applicable discipline is all but mandatory for even an entry-level position in the video game industry. (Miller, 2013) This requirement also underscores why the dominant trend with publisher-owned and first-party developers simply cannot be maintained — with people averaging less than five years in the industry before giving up. (G. Boucher-Vidal, personal communications, 20 September 2012)

Influence of the Internet:

The widespread adoption of the internet allows developers direct access to consumers and enables them to publish video games themselves. Developers are also able to publish their games through distribution services such as Steam. They also receive the same level of coverage through online review sites — such as Imagine Games Network (IGN), Polygon, and Gamasutra — that was once reserved for mainstream publishers. In fact, independent developers (aka "indies") frequently receive preferential treatment from such websites as each wants to be the one to discover the next indie smash hit.

Guillaume Boucher-Vidal, founder and CEO of Nine Dots Studio is but one person among hundreds (perhaps thousands) who attribute the relative stagnation of video games to the oppressive and archaic business model employed by most publishers. (Personal communications, 20 September 2012) Without a formal publisher looming overhead, development studios are free to explore entirely new genres of experiences with unfettered creativity.



Physical Work Environment:

Independent video game developers vary widely as to their physical workspace. Games have grown too complex for a single developer to manage in most cases, though there are always exceptions to every rule, and typical staff sizes vary from around twenty (G. Boucher-Vidal, personal communications, 20 September 2012) to around one hundred (McMillen, 2011)

Both Seeley and Boucher-Vidal express that smaller "official workspace" leads to the highest productivity and overall efficiency. Boucher-Vidal reports a considerable increase compared to when the studio worked more informally, with most people working from their own homes with little face-to-face interaction. Seeley reports a similar decline when too many people are "shoehorned together in cubicle hell".

Gender Issues:

The world of video games — both among enthusiasts and developers — is still widely perceived as "a boys only club". While this has been true throughout most of this industry's history, the situation has changed radically since the turn of the millennium. The Entertainment Software Association reports that the average gamer is no longer a teenaged male but a 37-year-old female. (2012) While the Nintendo Wii holds a 41% plurality among male gamers, it dominates with an 80% majority among female gamers. (ESRB, 2010)

This tremendous shift in consumer demographics has spurred a gradual transition towards more women working in the video game industry. Although women only comprise 13% of the workforce, this still represents a doubling of female workforce in the industry over the past eight years. (Miller, 2013) There is also some degree of concern that women in the video game industry typically earn 10%-20% less than their male counterparts, though seniority plays a heavy factor in earnings — those with three years or less experience typically earn 27% below average, and 39% less than those with at least six years of seniority. (Miller, 2013)

Game Design Document:

The granddaddy of all communications within a video game development studio is the Game Design Document (GDD). The Game Design Document functions much like a formal contract, bringing all the multiple disciplines 'under the same roof' to result in a cohesive finished product. If the development studio works with an outside publisher, the GDD also serves as part of the contract between them as to the video game the development studio is promising to deliver.

Origination
The Game Design Document begins life as an abstract for a completed video game and, as a living document, evolves and grows throughout the entire cycle of development. It can be submitted from most anywhere within or outside the development studio, and fully outlines what each group contributes towards the end result.

Approval Process
The Board reviews the Game Design Document and evaluates the proposal based upon numerous considerations: Does the studio possess (or can they acquire) the resources needed to see this project to fruition? Do the themes and subject matter align with the direction they want the studio to go? Is there sufficient consumer demand for such a game to justify the time and expense required to develop it?

Should the Board decide to pursue the proposal, the GDD is assigned to one of the Project Leads. The Project Lead, in turn, refines the document and works out a development schedule which includes specific milestones to meet if the project is to reach completion at an opportune point in the sales season. This is then resubmitted to the Board for final approval.

Dissemination
Once approved, the Project Lead consults with the Department Leads to delegate responsibility for each of the individual elements. Each Development Lead, in turn, determines how to reapportion the individual developers within their discipline to meet those responsibilities.

The GDD is then passed to the Group Leads, who work with their respective Development Leads to refine the document and determine precisely how each aspect is to be developed. The Group Leads also work with the individual developers within their groups to further refine the document.

Evolution
As the project is developed, changes and refinements go downward through the hierarchy while upwards changes must be submitted upwards for approval. While generally a good thing, this system does have its flaws — such as when the Board buys into industry buzzwords and demands changes detrimental to the project.

LEGENDS:

The video game industry abounds with legends and lore, many of which focus upon a seemingly-eternal battle of wills between developers, bureaucratic management, and consumers. Of these, three in particular stand out for how they have influenced the overall culture and workplace environment within the industry.

Sim City by **Will Wright**
One of the earliest examples to reveal the true potential of video games comes from the 1980s. While working for Brøderbund as a developer on *Raid on Bungeling Bay*, Will Wright found that he enjoyed creating maps of in-world terrain far more than actually playing the game. He approached Brøderbund with a finished title (then called *Micropolis*) in 1985 but the fact that the game could be neither won or lost led them to believe it was unsellable. It took Wright four years to find and partner with investor Jeff Braun to found Maxis and, even without the backing of a major publisher, the game sold more than 100,000 copies before they could find workspace other than Wright's own living room.

What's more is that, within a year of release, the game won more than twenty major awards — including several acclaims reserved for educational software — for many of the same reasons no mainstream publisher was willing to touch it with a ten-foot pole. Maxis was acquired by Electronic Arts in 1997 and one of the game's spin-off titles, *The Sims*, quickly became one of the most prominent franchises in EA's lineup.

Minecraft by **Markus Persson**

Twenty years later, another "sandbox" game denounced by publishers found its way into the hands of game enthusiasts and took the world by storm. While working for British social games company King, Swedish programmer Markus "Notch" Persson combined the "simple but deep" mechanic with basic RPG elements to create the game *Minecraft*. Since publishers considered the blocky graphics too primitive, Persson wound up publishing the game himself via his personal website where it became an instant world-wide phenomenon. As of 03 September 2013, this simple "unsellable" game has sold more than 33 million copies. (Wikipedia, 2013)

L.A. Noire by **Team Bondi**

Well-known throughout the video game industry, the story of Team Bondi serves as a cautionary tale as to the consequences of oppressive working conditions. Founder Brendan McNamara set out in 2003 to launch Australia onto the world stage of video game development, but his oppressive and confrontational style of management only served to doom the studio. Former employees described working conditions as "a 24/7 corpse grinder", working nearly 100 hours per week with McNamara verbally assaulting employees openly at the slightest provocation. (McMillan, 2013)

After burning through more than $100 million, churning through more than 400 employees (while never attaining a staff of more than 100), and alienating two different publishers, Team Bondi liquidated all its assets and declared bankruptcy in 2011. "One game, eight years of hell, and you're out of a job." (Portnow, 2013)

Discussion of Findings:

Some video game titles arrive with the pomp and fury of a hurricane only to vanish into obscurity within a few weeks, while other arrive more modestly only to become classics loved for generations. Video games which managed to accomplish both — or failed to do so despite expectations — have become legends which resonate throughout the industry.

Organizational Heirarchy:

One of the largest contributors to this dichotomy is the homogeneity of the development studio and the freedom to base decisions upon their benefit to the end product. This dichotomy generally correlates to the scale of the development studio itself, as larger studios gravitate towards enormous multimillion-dollar projects and are extremely hesitant to take the risks upon which legendary titles rely. Being unable to tackle projects of such magnitude, smaller development studios are free to pursue niche markets — creating unexpected blockbuster successes with recurring frequency.

Huge numbers of developers have long despised their studios' reliance upon mainstream publishers and regard the widespread adoption of the internet to be nothing short of a godsend. Developers are now able to pursue projects which would never see approval at a corporate scale, assisted by an ever-expanding plethora of third-party development tools which are also made accessible through the internet.

Developers at smaller studios are less removed from the upper echelons, allowing their voices to be heard more readily — and, more importantly, listened to. Similarly, those on the Boards of smaller studios are less removed from "the trenches" and possess a firmer grasp of the studios' inner workings.

This combination of factors results in a more structured and consistent workflow which minimizes the notorious "crunch time" so common to larger studios. As a result, these smaller studios are a huge draw to some of the greatest talent in the industry. While developers at smaller studios often work every bit as hard as (if not harder than) those at larger studios, the difference between "suffering for one's art" and "a mandatory death-march" is very distinct in their minds.

Social Environment:

The aforementioned organizational hierarchy, coupled with the more lateral structure between Department Leads and Project Leads, contributes to a far more casual and sociable work environment. This instills a ubiquitous sense of camaraderie between employees which is notoriously absent from most "old guard" development studios.

The scale of smaller development studios contributes towards this social atmosphere, which tends to be particularly attractive to the women who entering this testosterone-laden industry, giving smaller studios additional advantages in respect towards the expanding female audience for video games.

This atmosphere is also more welcoming towards novices. Rather than judging applicants by how much money they spent on a piece of sheepskin, they are instead evaluated by their talents and what they can bring into the collaborative effort. This has additional benefits owing to the fact that smaller studios tend to rely more upon standardized third-party development tools, rather than in-house proprietary applications.

Productivity:

Many developers find themselves intimidated by working in a "cubicle hell" — a condition which does not exist at smaller studios. The social atmosphere promotes a great deal of lateral communications, while the organizational structure encourages a passionate attitude towards current projects. The cooperative atmosphere which grants them a degree of latitude in scheduling also encourages them not to abuse it.

All of these combine to increase overall productivity by a considerable factor. The overall mindset is less that of individual developers and more of solidarity. Individual developers have vested interest in their projects being received well by consumers and will consistently keep an weather eye out for ways to improve the final products. This attitude is only reinforced by the fact that their input is not only permitted but encouraged.

Happy workers are productive workers.

CONCLUSIONS:

In summary, smaller video game development studios which manage themselves have a tremendous propensity towards creating memorable titles. Such were the conditions under which this planet-wide multibillion-dollar industry grew from the days when most titles were developed by a single individual. History has shown time and again that the passions of the creators shine through in every form of media, and video games are no exception. Working conditions within the industry can vary widely but the camaraderie of smaller studios is tailor-made to encourage such passions.

Throughout a number of past occupations, the most enjoyable have been those which combine aggressive milestones with the latitude to determine for myself how to attain them. Supervisors have frequently commented that I belonged in "some sort of think tank", owing to my natural inclination to develop creative solutions to address both sides of seemingly-incompatible extremes.

Being a video game developer offers the unique paradoxes of structured freedom and creative technicality. Of working independently on a collaborative project with aggressive milestones in a casual environment. Just the sort of environment I crave — as if my course load over the past year isn't a dead giveaway.

Not only do I fully intend to become a video game developer but I also aspire to establish my own studio at some point in the not-so-distant future.

Thank you for your time and consideration in reading this report.

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