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all your dreams come true – and make
serious money doing it!”**

— Brian Fargo, Founder, Interplay and InXile Entertainment

SCOTT STEINBERG'S

**GET
RICH
PLAYING
GAMES**

**FOREWORD BY
NOLAN BUSHNELL**

FOUNDER OF ATARI, CHUCK E. CHEESE'S AND UWINK

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GET RICH PLAYING GAMES

BY
SCOTT STEINBERG

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FOREWORD

Curiously, today's videogame business has founded itself on sequels and hits that cost literally millions to develop, produce and market. But don't be fooled by what you see on TV or in the movies.

The real truth of the matter is that there are many ways to make money in the field... even if you don't have a ton of cash sitting around burning a hole in your pocket. In fact, sometimes capital is a poor substitute for creativity and passion – something the game industry desperately needs more of, especially now!

Hoping to strike it rich and see your name up in lights, even without technically ever having played in the big leagues? Allow me to share a trade secret I've learned during my years at the sector's forefront: Plain and simple innovation is what drives the field ever forward, expands it and helps it to uncover new markets and attract new customers. And there's nothing stopping you from tapping into its potential, right now, this very minute.

Case in point: Currently, there are over 15 million hardcore gamers and 285 million casual gamers. Nonetheless, bizarrely, most of the industry's output focuses on the former audience, leaving literally hundreds of millions of potential buyers (not to mention the vast majority of the market) out in the cold.

Because of this, there are huge opportunities lurking on the sidelines right outside of the mainstream gamer demographic just waiting to be tapped. And a fortune presently sits there untouched, ripe for the taking by those with the insight, talent and wherewithal to deliver innovative products and services destined to engage players' attention and spark their passion for interactive enjoyment.

In other words, you're more likely to land a high score if you take the road less traveled... So if you have an idea for a new version of a hit product like *Madden*

NFL, DON'T attempt to do it! Remember: *Madden* took hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of programming hours and hundreds of people supported by a solid business infrastructure to produce and market. Even if you were to develop a competitive product, simply marketing it alone would cost millions – and then you've still got to go head-to-head with the #1-selling game in its category.

The lesson to be gleaned from these scenarios, not to mention years of real-world experience, is as follows. If you really want to score big, instead of attempting to follow in others' tracks, do things your own way, be smart about your business and look for low-hanging fruit. Doing so can potentially even be as effortless as targeting openings in markets that already exist with lower-cost games that, with better gameplay (or a little tweaking), could easily become tomorrow's best sellers.

In addition, I'll also say this: It further pays to know your core skill set, inside and out, and educate yourself thoroughly in those areas you don't. Combining multiple talents and abilities – as well as possessing the know-how to gauge situations from several perspectives – is vitally important if you ever want to break the bank to boot.

Ask yourself... Are you a programmer? An artist? What about a level planner or mod-making expert? Imagine how much more capable you'd be as a combination of all. Many of today's most acclaimed producers possess greater talents than simple job titles convey. As insiders know, the ability to visualize ideas as tangible graphic representations or edit soundtracks on the fly to better convey desired moods, for example, can add to any game design.

Furthermore, when it comes to choosing topics to base products or services around, be sure to think about areas in which you have unique knowledge and can therefore specialize.

For example: Ever worked at a gas station? How about a restaurant? *Diner Dash* is a best-seller – and it's merely a game about a girl waiting tables. Who knows... perhaps a title featuring a gas station and its overworked attendants is the next big

thing? Maybe even being a barista at Starbucks – open as the market's become today, the sky's the limit. Consider: There are books filled with games that were popular in pubs 200 years ago that have yet to be converted into interactive form... and they're already proven to have been played and enjoyed by millions.

In my opinion, the mother lode you should be questing for isn't just a game, but a new game type unto itself. To be specific, one that has not been done before... and something that new technology allows for the first time. People forget that way back when, even *Tetris* was once such a property.

Similarly, *Dance Dance Revolution* and *Guitar Hero* struck a chord with fans by turning everyday concepts like dancing and guitar-playing into best-selling titles based on entirely new experiences. Nintendo's Wii is doing the same thing as we speak as well, with its motion-sensing controllers rapidly giving way to new types of interaction and virtual experience. Frankly, the types of controllers and activities associated with these outings will likely give way to an entirely new era of entertainment and record-breaking profits alone.

Then again, when it comes to financial success, not everything has to be about software itself... Sometimes, new business models are just as important.

Can an MMO game make sense selling spells for a nickel? What about *Halo* selling bullets for a penny? Is there million-dollar potential in cell phones with built-in GPS abilities that allow for location-based play based on treasure hunts in Manhattan or live whodunits that sprawl across the entirety of San Francisco? Who knows, but these days, such ideas don't seem so far-fetched, and both brazen entrepreneurs and old-world media titans are waiting with bated breath alongside one another to find out.

The main point I'm trying to get across being simply this. The world consistently hungers for new and fun experiences – and no matter how and where they're delivered, it's always willing to pay for the good ones. Knowing this, as game enthusiasts, developers, fans, marketers and executives, not to mention fiscally-

responsible individuals, it's our job to champion the cause of innovation and help bring it to market.

Take what you will from the following manuscript, full as it is of sound advice and priceless resources for those looking to change the face of gaming as we know it today. Ultimately, the most important thing is that no matter how future ventures pan out, we always have as much fun taking part in them as our customers – and probably more, if anyone's counting.

Nolan Bushnell

Founder of Atari, Chuck E. Cheese's and uWink

AUTHOR'S NOTE

So you want to be rich, right? Congratulations – you’ve come to the right place!

But before starting down the golden road, let’s be up-front. As you’ll soon see from the following collection of assorted essays, how-to articles, interviews and editorials, there’s only one constant when it comes to commercialism. Specifically: For any lone, individual gamer or software development/publishing company, there is no one surefire path to profitability.

Certainly, the advice and insight contained herein presents a singular record of several men and women’s quest for, and achievement of, record financial gain and stardom in the \$13.5 billion videogame field. (An industry that brings in more than Hollywood, for those counting... Although astute readers will note that a \$600 PlayStation 3 and \$60 game do cost more than a \$10 ticket and concessions, even if a large popcorn will set you back, what, \$125 now?)

However, you should never lose sight of the most important maxim: Despite what you may think, in most cases, for these and countless other would-be entrepreneurs with IPOs dancing in their eyes, it’s seldom really about the cash. Those who break the bank gaming generally do so because of a passion they share for this groundbreaking creative medium and rugged determination to pick themselves up and succeed no matter the cost. Even if that means risking everything and losing it, then suffering the pain and ignominy of living to tell the tale.

What’s more, learning to write your own chapter in the pages of interactive history is half the fun. Therefore the best professional lessons I, or anyone else, can ever provide you are simply don’t stop believing, never quit trying and remember the people and ideals you came up with – not to mention never lose sight of what inspired you to greatness in the first place.

Being a good sport, though, and not the sort predisposed to sentimental dross, I'll also do you one better. I'll give you some personal advice, distilled over nearly three decades' worth of fascination with one of the globe's most captivating entertainment fields.

Forget the parties. Forget the celebrities. Forget the wine. Forget the women. Forget the limelight. Forget the distractions. Getting rich off electronic entertainment isn't about staying up late rabblousing, sleeping in and then sitting at home in your underwear playing *Gears of War* against sexy gamer girls all day. What I've learned is that it seems to be a function of the following seven variables, a canon I like to call "The Winning Game," in almost every single case:

1. Hard Work – Sorry, there's no 9-to-5 jobs for would-be millionaires in gaming. Days, nights, weekends... Get ready to put in the overtime. Focus your energies on the most important tasks (those that deliver the fastest payout, the most headlines and the biggest long-term gains) and do them till it hurts. However, always make sure you're working to your own benefit first. I know very few well-to-do slackers, but the ones I do know generally got that way off the fruits of someone else's labor.

2. Passion – To truly strike it rich, you've got to love what you do. This enthusiasm (or lack thereof) won't just shine through in your work – it'll also inspire others who'll eventually rally to the cause. Never forget that for every one person offering encouragement behind any PC or videogame project, 1000 more will tell you that you're a madman for trying. In other words, if you don't stick up for yourself and be your own most outspoken evangelist, no one else will. Stand tall, stand proud and never let bitterness or resentment take hold. Most importantly, be a believer – positivity begets results, negativity failure. Remember, opportunity is what you make of it.

3. Timing – Playing to cultural trends or commandeering various fads for your own purpose is always a plus. But also knowing when it pays to be first (or second, if it means letting an adversary get there first and thereby experience initial headaches

or growing pains for you) to market is also crucial. As is, for that matter, realizing when it's best to hold a game back, or postpone production until the social climate or political atmosphere best supports your new virtual venture. Likewise, understanding when chance has passed you by, and being brave enough to kill an underperforming or ill-timed project, no matter how much it means to you from a personal standpoint, is further the mark of a great leader.

4. Persistence – I've spent 13-plus years grinding to get where I'm at; others take even longer just to make the first step. Success seldom happens overnight, and the greatest fallacy the media has perpetrated on an unsuspecting public is that you only get one chance in life to shine. Win or lose, to crack the vault, you've got to be willing to be in the game for the long haul, and make mistakes – frankly, that's how people learn. Sometimes you're up, sometimes you're down. Either way, just keep playing: The world has a funny way of making sure everything comes out OK in the end.

5. Ingenuity – Book smarts, street smarts, inborn savvy, whatever... no matter which school of thought you subscribe to, you've got to think fast on your feet, because pitfalls lie at every turn. Self-made videogame moguls are generally hyper-intelligent and, in some cases, borderline savants. Others, just astute businessmen. So, at minimum, you've got to be at least aware of, if not sharper than, all the sharks swimming around out there with so much moolah involved. (Classic example: Despite selling millions of copies of his iconic game the world over, even brilliant and visionary *Tetris* creator Alexey Pajitnov went years without seeing royalties once upon a time.) Whether through college courses, tradeshow appearances or simply browsing the local library's stacks, educate yourself: Knowledge truly is worth more than gold.

6. Resilience – Like the Boy Scouts say, be prepared. The world is a harsh place, and despite what everyone claims, things *will* change on your way to the top. Friends just as easily as competitors may leave your body (as well as budget) beaten and bruised. Partners split; companies declare bankruptcy; legal hassles and development woes can sink the best of AAA games. Throughout it all, the truly

rich man is he or she who best learns to weather the storm. Remember, cash remains king. Guard yourself against the vagaries of a cruel world by learning to stack it fast, and prioritize stockpiling that life-saving lucre.

7. Showmanship – Like 19th century circus magnate and legendary huckster P.T. Barnum, most videogame industry wizards understand a single, fundamental truth: Appearance is everything. Out of sight, out of mind... Fickle as the public's attention span may be, you've got to learn to court it. A product or person who goes unpublicized is seldom one who captures the world's imagination. What's more, human nature being what it is, most people tend to take things at face value, making the way in which you present yourself all the more vital. Teach yourself how to play the game right, and no matter the reality of your situation, you'll be able to catapult yourself to untold heights.

And that, my friends, is truly money in the bank.

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To my dear pal Ronnie, who too often went without. To my good chum, Chris Zimmerman, who spent many a night letting me indulge my habit. To my parents, Karen and Richard, for their lifelong care and encouragement. To my sisters, Jamie and Lisa, for always being there when needed. To my wife Karyn, for years of playing best friend, therapist and yin to my yang all rolled into one. To every videogame enthusiast who’s ever dreamed of making it big in the biz.

But, most importantly, to those who never made it – and those who realize that, as long as you don’t give up the good fight, there’s time to make it still.

*Dedicated to All Videogame Developers and Publishers That
Ever Were and Will Be: A Priceless Source of Inspiration to Us All*

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INTRODUCTION

I blame *Dragon's Lair* for ruining my life.

Released in 1983, the pioneering laserdisc arcade game – a groundbreaking fantasy adventure featuring cartoon-quality visuals and a storyline starring bumbling knight Dirk the Daring's quest to rescue ditzy Princess Daphne from evil dragon Singe – actually gets a bad rap. And who could blame critics? The title, whose action was limited to simple pattern-memorization sequences (you merely hit left, right, up, down or sword to dodge traps, slay monsters and otherwise advance the video reel) wasn't exactly the pinnacle of playability.

Nonetheless, its gorgeous hand-drawn sequences – created by master animator Don Bluth (*An American Tail*, *The Secret of NIMH*) – left this formerly chubby little lad awestruck. Laugh all you want... Sitting there next to classics like *BurgerTime* and *Defender*, dazzling with its stunning graphics and belly laugh-inducing sense of humor while competitors could barely eke out enough blocky pixels to portray a walking hot dog, it might as well have been the Holy Grail of high technology for me. And, in turn, for all the @&\$! quarters it was fed (this, even after I swiped a well-thumbed copy of 1984 book *How to Win at Dragon's Lair*, which got read, oh... 8 million-odd times), the game left an indelible, Chuck E. Cheese token-shaped mark on my soul – and personal sense of showmanship.

You see, the outing – co-developed by Gary Goldman and Rick Dyer, who also deserve to burn in the virtual fires for their contribution to my downfall – wasn't just a game to me. It was an ear-ringing, mind-numbing wake-up call, standing so far ahead of its peers (even with the great industry crash of '83 helping to somewhat thin the competitive ranks) that, in essence, no other form of stimuli effectively existed within a radius of 200 feet to my young, impressionable mind if it was anywhere near in the vicinity.

The lesson learned: Appearance is everything, and if you're going to do it up, you might as well go big. And so, standing there wide-eyed on the sticky, soda- and gum-riddled floor of a nameless boardwalk gallery where the machine was first viewed, my life as an innocent effectively ended. Right then and there, an obsession with the fabulous, fantastical game industry, and scaling its loftiest heights, effectively began.

Bad timing, though: Being that I wasn't exactly well-connected, \$999,999 short of a million and, you know, barely out of my He-Man underoos and Keds at the time, it would be nearly 15 years before I'd begin to apply the insights this titan among games bequeathed. In the meantime, my mind was left to fester during over a decade's worth of Trapper Keepers, wedgies and pop quizzes, and wonder... Why were other kids so fascinated with Transformers, G.I. Joes and these mysterious creatures known as girls while all I could ever dream of was playing, making and marketing interactive entertainment?

To put it in perspective: When I was in grade school, others loved Garbage Pail Kids and 5th period French; me, I spent days dreaming of *River Raid* and *Tutankham*. Come junior high, while classmates spent weekends playing basketball with friends or flirting with members of the opposite sex, my best pal was the NES, and the furthest I ever got wasn't to second base – it was the outfield in *Bases Loaded*. Circa high school, buddies started to come around, and dreamed of careers in game design... somehow I was the jerk who wanted to grow up to be the fat cat CEO sitting on top and deciding what they'd publish. And by the time college rolled around, well... I'd just had enough entirely – instead of attending class at all, I practically locked myself in my dorm room and refused to come out until I'd mastered *Warcraft II* and *Shadow of the Comet*.

Throughout this process, one thing remained constant: No one would give me a break to save my proverbial behind. And so, despite being willing to work virtually as slave labor, by the time I was 17, I'd already begun having to actively call up companies and offer to beta test crap games for free just to get a foot in the door. Thankfully, a few years later, after being rejected by dozens of publishers, going

headfirst into a windshield in a freak car accident, and hobbling to E3 the day after without even press or biz credentials, I finally caught a lucky break. Courtesy of the good folks at French publisher Microïds, I was off to Paris for a magical, star-studded (read: unpaid) internship, during which I had the good fortune to quickly rise through the ranks, sign a hit title (*SHOGO: Mobile Armor Division*) and rocket off into Z-grade semi-stardom.

So I can sympathize... All your life, you've probably heard about the American dream, and what it's like to go to school, work hard and raise a family like most honest, respectable citizens. Unfortunately, as with most members of Generation X and those who came after, you've probably also grown up knowing deep down that you'd happily sacrifice all for a shot at living out your *Space Invader*- or *Street Fighter*-filled dreams. And, ironically, that those who most deserve a chance at computerized acclaim are sometimes those least likely to ever get a proper crack at living the fantasy.

Bearing this in mind, if you're willing to accept life's harsh realities and pass up a run at the big time in favor of safer, smarter choices, then congratulations: I applaud your conviction, and wish you nothing but the best. You've been able to accomplish what thousands across the world haven't – recognizing the joy that comes from truly knowing peace of mind. But if you're willing to put your hopes to the side, to do what millions of respectable, God-fearing people across the globe agree is intelligent and right, then I must also kindly ask that you stop reading here. Because what follows is a roadmap to ruin as much as it is riches... a descent into depravity and obsession as much as a chance to achieve unfettered mastery over your domain.

The truth is, there is no set formula for 'making it.' Only by putting it all on the line, and living to learn from one's mistakes, no matter how catastrophic, can success in the videogame business, or any other field, ever be truly achieved. If there is one thing I've learned in decades of questing it's this: Suffer you will, before you see the light of day, or even promise of a first digitally-funded paycheck.

Nonetheless, without risk, there can be no return. And victory, of course, goes to those willing to seize the day. Just be warned: From here on out, there's no turning back – once the bug bites, and you understand the rules of the game, you can't turn it off. Accomplishment, as they say, can be habit-forming... and the second you've tasted it, like brilliant puzzler *Bust-A-Move*, it's sure to become an all-consuming addiction. Consider yourself warned.

Still with me, bucko?

Then perhaps you've got that hunger... that drive... that *fire* to succeed that burns so hot you can't sleep at night – or perhaps you've just been sucking down the Red Bulls and playing too much *Metal Slug Anthology*. Either way, I'm here to tell you that dreams *do* come true. As you'll see illustrated by the life lessons of several one-of-a-kind personalities I've had the distinct pleasure of working with and interviewing herein, making wishes reality is generally just a function of experience, timing, brashness and enthusiasm.

So listen up, because I'm going to share something all those self-avowed experts won't: Once upon a blue moon, long before the limousines and primetime specials, they were all starry-eyed hopefuls just like you. What's more, the high life doesn't come easy. Weekends in Vegas and parties at the Playboy mansion? Try nights in cramped Motel 6s and frolics at the local McDonald's. Screw it though – you're smart enough to be in it for the love, not the money, right?

This being the case, do yourself a favor and heed the advice Infogrames founder Bruno Bonnell once gave to me. When asked if he missed the good old days of the gaming biz, he said, "You can't see the way forward if you're always looking back." And so, for those of you determined to hit it big, I invite you to come along with me on an odyssey of self-discovery and shameless pursuit of personal betterment. Never forget: Experience and understanding are the most valuable assets you'll ever possess... and nobody can ever take them away from you.

Although, in fairness, the chance to sip drinks with *Super Mario Bros.* creator

Shigeru Miyamoto or trade war stories with Insomniac Games founder Ted Price is nothing to scoff at either. And hey, if anyone's got a spare *Dragon's Lair* machine, take time out to pause from your self-reflective musings and have a laugh on your old friend.

Would you believe, in all these years of gaming, despite owing an entire career and lifetime of fun and excitement to the coin-op – not to mention likely having deposited enough cash in these units to equal the down payment on a Porsche – I'm still too cheap to shell out for one? Then again, maybe that's why, 25 years later, they're still selling tens of thousands of pixel-perfect conversions on PlayStation 2, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, Nintendo DS, Game Boy, PC and damn near every console or disc player known to man.

But heck, what do I know anyway?

Like millions of fans throughout every known hemisphere, deep down, yours truly simply still remains that same teary-eyed tyke sitting stunned by that first great flashing marquee and sizzling soundtrack at heart.

Scott Steinberg
"The Hardest-Working Man in Gaming"
www.scottsteinberg.com

Said a photographer to music and fashion mogul Russell Simmons once: "Your pose looks too much like an ad."

"I don't think you understand," Simmons replied calmly.
"*Everything* I do is an advertisement."

DEVELOPERS

HOW TO MAKE YOUR OWN VIDEOGAME

Fun fact: Most so-called gaming experts don't know the first thing about the business beyond what they see on their PC or high-def TV screens.

So, after critiquing countless titles for more than 300 media outlets and counseling dozens of publishers on how to improve their products, I decided to do what any sensible entrepreneur would: Put my money where my mouse is.

Two years, hundreds of sleepless nights and one hair-brained scheme later, the impossible became reality: My independently produced, developed and conceived PC boxing sim, *Heavyweight Thunder*, arrived on store shelves circa 2005. And, with the help of several lifelong friends, I managed to build software production company Overload Entertainment into a thriving venture.

Here's how you can found tomorrow's Atari out of your home office, too.

DON'T PLAY AROUND

Dream big, but think small, and never let your reach exceed your grasp. Everyone's got a great idea for a game, but sensible ones are much rarer. Start by creating a concept document defining every detail of your ultimate fantasy project. Then begin chopping inessential features. Save grand ideas for sequels. After all, three guys in a basement tinkering on hand-me-down PCs can only accomplish so much.

KEEP IT SIMPLE, SILLY

Gaming isn't just for geeks anymore. Most titles are purchased by everyday people shopping at mass merchants who can't tell a peashooter from a plasma launcher. Increase your chances of success by creating a product that speaks to their interests. Choose concepts audiences will instantly recognize and relate to. (Football, poker and racing are in; extraterrestrial Nazi-hunting psychic vampires, out.) Art-

school projects are amusing, but they don't sell.

HANDLE YOUR BUSINESS

Talk about an expensive hobby: Games cost roughly \$5,000 to \$30,000,000 (around \$15-20 million on average for next-gen consoles, infinitely less on PC) to produce, so budget accordingly up-front. Spend no more than six figures initially. Licensing will also run you extra in terms of percentage-based royalties. Registering trademarks takes an additional \$10,000 or so, too. That said, always keep some "play money" in reserve; hidden expenses (voice-acting, language translation, etc.) are common as well.

CASH AND CARRY

Why risk your savings when you can gamble with someone else's? Venture capital's an excellent source of funding... if you can produce a game prototype and sample packaging. Seeing is believing, so always approach investors with something tangible; it makes a lasting impression. Can't find a backer? Do what the best of us must at times: Beg friends and family members for seed money.

ORDER OUT

Forget developing the next *Oblivion* in your home office. Games typically take half a dozen or more people to produce. Unless you're keen on paying health benefits, hiring programmers/artists/musicians, and otherwise overseeing a bunch of professional slackers, hire an external development team. Sites like Gamasutra (www.gamasutra.com) can connect you with independent contractors all over the world. Hint: Search for firms sporting proven experience making the type of the title you've envisioned.

GET WITH THE PROGRAM

If you're lucky, partners will have the resources on hand to handle all the grunt work, including constructing characters and environments. If not, you'll need tools like Adobe's Photoshop (available from www.adobe.com) or Alias's Maya (www.alias.com) to help participate in the process of building virtual worlds. Ready-made software engines like GarageGames' Torque Game Builder and

Engine – selling for only \$100-\$150 at www.garagegames.com – also offer an easy way to cut corners.

ENCOURAGE COMMUNITY SERVICE

Many joystick jocks are self-righteous loudmouths. And even more are simply outspoken and passionate about their hobby. Either way, they're a blessing in disguise. Why? You won't find a more vocal bunch on the Internet – or a better way to get word out about your game online. Employ newsgroups, user forums, websites, press releases, screenshots, demos and video trailers to spread the message. Enthusiastic as gamers are, they'll also willingly test and provide feedback on software prior to release, just for the privilege of a hands-on sneak peek.

AIM FOR A HIGH SCORE

If you've made enough noise about a title, international distributors will already be calling. But when it comes to selling your game, overseas firms, especially those located in countries where the American court system can't touch them, can be unpredictable. It's rare you'll ever see royalties. Instead, negotiate a healthy, guaranteed advance from publishing partners. Don't pawn off all rights to your game onto a single company either; you can negotiate sales licenses for each individual country separately.

GET STARTED EARLY

So much for retiring to a life of *Gran Turismo*... there's still work to be done. Software errors need patching, features updating and fans reassurance that there are better things to come. Strike while the iron is hot; begin work on add-ons or follow-ups ASAP, so you remain hungry and motivated. As fast as the interactive entertainment industry moves, there's no time to waste. The game, as they say, is always afoot!

GETTING YOUR GAME SIGNED

Allow me to share a little secret with you: I'm a glass half full of beer kind of guy. I want to see people succeed – most notably game developers, who pour their heart and soul into every project. After all, the more great titles that find their way onto store shelves, the happier consumers are, the larger the profits generated and, naturally, the better things become for our beloved industry as a whole. But having been to several Game Connection, E3 and Game Developer's Conference events, I find myself in an uncomfortable position.

Personally, I've acted as a talent scout since '98, helping companies from Microids to Atari and DreamCatcher pick smash hits to acquire dating all the way back to Monolith's *SHOGO: Mobile Armor Division*. Embassy Multimedia Consultants further does extensive work on the product acquisitions end for multiple clients as well, advising private and publicly-traded corporations alike on which titles to buy and how to market them. Heck, I even purchase and self-publish the occasional game myself, dipping into my own pocket when the occasion merits. However, if what I've seen recently is any indication of the current state of the development community's approach to publisher outreach, well... all I can say is that not much has changed in the last decade, and it's no wonder so few original products are finding their way to retail channels.

Now don't get me wrong. I'm not denying that there presently exists a pervasive climate of mistrust, in which a largely hit-driven business model has pushed major players into a situation where they favor sequels and franchises in a perceived effort to minimize risk. But as creative sorts who prefer artistry over accounting and mostly rely on the large cash subsidies publishers provide for their livelihood, developers would do well to remember that interactive entertainment is a serious business. New intellectual property (IP), familiar IP, movie licenses, whatever... From the perspective of many executives, what eventually goes into the box is simply pure product. Therefore what you're really looking at is a simple game of

risk and return, with those able to garner the most trust and deliver the most cost-effective content reaping the largest rewards.

This being the case, salesmanship is just as important on the back-end as it is the front. In other words, initial product pitches are equally (arguably more) crucial than the ones you'll eventually use to woo end-users. Essentially, if you're looking to get your new game project signed, as with any customer, you'll need to court the suits – only harder, as you're asking them to part with hundreds of thousands, or even millions, of hard-earned dollars. If the notion strikes you as disingenuous, take a step back, breathe deeply and consider. Remember that many of these people aren't actual gamers, and yet control not only your destiny, but also those of the employees and co-workers who've entrusted you with preserving their stability and sole source of income. Trust me: You don't want to see the sell-through figures, or success rate, associated with the vast majority of titles that fail to make it to retail. Let alone, for that matter, what happens to a company as well as its people and products when it gets dissolved.

The ultimate point of my little rant being this... Far be it from me to deny that greed, hubris and ambition are factors that weigh equally heavy on any publisher's decision to add a product to its portfolio as a title's actual quality level and content. But, as a software developer, if you want to have a shot at getting your first break, keeping your company chugging along or even changing the overall status quo, it's high time that you learned to play the virtual mating game a little bit better. Following are a few simple tricks that will help you cut to the chase, deliver more compelling presentations and maximize chances of finagling that star-studded deal you dream of. Not to mention (true story), saving me the trouble of yet again watching team after team's dreams get systematically flushed down the toilet as executives casually dismiss one concept after another over a leisurely continental breakfast.

Understand Your Audience

This first, most important point can't be stressed enough: Do your homework, and

always know to whom you're speaking before opening your mouth. If you're pitching a \$3 million sci-fi first-person shooter, it doesn't make much sense to hold a publisher of budget-priced casual puzzle games captive for an hour does it? That's a serious waste of their time – and yours. Likewise, asking for initial funding for a concept from a publisher who specializes in buying near-complete or finished goods? Not the smartest use of your day.

Therefore always research potential partners before proposing a meeting, let alone sitting down with them. A simple search of the Internet won't just reveal their history, size and scope of access to needed resources. It'll also give you a good look at their current and future lineups, letting you know what type of product or pitch best resonates with corporate heads. And, for that matter, give you a sense of just how successful they are at functions like advertising, marketing and public relations – since, naturally, you don't want to pick just any partner, but rather the right one for the job.

A few hours' of Web browsing, email and/or phone calls is all it takes to get a sense of who would make a good fit as a publishing partner in various territories. Several more is also enough to come up with an individually-tailored sales presentation for all possible collaborators. (Sorry, as in dating, one size does not fit all – you wouldn't approach every woman with the same tired pick-up line, right?) By being choosy and focusing your outreach efforts, you won't just save time and money, but also maximize chances of success. Not to mention connect better with companies who enjoy shared interests. Ask anyone who's unsuccessfully marched their adventure game through 50 action-, arcade- and racing-focused publishers – quality trumps quantity every time.

Dress for Success

I realize – it's hot, you're nervous and uncomfortable, and besides... you work out of your back bedroom anyhow. But please, if you're going to show up and ask for \$10 million with a straight face, at least clothe your product and presentation (not to mention yourself) to look the part.

You've heard the expression "first impressions are everything," yes? Well that goes double in sales meetings. Your product, not to mention you yourself, are, essentially, what you are perceived to be – so if there's one area I wouldn't skimp on, it would be visual presentation. Screenshots, sell sheets, video trailers, boxes, websites, etc... Supporting assets should all be of the highest caliber, and presented on the best possible machine/setup manageable. The same goes for product demos – I'd rather see a spectacular-looking 10-minute hands-on teaser than dozens of lifeless levels or examples of physics-driven technology in motion. Never forget, it's all about context: You've got just seconds to capture observers' attention, and even less time to leave a lasting impression. Impact is everything. Ask yourself: If the publisher reps are likely seeing 25+ titles in one day, what's to make them remember yours?

Sales presentations should further be short, sweet and to the point: Gamers have notoriously limited attention spans... If you can't quickly pique my interest, what's to make me think you'll grab theirs? Also worth noting while we're at it: Such pitches are best delivered by the most charismatic and well-spoken member of your development team, who should be able to bullet-point key features with brief overviews. Oh, and showing up with bed-head, unshaven, in a t-shirt and shorts is ill-advised too – we all know appearances aren't everything, but taking the time to compose yourself is a simple sign of mutual respect.

Show and Tell

Less talk, more action – that's what publishing partners really want to see. You can trot out the biggest, fattest, coolest sounding design document in the world, but if you want to be the beneficiary of a five-, six- or seven-figure check, hoo boy... Brother, you better be able to put a playable demo where your mouth is. (Especially since we're sure as snot not reading a 50-page essay on the spot, let alone while swamped back at the home office...)

Part of the reason for doing so is showing you're capable of delivering on claims;

part of it is helping partners visualize exactly how the end-product may turn out. On the one hand, we all know things have a tendency to change during extended development cycles – having a clear-cut vision for a title up-front helps. On the other, if you’re going to ask someone to entrust you with life-changing sums of money, you’ve also got to have the goods to back it up. So do yourself a favor: Prototype every concept you’re determined to sell in, and show up to meetings with playable code in-hand. Don’t believe me? Ponder the words of *LocoRoco* creator Tsutomu Kuono, who unsuccessfully pitched the cult hit PSP smash to Sony twice before they finally gave it the green-light the third time around. The reason, as he told audience members at 2007’s Develop conference: “It’s very important to make a demo and show something that moves.”

What’s more, if you really want to be proactive, highlight several applications for the same technology in various settings. For example: Those routines you’ve coded that let a psychic hero toss huge boulders around with their mind might work equally well, if not better, in a comic book/superhero-style context – or a magic-infused medieval outing. That way, maybe the initial idea you’d intended to create doesn’t get off the ground, but for little immediate cost, you exponentially increase the chances a publisher finds a product that’s potentially to their specific taste, and offers a much-needed contract. A little extra effort is all it takes to give yourself that extra edge, or at least ensure you’re harder to dismiss outright.

Dare to be Different

Great minds think alike – especially when they’re trying to capitalize on successful commercial trends. A recent big theme is Nintendo DS titles... Next year, it could just as likely be social networks and MMOs. Either way, publishers aren’t stupid: With a flood of similar product coming down the pipeline, succeeding at retail involves more than simply trotting out titles for a popular platform. Certainly, there may be more price points and options for us to choose from, but acquisitions experts are still looking for games that give them an edge over the competition.

Meaning that saying “OK, let’s do a DS title” isn’t enough. You’ve also got to fig-

ure out how to do one with a minimum of one to two immediately-recognizable unique sales points (USPs) that set it apart from the competition. Thus, instead of presenting a basic touchscreen-enabled strategy game, maybe you do one that's housed in a contemporary setting like the Middle East, or come up with the first offering based on aerial combat. Choices of subject matter or features don't need to be complex or visionary – just interesting enough to immediately separate the title from the rest of the pack at a glance. Otherwise, you run the risk of being lumped into the has-been category, or worse, going head-to-head with several products being shopped around by rivals, any one of which would satisfy prospective corporate buyers' needs.

As above, prototyping a range of concepts helps in this regard – heck, just swap out art assets if you're feeling lazy. That way, you can see what connects with acquisitions experts, and/or quickly pursue a different concept if you should find out someone's doing your original idea already. As Sun Tzu explains in seminal tome *The Art of War*, the trick isn't going head-to-head with an opponent, but rather learning to strike where your enemy isn't. You can still capitalize on irrational thirsts for products on certain platforms or in certain genres... Merely make sure you're offering different ways to quench them in unique flavors before guzzling that corporate Kool-Aid.

Think Fast

Development times, release dates, projected costs, company background, manpower, track record with similar titles, budget breakdown, relationship with platform manufacturers... Acquisitions and executive teams are going to walk into any meeting looking to ask dozens of relevant questions pertaining to any new development. Do you have the answers ready on the tip of your tongue, and in printed materials they can take away and reference later? If not, you'd better rethink your strategy: It always pays to be prepared.

Being able to think fast on one's feet is also a virtue: The one rule of publisher meetings is to always expect the unexpected. A good way to practice would be to

stage faux meetings with internal staff where one or more individuals in the room assumes the role of the publisher representatives – and plays devil’s advocate. Smart publishing concerns always keep at least one guy in the room when meeting developers to do just that. (Often myself... maybe it’s shaved head and earrings, or imposing midget-like stature.) It’s further imperative you handle any and all questions with grace and calm – many developers get visibly hot under the collar when you challenge a statement, never a good sign. And if you or an associate don’t have an answer handy, don’t be afraid to say you’ll follow up... and make sure you do so in record time.

What’s more, keep the focus on your own titles – never reference another successful game unless hard-pressed. Rest assured everyone else is comparing their products to or aping the market’s current best-sellers. A good basic litmus test for general viability is whether or not your game has enough of an identity to stand on its own, with no prior knowledge of the topic, genre or play style required to comprehend it. If publishers, whose business it is to hock games, can’t figure out where a title fits in the marketplace without your prompting, how’s a media/trade member to create buzz surrounding it or consumer to decide whether it’s worth adding to their collection?

Stay Hip to Cultural Contexts

Why yes, you have built a very nice bocce or badminton simulation. And indeed, the graphics on that cel-shaded piñata-smashing title of yours positively have to be seen to be believed. But, you know, before making me sit through a 20-minute demo, perhaps it’s best to understand whether the subject matter even makes sense for the territory in question.

There’s only one thing worse than hashing it out with an Eastern European developer for ages as to why their latest “smash hit” works in Prague and not Peoria. And that, of course, is when said blockbuster features an absolutely great theme and premise, but either play centered on intensive stat-crunching or artwork straight out of the Sunday funnies. One word, people: Localization. I realize that

the last thing you want to do is tweak your title, at added cost, to make it more marketable in certain countries, especially once the product's finalized elsewhere in the world. Nevertheless, if nothing else, at least take the time to research whether or not region-specific updates may be necessary just to show a given title... and to what extent. You do yourself no favors (and in many cases burn goodwill) spending large amounts of time attempting to present prospective partners with product they know at a glance that they can't use outright.

Here's a thought too: At some point during the development cycle, why not bring in a native of each key distribution territory, and solicit their honest opinion? It's at this stage where you're most able to implement any needed changes in terms of alternate play options and graphic sets, and will be most willing to make the adjustment. After all, I fully understand: Following a protracted 12- to 16-month development cycle and smashing commercial reception throughout the German-speaking world, I'd be loath to start from scratch and rework that critically-acclaimed cycling manager too. But if you want to crack the US market, remember... Sometimes, change is good.

Be Ready to Negotiate

Believe me, I know... You've sacrificed blood, sweat and tears – not to mention the better part of the last decade and your marriage – to get your dream naval warfare title out the door. To you, the game represents years of heartache and passion; unfortunately, to most publishing firms, it's just another commodity to be jazzed up, repackaged and splayed across a shelf. In short, everyone's coming to the meeting armed with their own agenda, and unless you're willing to be flexible, talks will quickly dissolve, or reach a stalemate.

The bottom line: Don't arrive at the bargaining table unless you're willing to negotiate, and open to seeing things from the publisher's perspective. This doesn't necessarily mean accepting less money than anticipated, but it may mean adjusting royalty figures or expectations in terms of marketing and promotional commitments. Fun fact: Everyone's goal is always to maximize return while passing the

most possible risk onto the other party. And so, if you want to have any hope of getting signed, let alone landing a deal whose terms are even close to favorable, you have to leave yourself room to maneuver. Deals are always a subtle process of give and take. Offended easily? Perhaps this isn't the right business to be in – you'd be amazed the proposals various game-making and –manufacturing entities will attempt to float past one another.

Still, leave yourself several outs and options, and it'll be easier to wrangle a deal that'll satisfy both parties in any transaction. Publishers aren't necessary the evil entities they seem to be – like most of us, they're just looking for a leg up, and development partners willing to play ball. Ultimately, recall that the goal is finding some contractual path equivalent to meeting in the middle. (Or, better yet, slanted heavily towards your end of the spectrum...) However, that's hard to do when you refuse to do anything but stand unmoving atop an indefensible position.

THE SECRET TO MAINSTREAM SUCCESS

Call it a landmark industry moment.

Much as I love to hear the sound of my own voice – I’m an executive (and male, at least last I checked), after all – for once, I’ll spare you the rhetoric: We all know casual games are serious business.

Titles like *Cake Mania* and *Diner Dash* have made millions online, are quickly invading the DS and PSP, and, per the International Game Developers Association’s 2006 White Paper, the biz will surpass \$2 billion in revenue by 2008 in America alone.

Now, given that it’s my day job as an author, marketing/publishing pro and head of Embassy Multimedia Consultants to keep my ear to the ground, this has the old spider senses tingling for several reasons:

1. The rise of the casual gaming market obviously speaks to its increasing maturity... and therefore the inevitable dawn of several issues ranging from troubles with standard development/publishing practices to the need to juggle the pressures of a rapidly expanding audience base.
2. Marketing has thus far consisted solely of cross-promotion of content across in-house properties and online distribution partners/portals, highlighting the glaring need for both wider-reaching and more targeted efforts in the space. And, for that matter, even more innovative advertising and promotional campaigns than executives are used to... Unlike in the traditional gaming world, they must now speak to end-users potentially wholly unfamiliar with interactive entertainment.
3. The “gold rush” mentality that seems to have gripped publishers in the

wake of the business model's proven viability. Fortune 500 companies seem convinced they can simply take the same mindset and approach that serves them so well on the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360, transfer it to this new platform and meet with immediate success. Ask insiders though, and you'll hear instant snorts of derision.

That being said, it strikes me as obvious that there's a wealth of potential lessons to be learned from the biz.

Need I remind you: Most outfits currently operating at the top started out small, pushing product the retail industry once wouldn't touch out of spare bedrooms and garages on budgets that'd make most CFOs blush. Learn how to walk a mile in their shoes, and imagine how successful you'd be when backed by the resources and manpower of a major corporation.

With this spirit in mind, I opened our famed Rolodex, and reached out to a few notable acquaintances. Let their own words serve as a warning to some, a surefire roadmap to fame and fortune for others:

PAUL THELEN

CEO of Big Fish Games, which offers a new game *every day* and publishes popular franchises such as *Mystery Case Files* and *Travelogue 360*.

"My favorite analogy is that the same people playing casual games are those who 50 years ago would have been knitting or building model airplanes. Casual games and hardcore games are played for very different purposes. When a person knits or crafts, they focus their attention on the task, feel satisfaction from being good at it, and – when finished – feel an almost addictive sense of relaxation. It's the same effect casual games have on audiences today.

Economically, hit casual games still take the lion's share of industry dollars. It's a

more honest gaming industry: The try-before-you-buy and ad-supported models force developers to focus on making great games before all other facts. [Unlike] with traditional games, recognized brands and heavy-handed marketing can't turn a fundamentally bad title into a success. These business models will change and the demographics [behind casual gaming] shift over time. But with baby boomers starting to enter retirement age, with lots of time/disposable income on-hand, I expect growth to continue for some time.

Important to note – casual games are different than core ones; they have more similarities with the e-greeting business or scrapbooking industry. Potential moguls' greatest barrier to entry is arrogance: If someone thinks they know what will sell, they'll be wrong almost 99% of the time. Remember: Our audience is 25-65 years old and 75% female.

Conversely, cloning is an unfortunate fact of life – it makes the industry stagnant and ultimately hurts customers. The only rule is there are no rules: Success requires a balance between taking risks on innovative games (most of which fail, but the occasional gem makes up for 10 flops) and tried-and-true offerings. Never forget, innovation drives every big success – there needs to be some risk-taking to differentiate oneself in a world of thousands of competitors. The only way to increase chances of success is to have a laser-like focus on customers' wants and needs.”

ROMAIN NOUZARETH

Founder of Boonty S.A and President & CEO of Boonty Inc., owners and operators of popular international casual game portals Boonty.com and Café.com.

“Circa 2001, we saw there was a gap between free Java games and the more advanced titles found on CD. We felt that if we marketed a great catalog of games at the right price with a simple distribution method, people would buy. We were

right, and growth continues thanks to the following factors:

- Instant gratification via digital distribution
- Broadband penetration
- The try-before-you-buy model
- Great content
- Distribution on most of the world's major online portals

Casual games cost \$50K-\$300K to develop. Still, as with other entertainment sectors, the market's hit driven – many games don't sell. I still think opportunities exist, but only for high-quality content and new business models. I also believe there's an opportunity for brands to emerge: Ask any woman on the street about a search engine – she'll tell you Google or Yahoo. We're hoping Café.com will be the answer when she's asked about online game portals.

Nowadays though, there are too many sequels, copycats and games offered for free, making it hard for the business to grow. I think a better way's based around a mix of digital distribution, the “free to play, pay for value” model, advertising, multiplayer connectivity and social interaction. To succeed though, you need to have a good user base, pick the right distribution partners and select the best content.

Our audience isn't just the standard 60% soccer moms most companies in the industry attract. Interestingly, we discovered that a casual game works similarly in the US, Italy or Japan. If localized, marketed, promoted and distributed properly, it works almost anywhere – and provides a good way for developers to monetize content. When a game is only available in English, you cut yourself out of 70% of the market.

Even so, there's no real recipe for success. But I'd tell aspiring entrepreneurs to focus on the following: Simplicity, quality, innovation, forgiving gameplay and appealing to the largest user base.”

JAMES GWERTZMAN AND JOHN VECHEY

Director of Business Development and Co-Founder/Director of PopCap.com, respectively, for PopCap Games, creator of landmark titles such as *Bejeweled* and *Bookworm Adventures*.

James: “I wouldn’t say the economics of casual gaming vs. traditional gaming are necessarily more or less favorable – just different. Even our most expensive games cost us 20X less to build than a typical big-budget console game. They also lend themselves better to viral marketing techniques.

On the other hand, we’re targeting a broad audience not used to paying for games – a casual title is generally considered a hit if it sells 100,000 units at \$20 apiece. Ironically, however, even though online distribution is very efficient (no boxes to print and ship), because our distribution partners essentially end up paying for customer acquisition they earn a larger revenue share... in general, developers see a smaller percentage of that final sale.

Growth in the sector will come from two directions: New users, and existing customers. The casual game industry’s famous for having only a 1-2% conversion rate on average – that number’s actually better than it sounds, since only 10% who play a free web game download the deluxe version. So for every 1000 people who play that game free online, only 1-2 people actually buy it. There’s a LOT of room there for improvement, and we’re all getting better at it.”

John: “The biggest differentiating factor with casual games is their cross-platform nature. *Bejeweled* is still *Bejeweled* on a mobile phone, iPod or Xbox 360. If you took *Grand Theft Auto*, it would be a drastically different game on all those devices.

But opportunity cost is a stumbling block. The biggest hang-up for startups in the casual space is that for everything you do, you’re not doing [10 others]. It’s even worse when you’re starting out since you don’t have the frame of reference, budg-

et or experience to know when to cancel a title, or how to pick your next project. Regardless, I think it's anybody's industry still. We haven't had a big round of acquisitions, everyone is partnered up for the most part, and we all know each other. We're the Wild West before railroads; the industry's only going to get crazier.

Interestingly, the casual game industry has yet to take advantage of user-generated content. I predict it will become more prominent. The big buzzword right now is "community." What most companies don't understand is you don't just create it. It's taken Pogo 10 years to build their user base – they didn't just plug it in one day and [attract millions of people]. Growth comes from nurturing your customers and adding features people want – you can't just set out to do something giant out-right and think it'll work.

JOHN WELCH

CEO and Co-Founder of PlayFirst, publisher of smash hit offerings including the hugely influential and record-breaking *Diner Dash*.

"The future of casual gaming, at least from our perspective, is to [jump from] publishing casual games to become a leading multiplatform company focused on "mass-market interactive entertainment."

While content will still include popular games like *Chocolatier*, it will also include titles with more perspective, and television programming with more game-like interaction between the network and members of the audience themselves. It will require a mastery of game design, Internet technologies and new business models, plus a deep understanding of the mass-market consumer. Companies who can bridge gaming, Hollywood and technology will be especially well-positioned.

Going forward, there's a lot of opportunity. I wouldn't describe it as

“social networking” so much as “optionally social play.” Here’s a real-world example.

Some people go to a bar to meet new people – they might not even have a drink. Others go to have a good time with their friends. Still more go to grab a bite to eat, maybe watch the game on TV. Same place, shared experiences, very different goals. Multiplayer game experiences are similar – some enter for the interaction, others for the game itself. We’re just at the cusp of this with casual games. The next frontier is innovating at the intersection of content, community and commerce to deliver compelling social gameplay with zero entry fee and numerous ways to earn revenue.

Personally, I don’t care about competition from traditional videogame publishers; I’m looking to what Hollywood is doing, as well as what innovative Silicon Valley software entrepreneurs are cooking up with small, lightning-fast teams. The pace of innovation will only accelerate. The pace of producing more and more non-differentiated single-player games isn’t sustainable – and about to cause a lot of people a lot of heartache.

I will say that the Internet is key, and developing and distributing product to consumers online is a whole new ball game. What you see today will tell you how to be successful today – except your product cycle isn’t instantaneous and the market is moving quickly.”

CONQUERING THE MMO MARKET

We've all heard the hype: Massively multiplayer online games, a.k.a. MMOs – persistent virtual worlds that players can simultaneously mix, mingle and/or adventure within 24/7 alongside literally thousands of fellow users – are the next big thing.

No surprise there... Selling 100,000 copies of a standard full-price title in its initial production run, which can last mere weeks, is still big news to many game publishers. (Although, in fairness, many can expect to garner additional sales and revenue when products are re-released at budget prices, through OEM channels, via online vendors, shipped overseas or relaunched as value-minded compilations.)

On the flip side, massively multiplayer Internet-only outings can generate just as much retail action through the release of boxed goods, while at the same time enjoying longer virtual (and overall) lifecycles. Plus – more pointedly – producing extended, ongoing income in the form of paid subscriptions or microtransactions at little added development and manufacturing cost. The difference between approaches, naturally, being as vast as it is compelling from a commercial standpoint... and irresistible to explore.

Picture the situation faced by those dealing in standalone retail product.

You ship your latest award-winner for \$49.99-\$59.99. Following, there's perhaps just a six- to eight-week premium shelf life period in which to capitalize on this expensive, years-in-the-making title, which dozens, more likely hundreds, of peers contributed to. Maybe you succeed, maybe you fail, and the title's quickly reduced in price or pulled from retailers altogether; hopefully, at some point, you see some recurring back-catalogue revenue. Considering that you've spent \$10-20 million and invested heaven knows how many man-hours up-front, it's hardly a tempting or risk-averse proposition by even the greenest executive's measure.

Now envision you could sell the same title in-store just as long, yet also at full sticker price online for months to come – or give it away free via digital download, thanks to a more flexible business model. And, what's more, get to see around \$9.99-\$14.99/month, every month, on average from users in recurring revenue in exchange for a little customer support and new content, or \$3-4 in regular, bite-sized purchases of virtual items and enhancements. Suddenly, what was once a potentially lucrative, but hit-or-miss income stream becomes not only consistently predictable and profitable... the trickle becomes a raging torrent. And that's before you count the additional onrush of capital created by peripheral income-generating activities, such as the public sale and trade of virtual goods and characters.

To put things in perspective: Market leader *World of WarCraft* tops 9 million subscribers worldwide. Alone, it swells owner Vivendi's coffers to the point that the corporation could literally fund the start-up of an entirely new, fully-functional standalone game publishing subsidiary *every single month*.

Sounds like an incredible deal, right?

Not necessarily – infinitely more expensive, trickier to maintain, more upkeep-intensive and likelier to implode than single-player-only experiences, these cyberspace realms can cost tens of millions initially *and* on the back-end to build and support. And that's before you count the grief, public outrage and aggravation associated with inevitable outages and downtime.

Nor, as the failure of countless titles from *The Sims Online* to *The Matrix Online* and, most recently, *Vanguard: Saga of Heroes* to ignite the gaming world illustrates, is success guaranteed, whatever your firm's past track record in the industry. Note that this maxim holds true even for the most pedigreed and well-funded of intellectual properties: Anyone remember *Asheron's Call 2* (the now-defunct sequel to a much older forerunner which is actually still profitably running) or *Need for Speed* spin-off *Motor City Online*?

Bearing this in mind, before rushing out and attempting to capitalize on one of the

hottest trends since in-game advertising, take a second to stop and ponder the following hints, tips and advice. Certainly, the analysts at DFC Intelligence predict big things for the sector, saying it will be worth over \$13 billion by 2012. But as we at Embassy Multimedia Consultants counsel clients both new to and familiar with this rapidly-growing market, it always pays to know the rules before getting in the game...

Defy Expectation – “Most MMOs follow the narrow framework defined early in the market’s history by *Ultima Online* and *EverQuest*,” explains Richard “Lord British” Garriott, creator of the *Ultima* franchise and NCSoft’s *Tabula Rasa*. “There’s no feeling of a dynamic world; no real sense of accomplishment beyond leveling up.”

Translation: We don’t need another *World of Warcraft*, or similarly-styled, grind-heavy sword and sorcery romp – ditto for sci-fi themed escapades as well. That market’s already sewn up thanks to an immense number of current offerings from *Dark Age of Camelot* to *Anarchy Online*, *The Lord of the Rings Online*, *EVE Online*, *Gods & Heroes*, *Age of Conan*, etc. (Notice a trend here? We call that overstimulation.) What’s more, consumers tend to form long-standing bonds with specific games, heightened by these products’ sense of familiarity and community. Attempting to convince them to part from their present obsession, after endless months of character-building and relationship-forming, just to try a largely carbon-copy alternative isn’t the easiest, or most cost-effective, task.

Instead, when developing your next blockbuster, focus on more uncommonly explored, yet just as interesting topics. Although still in the minority, publishers like Sony Online Entertainment with *The Agency* (spies); Netamin with *Ultimate Baseball Online* (sports); and Flying Lab with *Pirates of the Burning Sea* (I’ll give you one guess) are leading the way. Bonus points if you maximize marketability by picking a topic that extends the title’s appeal to non-traditional gaming demographics such as women, casual shoppers and seniors. See Nexon’s *Audition* (dancing), Linden Labs’ *Second Life* (human interaction), Sulake’s *Habbo Hotel* (kickin’ it with friends) or *Kaneva* (social networking) for inspiration, with even

Sony's *PlayStation Home* initiative speaking to the popularity of this growing practice. In other words, making niche titles for limited audiences with tired play mechanics based on already well-exploited trends won't do wonders for your bottom line. Dare to boldly go where rivals aren't: In one fell swoop, it'll let you raise your profile, recognize greater financial upsides, improve game quality and face reduced competition.

Put Profits First – Here's a simple equation even all us non-bean-counting types can understand: Less development cost + smaller overhead + fewer licensing fees + lighter manpower = greater payouts, minimized risk, faster profitability and exponentially increased ROI.

It's the reason why outfits like Worlds Apart Productions (creators of *Stargate: Online Trading Card Game* and other computerized collectible card game outings – now known as SOE Denver) have operated for years successfully on skeleton crews, yet still produce top-notch product. And, of course, browser-based offerings from small outfits such as *Kingdom of Loathing* can quickly become lucrative. What's more, the phenomenon further explains how relatively low-key titles with little-to-no marketing expenditures such as *RuneScape* can be amongst the most successful (featuring 5.6 million players, 1 million of whom are paying subscribers) MMOs in existence.

The takeaway here being that massive budgets and expansive universes filled with endless surprises aren't everything. To improve chances of success, simply devote as much attention to your business plan as the actual game itself. Before building a title, determine a break-even point and core set of goals, then staff accordingly and stick religiously to assigned budgets and design plans. Don't let feature creep or, worse, hubris – always estimate conservatively when forecasting revenues, subscriber bases, rate of customer retention, etc. – stand in the way of common sense. Ultimately, what you need to focus on is building a polished, high-quality product of manageably limited, but infinitely expandable scope that drives word-of-mouth sales, the single biggest contributor to any given MMO's success. And above all else, ensures the flexibility to accept multiple revenue streams and dynamically

adapt your strategic approach as needed. When it comes to virtual worlds, anything and everything can, and will, often change on the fly.

If you have to start small, so be it: Build a solid core game than can operate with fewer members then use a low, but steady stream of subscriber income to expand slowly and organically. If you need to achieve larger payouts and recruit customers faster, focus on promotions (e.g. online campaigns, demo discs, mailers, contests, etc.) that directly put the title, or a means of interacting with its assets (i.e. fan site kits, playable mini-games or teaser trailers) in front of the most possible buyers. Always look for alternate income channels, as companies like K2 Network (whose games are free to play, yet generate a healthy income on small power-up and item purchases) or virtual miniatures seller Octopi have done. And whatever your size or ambition, as a rule of thumb, anticipate that costs of customer support will far exceed initial expectation – players can and will be demanding.

Either way, do the research and take the managerial steps necessary to ensure your reach doesn't exceed your grasp, and you'll already be ahead of 90% of the competition. "Our goal is to grow organically, profitably and healthy," confirms Funcom product director Jorgen Tharaldsen. "And [of course] deliver the best possible games where people can enjoy themselves and have fun, regardless of their nationality or background."

Nurture Your Community – Remember: Most players play not for actual in-game content itself, but rather to chat, canoodle and interact with others just like themselves.

That said, a top-notch (but not, by definition, necessarily technically cutting-edge or audio-visually astounding) hands-on experience and the associated community it inevitably attracts is the most effective sales tool you've got, and means of driving continued growth. Therefore you'd best treat end-users like royalty. Why? Well, quite frankly, they're the ones paving your simulated streets in gold.

Or, as *A Theory of Fun for Game Design* author Raph Koster is kind enough to

point out on his website, “Glory is the reason why people play online; shame is what keeps them from playing online. Neither is possible without other people being present.”

To wit, the fine art of listening, responding to and providing encouragement for your customer base can’t be underestimated. Just ask *Star Wars: Galaxies*’ creators, who sparked a storm of controversy with their undesired “enhancements” to the title in 2005. Nor should one fail to recognize end-users’ inherent ability, or motivation, to “break the system,” whether intentional or not... As makers of pioneering MMOs dating all the way back to 1987’s *Habitat*, which saw a months-in-the-making treasure hunt designed to take the user community weeks to solve cracked in minutes, can attest, expect the unexpected – and be ready to deal with it when it inevitability happens.

With this in mind, it’s imperative that you invest heavily in customer support, keep your ear to the street and recruit designers who remain active and willing participants in their own simulated worlds. Not to mention continuously arrange a spate of in-game events and activities such as tournaments, political rallies and even celebrity appearances, to keep users coming back. (Real-world gatherings such as fan faires and conventions too...) Putting consumers’ needs first and being able to respond speedily and effectively to any situation that affects their happiness and satisfaction is crucial, as is perpetually enhancing the quality of their ongoing play experience. Never forget that an MMO is less a game, more an active commitment – everyone, including you and your social life/checkbook, needs to be in it for the long haul.

Promote User-Friendliness – Bad news: If you’re an MMO maker, you’re already playing to audience that’s a subset of a subset. Think PC gamers with an interest in the subject matter that possess specific minimum hardware/Internet configurations who are willing to try new things, outlay regular amounts of cash and spend multiple hours each week getting up to speed with and enjoying your product. If it helps, imagine each step required to play your title, from its initial purchase to installation, configuration, character generation and active play as another gateway

through which gamers must pass. And it's only natural that there will be a steady rate of attrition, or customer loss, along the way at each checkpoint.

Game developers want to know why more people aren't getting hooked on the hobby. The short answer: We're not making it easy for them. So if you want to increase chances for success, it has to start at the earliest phase of development. As in, going all the way back to when you're choosing a topic, determining how to present it to the world and deciding how players will interact with your simulated universe.

Want to really see an MMO take off? Create one with a mass-market theme, lower the system requirements, make it possible to play in bite-sized sessions and show people how they can jump right in and begin playing in minutes. It's the difference between enjoying a best-selling novel that's been adapted into an hour-long TV special or actually picking up and thumbing through the original, 600-page book. Most gamers want to get right to the good stuff, not sit around reading every last tome or scroll you've crammed onto a 3D bookcase or pimping out their new superhero or paladin by endlessly tapping their mouse to wail on generic thugs or low-resolution rats. That's why hardcore players – a small subset of your audience – should have the option to delve into games in detail, while the majority of players should, by default, be given the choice to skip the minutiae.

Certainly, customizability is mandatory: The end-user must be made to feel as if they have ownership of their virtual experience by being allowed to personalize everything from avatar look/feel to assigned quests/missions and in-game controls. But you also have to truly put that power in their hands, and make it – like actually jumping in and seeing where a title's fun really lies – easy to access and appreciate. Sadly, most who do include such features still hide them behind a dizzying array of menus, toggles and keyboard inputs... Not to mention game designs which instantly infuriate players by immediately forcing them to download 30-minute updates the initial time they're loaded. You know what they say about first impressions, right?

Oh, and just because “massively multiplayer” is the watchword, shouldn’t mean it’s the only game in town. Counterintuitive as it seems, don’t force players to automatically have to interact with other subscribers. Instead, create a large subset of compelling adventures they can accomplish alone. Then let them choose to reach out to the virtual world at large for help, advice or just to recount war stories when ready. Newcomers need a little time to get adjusted, and we all have moments where we want to just cut loose, feel like a one-man army, raid a few wyvern’s nests, and not have some foul-mouthed teen named “j00m4Ma69” tagging along to ruin the experience. In plain English, it’s their fantasy: Let players individually decide when they’re ready to allow someone to rudely intrude on it.

“It’s always tricky to communicate to potential users that making a game that’s friendly to everyone, even casual players, doesn’t need to necessarily preclude depth or challenge,” confesses *EverQuest II* senior producer Scott Hartsman. “Lots of hardcore gamers, even developers, hear ‘casual-friendly’ and think ‘no thanks.’ The truth is that it’s actually possible, and highly recommendable, to make a game that has interesting things to do for people across the spectrum.”

In essence, the sooner we all stop making MMOs the old-fashioned way, and start simply making sense, the easier it’s going to be to expand the medium, and enjoy unfettered success.

Besides, lest you doubt the upsides, recall: Given aforementioned financial forecasts, if, by following these suggestions, you manage to seize even .005% more of the market, well... Per going rates on online auction houses, that still buys one heck of a level 60 dark elf necromancer.

CREATING HITS

By Steve Allison
Chief Marketing Officer, Midway Games
www.midway.com

In the past several months there has been some interesting banter about changing the way games are marketed as we enter the next generation, particularly when it comes to new IP (intellectual property). But is this really the case? According to our numbers, the actual success rate of new IP over the past four years is just 7%. In other words, 93% of new IP fails in the marketplace. So while the 90-plus review scores and armfuls of awards create the perception that titles like *Psychonauts*, *Shadow of the Colossus*, *Okami* and other great pieces of work were big successes, the truth is that they were big financial disappointments and money losers.

The call for a change in marketing has come primarily from a few developers who have seen their games passed over by the marketplace or by their competitors and decided to reboot their projects a couple of times. Yet I've never seen a highly anticipated game with a truly powerful concept hurt by a product delay. I've been through a few with the *Unreal Tournament* franchise and the launch of *Neverwinter Nights*. These were truly anticipated releases that were destined to be big whenever they shipped and have publicity all along the way, however long it took. But let's face it: Not all games are as highly anticipated as these. If a game loses its momentum because of delays it will be because the concept itself is weak, or because bad timing has made the product either less relevant or allowed a rival developer to get to market first with a similar idea.

So with a success rate of less than 10% percent for new IP, it is not the way we

market and launch games that needs revisiting in the next generation. No, it is development that needs reflection, refinement and change. It is development that must evolve in all its various facets, from inception to execution. It is the conception and creation of new IP that must be redefined in this new generation so that we can all pull together to beat the 93% failure rate – even as we face significantly higher development costs – by reaching a common understanding that the potential success of any game is wholly dependent on three key factors, in the following order of importance: The true commercial power of the game’s high-level *concept*, the *timing* of the game’s release, and finally, the quality of the game’s *execution*.

1. The Most Important Thing to Get Right is the Concept.

Games should have an elevator pitch that makes avid gamers *and* average mass market consumer who plays games say “I’ve got to get that” or “Bad ass!”

One very important truth is this: 16-35 year-old males [in this day and age] are not attracted to the things our PD (product development) guys naturally tend to come up with. Why? Because working at a publisher day in and day out, particularly in development, we all get trapped in the hardcore gamer’s mindset. It’s really important to understand that our customers on next-generation home consoles – PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 – are 90% male, and that’s not going to change anytime soon. Therefore, the games that have the highest commercial potential are those that provide an outlet for them to live out their alpha male fantasies, to do the things they truly want to do but never could in real life.

In other forms of entertainment, the audience is content to sit back and passively take in the experience. With interactive entertainment, our customers actually want to do things they see in other forms of entertainment or in the news. They want to lead a rock band; become a pro skateboarder; be LeBron James; stride onto the field with their favorite NFL team; save the world from tyranny during World War II; drive a car in ways that would be completely reckless in real life; lead an elite counter-terrorist unit against threats in Las Vegas or New York; rise to power in a Scorsese-like crime saga; or, to use an example that’s very close to home, step into

Chow Yun-Fat's shoes in a John Woo movie. In general, when you test concepts with our target customer, these are the types of things they dream about. What holds the greatest attraction for them in video games is this: Culturally-relevant fantasies established by current events, recent cultural trends or forms of entertainment that appeal to their age group.

Want to be certain that you have a powerful concept? Don't take internal debate or internal polls as proof of commercial viability. Instead, really get to know your audience. Test your concepts with them. Be sure your audience loves the game premise and key features in an elevator pitch of no more than one page. If you need more than that in order for an average 16 year-old to get it, you've got too much story and an insufficiently powerful concept. The most successful concepts are going to be those our audience fantasizes about doing, but could never otherwise do without the videogame arena to do it in.

Conversely, what doesn't our audience fantasize about or respond to? Desolate, post-apocalyptic wastelands. Werewolves. Vampires. Mechs. Exo-suits. Cybernetic enhancements. Magic dogs. So if your next game is set in a post apocalyptic world, starring a cybernetically-enhanced vampire hunter, you may make hardcore gamers say "Bad ass," but you're facing an uphill battle when it comes to the larger segment of the market who simply say "Meh... another one of *those* games."

What's both funny and fascinating is what happens when an obtuse concept like the ones above come in from various parts of our company. One of the higher-ups will suggest a refinement like "Let's take out the post-apocalyptic future and set it in the present day." All of the sudden, there's a revolt because "the suits" are wringing the innovation out of [some poor developer's] game concept. That's simply not the case. Innovation doesn't come from the setting. It comes from what you do within a powerful concept. Trust me, there's nothing innovative about cybernetic enhancements.

There is one exception. The name recognition of highly successful developers and individuals can be a powerful commercial draw in its own right. But that's a select

group of talent: Blizzard; BioWare; Epic Games; Bungie; id software; Rockstar North; Will Wright, Shigeru Miyamoto; Hideo Kojima and a few others. The next game from any of these studios or individuals is enough of a powerful concept to be bankable even if the concept is otherwise obtuse. By repeatedly succeeding both critically and commercially, these studios or individuals have earned the near-undying trust of consumers. That trust gives them the right to a level of creative freedom that other studios or individuals will not be able to justify to the suits from a commercial perspective, no matter how well they execute.

The only time one of *those* games will attract a broad segment of our audience is if it comes from one of the aforementioned superstar developers. People like Kojima or Miyamoto and studios like BioWare or Bungie can show up at E3 with a game about cybernetically-enhanced magic dogs battling exo-suit-wearing werewolves in a desolate post-apocalyptic wasteland, and they'll get the benefit of the doubt from the press and from gamers. Other developers – no matter how talented they are, or how much acclaim they've gotten from the press – can only claim to be at this level when they have won the confidence of gamers through repeated commercial success.

2. Timing is the Second Most Important Factor in the Sales Potential of a Game.

No matter how cool your idea may be, understand that great minds think alike. Being first to market on key features or powerful concepts can make you top dog. Missing your window will make you irrelevant. Because an incredible feature that a developer is working on is never unique for long: Multiple teams are usually chasing the same general idea or feature breakthrough.

In Hollywood, where you'll see three Wyatt Earp movies or three asteroid flicks from three different studios in the same release season, you don't want to be the last one to hit the theatres. The last one will be irrelevant, and the same is true for games. Just look at the number of musical instrument and karaoke singing games that are flooding the market. Joining *Guitar Hero* and *SingStar* are *Boogie* from EA, Harmonix's *Rock Band* and I'm sure several others. Timing to market is going

to make or break these games at retail, because all of them are expected to be well-executed.

Whenever execution on an innovative feature is expected to be a key driver of a game's success, timing to market is a huge factor. Our *Stranglehold* team is working on an incredibly tough feature they call "Massive D," which allows pixel-level destruction of the environment. It's very impressive and nobody has delivered this before in a videogame, especially the way they are doing it. However, we're not alone. We also know of about four or five other next-generation games based around a similar feature, like EA's *Battlefield: Bad Company*. But with *Stranglehold* strategically timed to [arrive ahead of them], we're assured of being first ever to market with this eye-catching technology.

If *Stranglehold* were to come out twelve months late with Massive D as one of its major selling points, there would still be people who'd think it's cool. But the sales impact of a genuinely innovative feature has much greater impact than a mere commodity feature, as Massive D will be in 2008.

This is a fact of life. Developers who get it and want to be recognized as pioneers have to grasp the paramount importance of being first to market on technology and gameplay mechanics – while still being motivated to execute them well.

3. Execution is Only the Third Most Important Factor In A Game's Success. Yes, Third.

This doesn't mean that we shouldn't strive to make great games. Nor does it mean that a great concept gives developers the license to make a crappy game. It simply means that execution alone is no guarantee of commercial success. The developers who understand this will thrive in the next-generation home console business. The ones who don't will fall victim to the realities of the shifting marketplace.

The average reader of this piece, especially one working in the gaming business, will say, "Wait a minute. A great game whose review scores average 90 or higher

can ship when it's done and it'll still be a great game." Or they'll say, "Whatever the concept may be, a great title is all about the game mechanics." Unfortunately, this is not true. A great game is one that is a commercial success. Period.

Consumers review games with their wallet, and you don't get to sell them a million units at full price unless a bunch of people love your work – especially at \$59 a pop. Sure, your craftsmanship may be amazing. But if your concept is not a powerful and relevant male fantasy, executed in a timely fashion, at a level that delivers on the promise of your core idea, you've probably just delivered the videogame equivalent of an art house film.

An art house game certainly proves that your development team is really talented, but it also demonstrates you're really not in tune with the audience. This kind of creativity is only fine as long as your art house game was built on an art house budget. But an art house game made on a blockbuster budget – especially the sums of money required to be competitive on Xbox 360, PS3 and high-end PCs – is fiscally irresponsible.

The truth is that there is no correlation between review scores and commercial success. If there were, "great" games like *Beyond Good & Evil*, *Ico*, *Okami*, *Psychonauts*, *Shadow of the Colossus*, *Freedom Fighters*, *Prey* and Midway's own *Psi-Ops* would all have been multimillion-unit sellers. The aforementioned games are all games that average review scores of nearly 90% out of 100, some even higher. The reality is that none has sold more than 300,000 units at full price in the U.S. and a couple of these less than 250,000 units [throughout their] lifetime, even with bargain pricing. In today's home console business, a true next-generation game costs between \$12 and \$25 million dollars to produce, which sets the break-even point at 1 million units (and in some cases even 2 million units) depending on how high the budget has gotten.

What happens all too often in the videogame business is that we get art house movies made at blockbuster budgets. These games inevitably fail to find an audience large enough to support their costs, and nobody is happy. The developer

thinks they were destined to sell 5 million units because they scored a 90 on average. The publisher is mad for spending so much on a game that had no broad appeal despite a very talented team and a large budget.

Let's be clear: It is not the amount spent on marketing that determines how many units of these games are sold. A game's sales potential is entirely determined by the strength of its overall concept, while the difference between its sales potential and its final tally is determined by its execution. And given the phenomenal execution of *Psychonauts*, *Ico*, *Psi-Ops* and the other art house games listed above, their failure can be ascribed to a misguided concept, poor timing or both.

4. One More Thing – Develop Vertically With Concept, Timing And Execution In Mind.

Begin by developing your game vertically, not horizontally. In other words, don't just take the design document and start building levels 1 through 20 because that's the way that the lead designer mapped out the game progression. By first taking the time to build a single level to the quality of a finished product; by rapidly prototyping all new gameplay mechanics; by prioritizing the riskiest and most innovative features, you take the unknown and make it completely known. You'll also know how long it takes to make a level of finished quality; whether the gameplay ideas and features are working properly and, most importantly, whether they're fun. And if there's anything that's not working, you can cut it sooner rather than later.

If you've got a truly powerful concept, it should help generate a specific, quantifiable set of features. Focus on that. Don't develop a laundry list of features to merely functional status – which means they work, but they still need tons of additional work to actually be fun – then move on to yet other features. You won't even know if your ideas are genuinely fun until you develop one vertical slice, or several, depending on the ambition and challenges of your project. Don't be wedded to a paper design document: That's not your game. Game development is an iterative process, and only by iterating early and often will you discover the best version of the game that is hidden inside your concept. Keep refining your game by constant-

ly scaling it back and rebuilding it around the genuinely fun elements that emerge during the vertical slice process.

If, during this process, a feature turns out to be just OK and not great, it's decision time. If it's essential, keep at it. If it's a nice-to-have, but not a must-have, drop it, or, better yet, save it for the sequel. On the other hand, if nothing is fun or true to the concept after this extended pre-production period, kill the project and move on.

The key to good game development is to prove what is both fun about your game and critical to its success – but let the rest go. One or two elements, done spectacularly, are exponentially more likely to yield a blockbuster than 15 average features. Look at [recent] hit *Gears of War*. Its feature set is not very deep at all, but it does what it does exceptionally well: Stop-and-pop gunplay with use of cover, executed to perfection, with best-of-breed visuals and core technology.

If you do this type of pre-production correctly, the actual production process should be shorter; major levels can be built efficiently via outsourcing to specifications determined during pre-production; and the development schedule can be projected with less error, making your game's time-to-market more of a known quantity. And when you've got the concept and timing in the bag, thanks to your well-engineered pre-production process, everything else about your game's development now comes down to good old-fashioned execution, based on things that you've already proven with your vertical slice.

If developers follow the process I've outlined above, they'll create a product that can achieve the biggest sales possible based on the potential of its concept. Meanwhile, marketing can begin its process around the near-final quality vertical slice instead of a design document and a prayer. Everyone is on the same page. Everybody wins. The stakes are so high in the next-gen landscape that marketing or publishing leadership needs to be involved all along the way so that concept, timing and execution are clear from start to finish.

EXECUTIVES

JUMPSTART YOUR CAREER

Fast-paced, ego-driven and competitive as the videogame industry is, I probably shouldn't be telling you this... but then, that's never stopped me before. So here it goes: You – yes, *you*, no matter your level of interest, experience or familiarity with the business – possess all the basic skills and know-how it takes to win big in the gaming business.

Think I'm pulling your joystick?

Recall: World-renowned designer Sid Meier (*Pirates!*, *Civilization*) started out a simple computer/IT grunt. Sales legend J.W. “Wild Bill” Stealey, a former Air Force pilot, founded MicroProse, one of the most successful gaming companies of the '80s/'90s, after randomly bumping into him in an arcade. Former Microsoft honcho Peter Moore, one of the biz's most respected figures and a staple fixture both on TV and in print, actually began his career as a physical education (PE) teacher. And Video Games Live founder Tommy Tallarico, who lives in a theme park-like mansion and travels the world playing sold-out concerts for thousands of international fans at venues as diverse as the Kennedy Center and Hollywood Bowl? Long before the fame and fortune, he started out homeless and sleeping under a pier.

And if you believe it can't happen to you, well... Sorry, my friend – you've got your wires crossed. I should know.

At 17 I was just another overweight, lonely geek dreaming of stardom, beta testing games like *Blood Bowl* and *Alone in the Dark 3* pro bono just to feel like part of the industry. Two years after: Your average, everyday college kid and dedicated fansite owner desperately seeking a summer job, who'd been rejected by nearly every game company on the east coast.

But despite possessing no programming, graphic or design skills, by the time I was 20, I'd landed my first internship, working for multimillion-dollar, decade-old software publisher Microids out of Paris, France. Three weeks after arriving, was named head of international public relations. And three months following, when I departed back for America? Dubbed VP of Product Acquisitions – and enjoying the prestige of a having a hit title already under my belt. Since then, it's been nothing but start-ups, self-published software hits, book signings and radio/TV appearances – proving, yet again, that literally anyone can make it, if they just know where to concentrate their talent and effort.

The good news then: Today's your lucky day. Rather than retread the same tired ground – seriously, the amount of books, articles and podcasts now devoted to breaking into the gaming biz practically dwarves Koei's catalogue of *Dynasty Warriors* re-releases – I'm here to tell you how to get where you'd truly like to go: Straight to the top.

Want to slap hands with legends like Shigeru Miyamoto, Will Wright and Trip Hawkins? Build an electronic empire? Someday day see your latest title's name sitting up in lights alongside best-sellers like *Halo 3*, *Metal Gear Solid 4* and *Splinter Cell: Double Agent* as the next interactive smash? Here's how to send your career, as well as both personal and job prospects, skyrocketing...

ARTISTS

Great art is nothing without an audience: Get your work in front of as many people as possible. While publishing an online portfolio's a great start, equally vital is learning to establish a singular, marketable identity.

Concentrate on mastering a particular style of visuals to generate a dedicated fan base. Next, continue to cultivate your following through cost-effective promotional vehicles such as newsletters, virtual gallery viewings and other self-engineered publicity campaigns designed to push their buttons. For instance: Anyone can give

away free desktop wallpaper featuring spoofs of popular characters in unexpected situations. Or, for that matter, contribute stunning graphic sets or concept sketches to the dozens of complimentary game mods, or fan-made updates, for chart-topping outings such as *Half-Life 2* and *Unreal Tournament* that are being casually constructed in their spare time by legions of loyal fans as we speak.

More than anything else, it pays to be inventive, and prolific – from web-based comics to indie game box covers or even just eye-catching finishes to your favorite fansite, don't hesitate to leave your mark on any colorful venture that's bound to capture the public's imagination.

TIP: Afraid potential employers won't see what you're getting at? Paint a picture for them. Anybody can send in a resume or email off a few slick pics. Instead, improve your chances of being noticed by taking the time to visit with prospective patrons at various industry events – putting a face to a name makes you harder to dismiss. And hey, should you leave behind a snazzy, well-produced keepsake (services like CafePress, Lulu.com and BookSurge make it easy to self-publish books, mugs, etc. at minimal costs) that's bound to look great on someone's shelf – and serve as a ready reminder – to boot, so much the better. After all, as you well know... it's all about making an impression.

DESIGNERS

Go against the grain – to a point. While it pays to avoid clichés (hel-lo, World War II shooters and sci-fi real-time strategy epics) and pick story topics, underlying premises, art styles and control schemes that the market has yet to embrace, always stick with a base concept that both hardcore gamers can instantly comprehend the value of and casual shoppers immediately recognize. It's one thing to be ahead of the curve (and there should always be a minimum 1-3 key innovations you hang each new creation's hat on, both from a design and PR standpoint) – another to be out in left field completely.

Similarly, reach for the stars... But also know when to stop grasping at empty space. The best videogame projects generally begin with a detailed design document and fully mapped-out production schedule. While it's inevitable projects can, and *should*, evolve as team members contribute new ideas and insight though, a wise man knows when his ambition exceeds his resources – and when to save killer ideas for a token sequel.

True: If everyone were to accept their limitations at face value, we'd never see bar-raising outings like the original *Doom* or boundary-busting MMOs such as *World of Warcraft*. But chances of batting one out of the park are 10,000 to 1, as even experienced vets will tell you. So instead of swinging for the fences – and most likely whiffing – just set out to create the best game you can using a concise, well-researched plan of action, and *given the time, money and manpower provided*.

As any pro ballplayer knows, base hits, when taken cumulatively, can be just as important as home runs. Don't try to force a blockbuster: Let the process evolve naturally, if and when it happens, as a result of team chemistry.

TIP: There's no substitute for good, old-fashioned playtesting. Never show your work to peers or the general public before it's ready – you only get one chance to make a first impression. Nonetheless, don't be afraid to put the product in people's hands either. Even in the old days, when one-man crews were the norm, great games seldom sprung forth fully born from the womb of a lone designer's imagination. They're often created as the direct result of outside influences, subtle or otherwise, on a single craftsman or team's initial creative vision.

EXECUTIVES

If you've ever worked a full-time job at a videogame developer/publisher, or any other commercial firm for that matter, then surely you're aware: Sadly, corporate advancement isn't necessarily tied to smarts, personality or performance. The secret to success in the boardroom: Making sure your voice is respected – and,

more importantly, heard.

In other words, first you've got to make yourself a standout commodity, not just another cog in the wheel... Hardly an easy task when you're just one of several dozen faceless marketing execs or middle-managers. The solution: Learning to live without fear, cultivate political allies, inspire by example and master the art of timing. Or, in plain English, knowing when to speak up, when to shut up, whom to speak to and how far to push it with the things you say and do, regardless of established process or convention... then simply having the guts to back any given play up, and smarts to spin it to your favor.

Naturally, be sensible about your approach: Cutting your boss out of the loop or misappropriating corporate resources to fuel a snappy side-project, say, isn't always a smart way to go about getting what you want. But, not that I'd insinuate anything, what's wrong with innocently asking the CEO if you could just buy him or her a cup of coffee sometime and hear their thoughts on the rise of casual, or massively multiplayer, online gaming, thereby putting yourself on a first-name basis? Or seeing if that friend of yours – you know, the software engineer – wouldn't mind helping you prototype that sweet idea you've had for months for a side-scrolling shooter on your lunch break? Heck – how about just dipping into your own pocket and buying some of the guys in the development trenches a pizza here and there during crunch time to help keep morale high, and over a deep-dish pie, innocently inquiring about that feature you'd love to see them introduce?

Genius – hardly. Simply be spontaneous: Whatever people expect from the average worker bee, dare to go above and beyond it.

TIP: Strategize, and always think long-term. Ask yourself: How is what I'm doing good jointly for myself, the individual in question and the entire corporation as a whole? Learn to incentivize behavior based around this – people react faster, more often and with greater alacrity when there's something in it for them. Can't wait to get certain projects up and running? Grease the wheels and watch how easily they turn.

JOURNALISTS

Pick better subjects – and learn to play the hype game. Translation: Choose topics and headlines designed to generate the most interest, controversy and/or mass-market appeal. After all, it's no coincidence the first thing you see on any newspaper, website or magazine are sensational headlines. Or that Mario Armando Lavandeira, of PerezHilton.com fame, went from being a virtual nobody to Internet sensation almost overnight.

Having written literally thousands myself, it pains me to say it: No matter how slick and polished your game-related news clips, reviews and previews, it's nigh impossible to stand out when hundreds more on the same themes and products from an equal number of faceless copywriting drones are published every single day. Meaning that if you want to establish yourself as a singular voice, you need to start speaking in one – and delivering equally one-of-a-kind stories to an eager audience. Thankfully, those who take the time to craft unique or gonzo pitches don't just stand a better chance of building a following amongst readers. They also put themselves in a better position to potentially get a clip published by eager editors constantly on the lookout for scoops. (Hint: Go with features to generate the most bang for the buck/visibility...)

Equally important: Controlling the rights to your own content, and learning to market yourself as much as your narrative. Tempting as a fat paycheck may sound to a starving artist, by giving up a byline, bio or personal stake in any given piece in exchange for an article's high-profile placement in a national publication and/or a one-time fee, you're literally writing yourself out of the story.

TIP: Be serious about your business. Thrilled as many penmen are just to be getting paid to diddle around on their Xbox 360, let alone get compensated for their wit and charm, they forget that contracts were meant to be negotiated. You never know when 10 seconds' chatter can result in a 50% pay increase, or the right to republish your story in another outlet, thereby doubling the productivity of any given day's work.

MUSICIANS

Every closet rock star dreams of getting in the groove. The ones who're really ready for the big time know that it's a combination of savvy marketing and raw talent that'll finally help them hit that high note. Creating music on the fly isn't the challenge it used to be: Utilities like Pro Tools and the free Audacity can turn even the most tone-deaf DJ into a smooth operator. What's really tricky is getting people to hear the message behind your music.

Recognize: Game tunes, at odds with other forms of harmonic composition, don't just need to be clever and catchy. These little ditties often have to accurately reflect various in-game/story event progressions, or help set certain moods. Typically, they serve a unique function – and must be snappy enough to attract the user's attention and stand up to multiple, looping plays, all without distracting from the on-screen action they're meant to supplement. As a result, if you want to capture audio directors' attention, you won't just have to exhibit unfettered genius in your work. It also pays to show range, forethought and versatility – especially if you plan to work with a firm who publishes everything from puzzlers to platform-hopping romps.

Ultimately, make yourself stand out by circulating tracks as much as possible throughout the gaming community, and in new and creative ways. Quick example: Designing concept albums inspired by various videogames for free online giveaways, performing a virtual concert in *Second Life*, or creating an unofficial downloadable “mixtape” to be enjoyed in the company of various specific interactive outings. Alternately, look for opportunities to pair tracks with complementary and striking visualizations – e.g. by scoring the soundtrack of a dazzling homebrew demo or title sequence of a popular independent game offering.

TIP: Tag any composition you make with a signature sound effect or calling card of some sort – a nom de plume, special shoutouts, certain instrumental tricks... whatever makes you instantly memorable to the listener. Then create a portal (i.e. a MySpace page or Facebook profile) where fans can easily find you and draw

attention to it. Needless to say, you'll never play to a packed virtual house if software promoters don't know where to send all those Jagermeister- and Cool Whip-filled contract riders...

PROGRAMMERS

Be sure to avail yourself of every learning resource and industry contact. Sites like Gamasutra, GPWiki.org and GameDev.net, not to mention organizations such as the International Game Developers Association (www.igda.org), are your best friend here. One's skills must constantly be kept current, regularly expanding your knowledge base and experience is crucial, and when it comes to staying ahead of the curve, it always pays to keep your ear to the ground.

Next, do what you do best: Grind out code like a cryptographer on crystal meth. But don't make the mistake of thinking you're the next John Carmac; today's games are built by dozens, sometimes hundreds, of individuals laboring for years on end. Just as valuable as the signature courses and curriculums you'll find at schools such as Carnegie Mellon, Digipen and The University of Southern California? Learning how to work as part of a team, mastering abstract thought, honing your problem-solving skills and developing the discipline needed to successfully cope with and work the endless overtime hours nearly all game projects require.

Also crucial: Stop thinking like an artist, and start thinking like an engineer. The simplest, most expedient solution is often the best, and the most successful programmers know to improve chances of success by breaking projects of any scope down into manageable, milestone-based goals.

TIP: Short on cash or time? Focus on innovation – not invention. Yes: We're all occasionally blown away by technically-astounding titles like *Company of Heroes* and *Crysis*. But from a software publishing executive's perspective, when it comes to pricey, risky, budget- and time-sensitive creative projects like games, sometimes

it's easier, more rewarding and better for your overall career prospects to avoid reinventing the wheel. In other words, if you can't do something new, concentrate on doing it *better*. Off-hours tinkering offers a ready vehicle (and one in which you're free to experiment, with no outside influence or constraints) for your wilder and more revolutionary impulses. Note: Rapid prototyping is the easiest way to tell if you're onto a winner.

VIDEOGAME ADVERTISING 2.0

Greetings from 30,000 feet! As I type this, I'm halfway to Denver, en route to Europe by way of Los Angeles (don't ask)... but more importantly, also 75% of the way through the latest issues of half a dozen leading industry publications including *Play* and *Game Informer*.

Being a consummate marketing professional – and not particularly intrigued by *The Queen* or those little packs of trail mix the airline's currently trying to pass off as meals – this disturbs me. Not so much because I'm sure I paid for a stale piece of chicken somewhere in that exorbitant last-minute ticket price, and don't have a spare Nintendo DS handy either. Rather, it's because breezing through the bulk of each publication simply involved zipping past nearly every single featured advertisement within.

Let me preface the following by saying I have every impetus in the world, and certainly more incentive than the average consumer, to pause and admire the corporate-sponsored view. It's my job to keep abreast of current promotional and sales strategies in order to stay ahead of the competition. Therefore, when an ad proves even remotely unique or engaging, I stop and notice.

So as someone who buys games regularly, makes a point of following emerging trends and has a vested interest in any biz-related outreach, the thought suddenly strikes me as chilling. I wonder: Could it be that, as game makers and marketers, we continue to pour hundreds of thousands of dollars, sometimes millions, into advertising vehicles that consumers and biz observers alike are finding increasingly more off-putting and outdated? Loyal readers of past books like *Videogame Marketing and PR* can, of course, deduce by now that my answer leans much towards the affirmative.

Mind you, there's plenty we could be doing to improve presentation and delivery

as is. Exhibit A: *PC Gamer*'s March 2007 issue, flush with page after page of promotional spots sporting less of what actual enthusiasts look for (e.g. large, high-quality in-game screenshots) and more of what they don't (obscure, oversized pieces of artwork or eye-scrunching stat readouts). Exhibit B: The fact I've just wandered through one of the country's largest airports and seen only a single, solitary banner reminding me that instead of spending my next layover idly skimming *War and Peace*, I could be enjoying a quick brainteaser or shootout via mobile phone. And, of course, Exhibit C: The realization that I've just unpacked a copy of *Final Fantasy III* – hence my grouchiness about that missing DS – and can't find anything inside telling me where to purchase, oh, the other dozen-plus titles in the series.

The upshot being that, perhaps, we as an industry need to start getting with the program a little quicker and looking ahead as to how the advertising and product messaging we produce should better be evolving alongside the consumer. Rather than bore you with the usual, albeit insightful suggestions (i.e. recommending marketing mainstream-friendly titles where women and casual consumers really do shop or, you know, actually creating in-game ads that don't interfere with the physical play experience), I'm taking a different tack, though. What follows is simply a short rundown of several hip, proven methods of getting the word out about new products and services that are already working for other businesses, and could do just as well for ours. Not to mention, hopefully, a wakeup call to start paying much more attention to them:

CUSTOM PUBLISHING

I recently read a definition of custom publishing that went a little something like this... "Simply defined, custom publishing is a targeted publishing program delivered to key audiences with a goal of increasing brand perception, improving brand loyalty and influencing or improving the overall decision making process."

In other words, forget courting the eyes of the media and hoping to increase con-

sumer awareness via various methods of PR outreach, which can produce unpredictable and sometimes even damaging results. Instead, why not create your own darn articles and/or corporate-owned print or online publications, brand these items as desired and deliver them to consumers where you know they'll already be at the time and place of your own choosing?

Confused? Think about the magazines you always find in every 747 seat back during any airborne business trip. It shouldn't come as a surprise to note that these are all paid for by the airline itself, painstakingly sculpted to get certain core themes/messages across and strategically delivered to a captive audience of millions.

Note that editorial content in the form of a custom publication can take several guises. Think brochures, catalogues, magazine inserts, websites, free POP giveaways or even advertisements disguised as articles in proper newsstand periodicals. What's more, content is completely controlled by the custom publication's sponsor. Certainly, copywriting agencies may be given leeway to pen their own writer-suggested articles around various broad/narrow requested topics. However, the funding party does have ultimate say over what does or does not eventually appear in the publication – and gains greater ability to influence its readership's eventual perception and impressions of any highlighted product or brand.

This “advertorial” approach works on multiple fronts. Advertisers are happy, because they're getting crucial selling points across in the manner and method they choose. They also gain a nice marketing vehicle through which to shout out trade partners, sell more goods and fuel increased consumer loyalty. (Say, by rewarding frequent shoppers with a free magazine subscription.) Consumers benefit by virtue of increased entertainment value – after all, people buy magazines for articles, not ads. What's more, even targeted advertorials are more fun to read than pure advertisements and keep you engaged longer than goofy photos or short, catch-phrase driven copy. In addition, they also provide an opportunity to speak to and connect with consumers on a casual, one-on-one level and may even be perceived as meaningful souvenirs.

Better still, custom publishing pieces aren't just able to be enjoyed by a single reader. They're often passed on to friends, laughed along to online with buddies during coffee breaks at the office, or read at length over the toilet. Ask yourself: When was the last time you enthusiastically handed a friend a copy of Sony's *MotorStorm* inside cover spread or referred them to a banner ad for *Supreme Commander*?

According to a recent study conducted by the Custom Publishing Council and Publications Management, companies spent an average of \$1,129,649 on custom publications in 2006 – an 18.4% increase from the year before. (The biz's largest year-on-year growth rate on record...) What's more, additional research says eight out of ten CMOs believe custom media should be an integral part of the marketing mix for any business, with 78% saying it's the future of marketing, period. Roper Public Affairs further discovered, on investigation, that 85% of consumers surveyed view custom publications as a preferred source of information, mostly because of their contents' highly-targeted nature.

Take it from experience too. We at Embassy Multimedia Consultants have already worked on everything from nationally-circulated articles to mailers, newsstand inserts, full-blown magazines, websites, micro-sites and more for dozens of clients including Sony, Microsoft, The Academy of Interactive Arts & Sciences, DreamCatcher Interactive, Nokia, Toys R Us, Nyko, Sam Goody, XM Radio, Major League Baseball, Sony Online Entertainment, Suncoast Video and ADV Films alone. So while game industry staples such as Electronic Arts, UbiSoft, IGN, IDG and Future Publishing are all starting to dip their toes more into these waters with single-/two-page advertorials or entire one-off publications, it's about time more game publishers considered doing a proverbial cannonball.

INTERACTIVE OUTREACH

It's one thing to voluntarily sit through a TV commercial, shoo away a pesky video trailer or scream in frustration after the 15th pop-up window touting the latest and

greatest new FPS unceremoniously storms its way onto your screen. Another entirely to kick back, relax and allow yourself to become immersed in an online multiplayer puzzle game that lets you happily square off for hours on end against newfound friends worldwide that just so happens to be sponsored by Dodge or Samsung.

That's right, ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the future of advertising... It's not making people sit through half-assed viral spots or brainstorming methods to slap your logo on a banner located far off in the background environment of a new *Need for Speed*. It's finding ways to build entire titles around specific brands, or place your messaging front and center in exchange for an overt value trade-off, i.e. giving the consumer something complimentary they'd otherwise have to pay for. You don't have to believe me, though – just scroll through an ever-growing list of immensely popular casual amusements out there ranging from *LEGO Bricktopia* to *Teen Titans: One on One* and even Comedy Central's oh-so-classy *South Park*-endorsed *Brown Noise Pooblast*.

The 3 million-plus copies Burger King recently sold of its exclusively-branded Xbox 360 titles – *Pocketbike Racer*, *Big Bumpin'* and *Sneak King* – can't spell it out clearly enough. Consumers don't mind being marketed to directly as long as such initiatives are tied to actual pieces of engaging content, have a compelling reason for being there and don't interfere with the hands-on experience. Heck, even I don't mind sitting through the odd Acuvue contact lenses commercial, if, as I recently discovered, it means getting to play WildTangent hits like *Blasterball 3* for free online via my Web browser versus paying \$19.99 for a full, downloadable edition.

The lesson being that ads shouldn't be static experiences that the consumer believes serve no purpose other than to make someone else money... Buyers need to feel as if the messaging itself is smartly wrapped around an intriguing product (say, an addictive desktop/console diversion or Web-based amusement). Alternately, it's also acceptable to work it in as a play component included for sake of real-world continuity – such as when *Splinter Cell* hero Sam Fisher whips out a

Sony Ericsson phone. Or, failing both of these instances, a trade-off buyers are willing to make in exchange for something of tangible value, i.e. pro bono or discount access to a cool game they wouldn't otherwise be able to afford or enjoy.

I'm a huge fan of publishers keeping their names and games on people's lips – a real problem in an industry where it takes 1-2 years on average to build a finished product. But even so, simple tricks such as designing Flash games based around core properties to keep interest high between sequels or offering free utilities like Rockstar's *Beaterator* that keep users coming back to your site, even during slow months, can work wonders for business in terms of influencing consumer perception. Shoot, just release a level editor or building designer such as CDV did with *City Life* and watch a community flourish, breathing new life into aging properties... and, possibly, depending on how savvy you are, fueling cheap content for later bundles and expansion packs.

Remaining at the forefront of people's minds is everything, given that we operate within an industry that's all about the newest and hottest products. And, naturally, there's no better way to do so than by making them want to constantly see more of what it is you're selling. (Especially if it provides a way to screw around for 15 minutes in the office when they should be doing work...) The upshot: If you build it, they will come. Provided, that is, there's a compelling reason – i.e. instant gratification, the joy of creating something from scratch, an activity people can bond over, or ways to happily fritter the day away shooting aliens instead of filing TPS reports – to do so.

EMPOWERING CONSUMERS

Recently, I sat down and had a chat with Greg Fischbach, founder of Acclaim Entertainment, to get a 20-year industry vet's thoughts on where videogame marketing and PR was headed. Now serving on MumboJumbo's board, one of the first things he happened to mention in a humorous anecdote involved his prior tenure overseeing Activision back in the '80s. Specifically, the story concerned how the

company used to issue fans collectible sew-on badges for mailing in photos of themselves hitting high scores on specific games. Some of you may recall this specific promotion; coming of age in the Atari 2600 era and being the proud personal owner of *Oink!* and *River Raid* patches, I certainly did.

Which only goes to prove a point – not only was such a marketing scheme, which basically provided enthusiasts tangible rewards for their continued participation, interest and brand loyalty, hugely successful. Here we sit two decades later, and it's still coming up in passing conversation. The kicker: There's no reason modern-day advertisers couldn't be devising similarly compelling frequent-shopper plans or even online-based initiatives that deliver just as much value. Hilariously though, people act as if Xbox Live's Achievements system (players are awarded points and virtual badges of honor that essentially give them greater standing and bragging rights in the online community) is ultra-revolutionary. Looking back, is it really so hard to see that game buyers like interactive, competition-driven promotions that offer the chance to hone their skills, socialize with peers and walk away with some perceived payout for their efforts?

MMOs and casual games are adept at exploiting this knowledge. Online portals like Pogo.com and King.com are flourishing – and amongst the “stickiest” websites on the Internet. Massively multiplayer titles such as *Eve Online* and *Second Life* generating incredible user traction. Frankly, there's no reason whatsoever a traditional PC/console publisher couldn't tap into the market with similar ventures. Building community- and new content-fostering features into games from the very beginning represents a smart step forward. Even simply releasing mod-making tools and encouraging consumers to utilize them (as well as building supporting social hubs) or creating mail-order programs, print/online newsletters or official newsgroups and forums would be a help. It's not like a fansite-based giveaway wherein you issue some basic graphical assets then hold a contest rewarding end-users with prizes for the best designs would even be particularly expensive or hard to execute.

The bottom line: It's now imperative that you find ways to continuously court the

consumer, put the power to influence product perception in their hands and make them feel like they're a member of your extended family. If it sounds troublesome, remember... As key influencers – the folks who directly fuel the buzz behind specific products and services throughout their demographic by constantly chatting them up – these people are essentially your ambassadors to the public at large. Or, in other words, the most effective champions for your brand that money can buy, enjoying greater influence than even the most powerful advertising campaign.

To put things in perspective: When I consider buying a new game, I always check how it's scored with key magazines and websites like *GameDaily*. But ultimately, before plunking my hard-earned cash down, I scan the net to see what people are saying, and ask friends for their personal opinion. Frankly, an individual with similar interests and outlook's bound to give me better purchasing advice than a critic who inherently comes at a title from an entirely different philosophical and experiential context.

As one high-level game industry exec recently confirmed, it is common knowledge now that roughly nine of ten males research games on the Internet before buying them. This being the case, a few banner placements on IGN.com and pages in *PSM* will only get you so far. The lesson to be learned here... If you really want to craft better game advertising and positively influence public perception, you have to create ongoing outreach programs that basically make players themselves walking, talking billboards.

BECOMING A BETTER MARKETER

As much as insiders relish spending hours debating the medium's artistic and intellectual value, if there's one sign gaming has truly come of age, it's this: The amount of outsiders flooding into the business. Film directors, venture capitalists, television networks, futurists, authors, politicians, music moguls, heads of state... With overall industry sales now topping \$13.5 billion, the entire world – not just 18-34 year-old males – is finally sitting up and taking notice.

That said, as many newcomers as one sees passing through Embassy Multimedia Consultants' doors, one subject bears repeating – making and marketing videogames isn't rocket science. The trick being that you simply need a solid frame of context to approach the twin problems of not only building high-quality product, but also finding ways to help it make sense to everyday consumers. Meaning as follows: Your chances are greater than ever to hit it big and score with products that not only rack up millions in sales, but also those that resonate with insanely wide demographics. One simply needs to understand how developing and promoting these goods differs from those produced by other industries.

In other words, what works for *Halo* isn't guaranteed to fly in Hollywood; what goes for Gucci not necessarily *Grand Theft Auto*. Following are just a few tips sure to help you become not simply a better game promoter and businessperson, but also learn to evangelize interactive brands with the best of them:

Familiarize Yourself with Your Target Market

As with many industries, gamers are clearly divided into two camps – casual users, or those with a passing knowledge of the hobby, and hardcore players, who spend endless hours voraciously consuming new/classic titles. Needless to say, each is essentially its own self-contained society, and speaks a different language...

Learning how to communicate with both, and tailor game concepts and surrounding messaging to reach these differing users, is crucial. Therefore it pays to spend time going hands-on with associated products to ensure you're familiar with each form of vernacular – and always plot a two-pronged marketing approach. In other words, don't target *Game Informer's* audience with the same tactics as *Glamour's*: When it comes to choice of game subjects and promotional vehicles, one size does not fit all. And just as you wouldn't try casually talking cinematography with aspiring film students who worship at the altar of director Stanley Kubrick, don't attempt to coddle diehard joystick jocks by telling them how great an arcade game *Gears of War* is. (Hint: It isn't.)

Choose Better Topics

Let's level for a second: Yes, titles like *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* and *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars* often connect with thousands of tech-savvy geeks worldwide. But, as the success of the casual gaming space – popular with women age 40 and up, as well as seniors – with nontraditional demographics proves, there's an entire market out there waiting to be tapped. Ask yourself: Why is Nintendo's Wii the fastest selling next-generation console? Simple – it's immediately accessible and appealing to all ages. Therefore, always remember that the titles you choose to invest in control your financial destiny... and that there's no better way to improve marketability, not to mention ROI, than by setting your sights on the broadest possible range of end-users. Any time you have a smashing idea for a game, just try this simple test. Consider whether a mother of three from Nashville walking into Wal-Mart will see it and immediately understand what you're getting at. Because, truthfully, it's ultimately going to wind up sitting there next to titles featuring instantly recognizable themes like *Nintendogs* or *Madden NFL 08*. And if everyday buyers can't make sense of it in 2-3 seconds, what chance does it really have of moving off the shelf?

Go Broad or Go Home

Massive ad spends are all well and good, but in the PC/videogame space, success hinges on your ability to think minute. A hip and highly computer literate bunch, gamers don't simply see a 30-second TV spot and think to themselves: "SOLD!" Realize: The average purchase price of game systems and goods hovers around \$400 and \$50, respectively (more if you factor in high-end PCs) – quite costly for a large portion of this demographic. What's more, dozens of alternatives to any given platform or game exist. (Try scanning store shelves to see how many sci-fi first-person shooters there are alone.) Countless channels are further available to source more information on titles ranging from websites to newsgroups, TV shows, magazines and even chatty friends. Therefore it can't be repeated enough – you've got to hit influencers from several angles, using multiple, highly-targeted vehicles to reach them. Bottom line: As a general rule, several smaller impression-generating tactics that play out over an extended timeframe will serve you better than a single, larger attention-getting gimmick. Never mind quick hits; it's all about building familiarity, and establishing context, over a greater period of time. At the very least, you can expect that casual shoppers, as Internet-addicted and socially-minded as they are, will hear about a product from more than one source of information.

Enlist Enthusiasts

Consumers are savvier than ever... Sticking a two-page spread in *Games for Windows: The Official Magazine* or simply shoving billboards touting a complementary product into the latest high-resolution racing simulation isn't necessarily going to make a true believer out of anyone. What's more, it can be a costly proposition. Instead, give gamers the tools they need to tout your brand in a manner that's valuable and constructive to both parties. For example: Build an online portal that lets users create profiles, engage in ongoing discussion, find new opponents or exchange custom-created maps and characters. Design a level editor into your product so they can swap new missions and weapons. Even just providing

excitable groupies the graphic files they need to construct a fansite makes a difference. It's all about interactivity... The more ways buyers have to enjoy your game and surrounding assets, the more they'll become personally invested in the title, the greater value they'll garner and more time they'll spend in front of it. And, of course, the more hours they'll essentially put in working as evangelists to help tout the party line.

Educate Yourself

Face it – there's a simple, underlying reason we're even having this discussion to begin with. Specifically, the fact that, thanks to the dawn of new technologies and platforms like Web 2.0, social networking, digital distribution and massively multi-player gaming, the business is literally changing daily. No joke – even 20-year boardroom veterans are constantly finding themselves having to relearn their craft. (Seriously: How many CEOs do you know that really understand the mentality of working hand-in-hand with influential blogs like *Kotaku* and *Joystiq*?) Therefore the importance of books like *Videogame Marketing and PR*, *The Videogame Style Guide and Reference Manual* and *The Indie Developer's Guide to Selling Games* can't be understated. At the very least, it's an absolute must you attend conferences like E3, Leipzig Games Convention and GDC to keep up with trends, network with peers and get a sense of what the competition is doing. The upshot being this: If you really want to learn how to improve your game marketing skills, make products fly off the shelf and rack up millions in revenues, it pays to invest in your continuing education – and take an active interest in the biz.

FIVE TIPS FOR BETTER GAME MARKETING

1. Don't Overcomplicate Matters – Just because it's high-tech doesn't mean it has to be high-concept. You've got less than 2-3 seconds to capture an audience's attention – and are competing with hundreds, sometimes thousands, of other products. People have to be able to look at your game at a glance and immediately

understand the key value it offers – so all you developers scheming on the next sci-fi shooter starring 100 foot-tall MCs fighting alien zombie Nazis on remote snowy worlds circa 1100 B.C. had best think twice.

2. Make it Pop – Call it human nature: We’re suckers for visual appeal. Never forget – like first impressions, presentation is everything. So don’t step out if you’re not dressed for success. Boxes, ads, sell sheets, websites, videos – art assets should be of the highest quality, because that’s the public face your showing. If there’s one place you shouldn’t spare expenses, it’s here. Sound disingenuous? Hit the club and see how many gorgeous girls you spend hours staring at versus nondescript wallflowers.

3. Get to the Point – Time is money: Enthusiasts aren’t going to sit around reading sales copy like it’s the next *New York Times* best-seller. Keep text short, sweet and catchy, and focus on no more than 5 or 6 essential messages you’re trying to get across. And always state them in plain English that anyone can understand – don’t assume any prior knowledge on the part of the reader. Main text should come in 150 words or under, and features should be bullet-pointed. Remember, less is more: Mobile phone games are marketed in 150 *characters* (read: letters and spaces) or less.

4. Attract Attention – Borrow a page from rapper Paul Wall’s playbook: Get the Internet going nuts. It costs next to nothing to throw up a catchy website, issue a bunch of slick screenshots, pump out some gameplay videos and offer admirers the base material needed to build their own fansites. Then rinse and repeat. Don’t be afraid to use Google to research and reach out to media as well. Persistence pays: The more noise you make, the more attention you’ll attract. If you force them to sit up and take notice, eventually, the right people will come knocking.

5. Be Honest and Forthright – Fans deserve your attention, and respect real talk. Always support them before, during and after launch, and keep things on the level. You want an interview? No problem. Some features you’d like added? Done. Looking for some copies to give away for contests? No problem, just tell us where

to send. A can-do attitude won't just endear you to buyers, who you're asking to cough up hard-earned money. It'll also enable real-time dialogue with them, letting you keep your ear to the street, and see the next big thing coming before it arrives.

POWER PR

Today's deep thought: As you've no doubt surmised – and like countless game industry outfits including everyone's favorite scapegoat, Take 2 Interactive, already know from experience – the power of the press can be enormous.

The funny thing is, as many aspiring public relations (PR) gurus as I've met in a decade-long career as a serial entrepreneur, consultant and interactive entertainment's most prolific writer, many still don't know how to successfully interface with the Fourth Estate. At best, it's a painful annoyance, creating major roadblocks that will prevent your business from ever being the focus of positive news stories, front-page mentions or widespread public recognition. At worst, it can cripple any chance you have at achieving fame and fortune, or send a former empire into a crumbling tailspin.

Oh, and if you still need added incentive, even more good news... Editors are known for their strong opinions, and aren't shy about expressing them. Trust me: There are gossip columnists who'd blush at some of the behind-the-scenes chatter surrounding certain companies and individuals spread across insiders' telephone lines and instant messenger windows on a daily basis. After all, if you want to judge a certain firm or personality's current standing, there are few better barometers than listening to the latest buzz echoing over the grapevine. And as the sleuths constantly hot on the trail and self-appointed overseers of all things buzz-worthy, the media's often an inquisitor's first port of call.

Accordingly, this means several things for computer and videogame developers, publishers and service providers hoping to project a better public image and establish credibility in the minds of both the media and consumers. Specifically:

- The eyes and ears of the world are constantly upon you – hence you've always got to be on your "A" game.

- How you present yourself is almost, and in many cases more, important than the actual facts surrounding any situation.
- Understanding how to work with, and alongside, the press isn't just a key part of any game business' ongoing responsibilities – at the end of the day, it's one of the core determinants used to ultimately determine public perception, and thus financial success.
- Would-be industry captains can no longer afford to treat PR as an afterthought.
- Every person you hire is, by extension, a company ambassador – their every word and action reflects positively or negatively upon your firm or brand.

In the interests of helping interactive entertainment industry players of all sorts and sizes – yes, even all you garage developers toiling around the clock to build the underwater basket-weaving simulation of your dreams – I've compiled a handy tip sheet to help you master several public relations basics.

Don't take my word for it as a former international PR director, game publisher, and lean, mean writing machine, though. The following advice also comes from several of the industry's biggest names, who were kind enough to share their thoughts and insights...

BE AN EXPERT

PR is nothing if not a glorified form of salesmanship. And as we're all aware, you can't effectively sell a product you don't know. Not only does it pay for PR reps to be gamers – it also pays for them to be the enthusiastic kind, who's happy to stay late, put in extra hours behind the controller, ask development team members probing questions or do whatever else it takes to better understand the titles they're promoting.

Remember that passion, says Dean Bender, co-founder of Bender/Helper Impact, is what defines a successful gaming PR rep from an ineffective one. Not only will this passion translate into being able to better think on your feet, respond to any questions the media might ask and achieve results with greater expediency. It also means you'll know exactly how to craft messaging, the best way to sell this messaging in and when/where to place stories to achieve maximum coverage.

He further points out that enthusiast media are a savvy bunch – you've got to be able to talk the proverbial talk, if you want to be taken seriously. Thankfully, getting up to speed is easy, even for beginners... Just ask. Executives, producers and even members of the press are human too (at least, the ones who bathe on a regular basis), and are generally happy to help with your education. As in any PR-related initiative, it's the effort that counts – just showing you care will aid your cause more than any fancy press release or painstakingly-negotiated exclusive.

PLAN AHEAD

Opinions differ on how long it takes to plot out a proper PR campaign – some say a year, others 6 months or less. But one theme's consistent across the board from all respondents surveyed: It's that you can't effectively promote a title without first having clearly-defined objectives and a master strategic plan in place. Essentially, you have to know what type of product you're promoting, who the potential audience for it is, how to speak to them and what goals/expectations are realistic for the game in question.

Start by determining a product's release date. Then define its top selling points – the three to five features that make the game different from the 10,000 competitors already out there on the market. Come up with a way to get these messages across in 30 seconds or less (oh sure, like you really listen in-depth to most cold calls or read beyond the first paragraph or two of any press release). Build a list of media outlets you'd like to connect with and decide on a dissemination strategy for each. Then create a tactical approach designed so that coverage breaks at carefully culti-

vated times, e.g. right before your sales team approaches retailers or so that print coverage arranged 90 days in advance coincides with the arrival of online stories. And for heaven's sake, make sure you have a steady supply of assets and chat-worthy tidbits designed to keep people talking throughout the entire period leading up to and on through the product's launch.

All you MMO providers will have to go a step further as well, says Sony Online Entertainment PR manager Katie Hanson. This means having something new to reveal or discuss every three months or so. The logic here: If you're trying to maintain a sustainable revenue source, you also have to keep generating sustainable buzz surrounding it.

And sure, glitches will certainly arise that are bound to throw even the best-laid plans off-track – i.e. embargoed stories getting out, bad reviews popping up, etc. But being able to confront all with poise and grace, not to mention react smartly on the fly, is what separates the true greats from the simply played out.

SEIZE THE DAY

Director Woody Allen once said “70% of success in life is showing up;” I couldn't agree more. Just taking the time to recognize the value of public relations and making an attempt at outreach will put you way ahead of the pack. There's a reason many independent and even major game development and publishing studios fail to get decent media coverage – it's that they don't even try.

Certainly, pros like Bethesda Softworks VP of PR and Marketing Pete Hines believe that focusing on enthusiast media, thereby reaching a readership you know is buying games already, is an important part – possibly even the centerpiece – of any game-related promotional venture. But even he recognizes the importance of making overtures to any and all consumer media publications such as *Maxim*, *Rolling Stone* and *Wired*. (If in doubt, compare circulations: For example, *Electronic Gaming Monthly* boasts 600,000 to *Playboy*'s 3 million-odd readers.)

Ironically, as someone who's writes for both regularly, I'm frankly stunned by the lack of pitches and emails I get on a steady basis – even if my blood pressure's thankful for it.

Even if you can't afford to throw fancy junkets or have celebrity talent attached to your titles, it's still possible to earn just as much coverage as those companies who do. If nothing else, merely shooting journalists (whatever their background) a simple email or giving them an occasional call on a regular basis when there's something new and noteworthy to discuss is crucial. Naturally, you don't want to be pushy or inundate anyone's inbox with spam. But the old maxim holds: "The squeaky wheel gets the grease." Staying top of mind is imperative.

At any time, for any reason, from an editorial standpoint, holes can suddenly open up in single pages or entire sections of magazines as advertisements and stories fall in and out... So when in doubt, never forget. I can't tell you the number of times an obscure Japanese import's made it into North America's biggest publications just because someone randomly shot me a note at just the right time.

Want an easy way to get your message out? Try **GamesPress.com**: It's free to broadcast assets to 22,000+ game journalists worldwide. You can even order fully-customized, user-friendly online pressrooms that go up in as little as 4-6 weeks, can be maintained by a junior associate and offer automated fulfillment of tasks like screenshot, fact sheet and release date delivery.

Persistence pays, as does diligent follow-up. Just make sure when pitching you've taken the time to craft ideas for the specific outlet, know the right editor to speak to and where stories would fit in the publication. Can the blanket sales routine too: One size does NOT fit all. That goes double when dealing with consumer media – you'll get farther devising a timely, tangential hook (say a featured musical track, celebrity or bonus item on the disc) to tie games to. The proven trick to nailing a story every time: Finding an approach that helps titles make sense not just as attractive products unto themselves, but also in an overall cultural context for the outlet's specific readership.

KEEP IT REAL

Surprise, surprise... In all these years working for virtually every videogame book currently in existence as well as a host of consumer outlets, I've yet to meet a PR person who wasn't my "friend."

No shocker there: I do use AXE body wash, and the most successful public relations representatives know that the business is entirely based on relationships. It's no secret that you should always cultivate a connection with the people you work with – especially members of the media, since, as in all walks of life, "you are who you know." But let's run a reality check. Like all editors, at the end of the day, I come to events (yes, even those flashy red carpet premieres at five-star hotels we all love to indulge in) and conduct personal outreach to do business, not slap hands and quaff free drinks.

As Funcom product director Jørgen Tharaldsen so sagely puts it, it pays for PR reps to be honest, friendly, welcoming and knowledgeable – and truly mean what they say. Moral of the story: Don't be the sort of shill who comes off so greasy you'd spontaneously combust if someone suddenly took a drag off a lit cigarette. Like many members of the press, I can spot a snake oil salesman at a glance, and I remember any shady overtures made, as well as sly, seemingly offhand remarks. Body language is important too: Sure, you're all smiles when we're shaking hands, but I notice when you immediately turn away, attempt to escape conversation in seconds or your eyes light up when the next self-styled big fish enters the room.

The lesson to be learned here: Keep things on the level, act like a decent, respectful human being and always be on your best behavior around press. Actually care about them as people, not just tools to an end. Answer all questions with candor, and be reasonable when managing product expectations. And understand that you'll ultimately be judged by your actions and ability to deliver – not how fun you are to hang out with, or how lavish a party you can throw.

Most of all, treat all members of the media equally... from broadcaster to blogger, it's a level playing field out there, and you can't afford to play favorites. You never know where that person you unwisely slagged off in public will wind up either. I got started in this biz running a fansite out of my college dorm room – and still deal with some of the same folks who stiffed me back then today.

Above all else, be supportive. (Hint: If a writer's started a new venture – e.g. a strategy guide company – you'll probably get further supporting them in it with extra info, unique developer access and introductions to top internal decision-makers than offering still more free trips and meals.) And never, ever let friendships get in the way of business: The importance of maintaining a professional relationship, and the proverbial separation of church and state, can't be underrated.

Never take anything personally (i.e. a scathing review or highly-critical editorial) either. Everyone's entitled to their opinion – how would you react if you were told yours is wrong? And hey, you never know when a higher-up's stepped in and changed something, or a situation's otherwise out of an editor's control.

Oh, and if you do have a problem with something someone's written, don't expect to change something that's already in print. Call the writer and have a friendly, positive discussion explaining that you understand their point, clarify where you're coming from and ask for feedback so that things won't play out the same in the future. Never try to browbeat someone into taking a story back. The better solution: Suggest ways (say, the introduction of a new article that might cast your product or client in a better light) to meet in the middle, so everything evens out in the end.

GET THE JOB DONE

Most importantly, if a journalist asks for something – a screenshot, an interview, a meeting, Sly Stallone's autographed jock strap, whatever – make sure you respond

promptly, and do your best to deliver.

They'll understand if the request falls through, so long as you've shown them enough respect to make the effort. Most members of the media are hard-workers who'll do anything within ethical limits and the bounds of reason to make a story happen... As a sign of mutual appreciation and understanding, it's expected you will too.

Always remember: Gaining an editor or freelancer's trust is easy, but it only takes one dropped ball to ruin your reputation with a journalist irrevocably. No story equals an unhappy writer, which equals wasted time, lost money and a teed off bunch of folks all around. The upshot being that you've always got to be prepared to deliver assets, playable code or whatever else media need on-demand.

My favorite snafu...? When I'm pestered non-stop to mention a title in print then told due to budget limitations, there's a shortage of review copies. After wondering why all the wasted effort and ill-will generated to begin with, my answer: Compare the cost of one sample review unit of a piece of software with even a 1/3-page ad in any major newsstand publication. You don't like found money? Fine – there's 50 other savvier developers/publishers who do.

It sounds like common sense, but really... Do your job to the best of your ability (be honest – you know when you're selling yourself, and others, short), and success will come. Ultimately, it's by being reliable that you'll install the highest level of confidence in your abilities and make yourself an indispensable resource amongst those you work with on both sides of the PR and media divide.

As Alex Josef, CEO of Pacific Media Partners so wisely explains: "Clients and employers need to know that they can count on you to handle things and represent both themselves and their products in the best possible light."

Frankly, I couldn't have put it – or summed the whole point of this entire long-winded discourse up – any better.

SELLING CASUAL GAMES

Face it – with development costs escalating, retail shelf space shrinking and conversion rates topping out at 1% or 2%, casual game creators can't afford to play around. Attracting consumers is no longer enough. Even when you hold a virtual monopoly on distribution, it's also crucial that you court key retail publishers and online portals.

So ask yourself: “What differentiates my game from the thousands currently at market?” Because if you can't answer that basic question in seconds, sorry . . . it's game over. With literally dozens of similarly-styled alternatives to choose from, there's nothing stopping execs or end-users from picking proven performers over your latest masterpiece.

Thankfully, the following tips won't just make your titles sell better and stand out more prominently. They'll also help you build buzz, increase awareness and generate headlines worldwide:

Don't Get Fancy

Can the high-concept ventures: Games should be simple, straightforward and make immediate sense to consumers in an everyday context. You've got less than three seconds to catch a buyer's attention. To maximize sales potential, position product around familiar themes, such as food, fashion, music or art. Added bonus: The simpler the subject matter, the greater the international viability of a games—and the easier it is to localize. One need only look to proven hits like *Cake Mania*, *Dream Day Wedding* and, of course, the 85 million unit-selling *The Sims* series (the best-selling franchise ever on PC) to see this phenomenon in action.

Expand Your Horizons

Pick topics with broad appeal. Think horizontal: Before developing any new game, ponder all potential audiences, which of their needs it can meet and how to instantly communicate that value to as many people as possible. From artwork to surrounding text and in-game features, assets should universally support and reinforce this core messaging, helping you reach a wider audience and increase return on investment accordingly. This being the case, maybe that futuristic turn-based strategy/shoot-'em-up hybrid starring the music of Pantera isn't such a safe bet compared to alternatives like a globetrotting adventure or IQ-building brainteaser after all.

Add Tangible Value

Two ways to succeed in business: Innovation or invention. Choose one. Either way, risk-taking is essential: Daring ideas move the medium forward. Likewise, it's not cloning that is killing the market—it's developers' inability to innovate with each passing release. (Risk-averse publishers actually *prefer* proven formulas with measurable sales potential.) Bottom line? Regardless of how you choose to add value to the space, you should include at least one new meaningful feature with every debut. Additions can be as simple as introducing a new setting (Victorian times vs. modern-day) or gameplay twist (say, branching storylines depending on the player's actions). Note: Better graphics don't count.

Stay Open-Ended

Avoid the use of territory- or company-specific imagery. By all means—create billboards, jumbotrons, blimps, signage and other in-game vehicles through which content can be cross-promoted or advertisers hyped. Just design such opportunities so that any supporting material can be inserted globally, as partners will want to reserve the right to individually brand these placements. Bottom line: All those

buildings plastered with banners featuring silly in-jokes and pictures of your coworkers? Probably not a wise insertion...

Evangelize Your Wares

Promote, promote, promote. Incessantly. Create a striking website and supplemental assets ranging from screenshots to in-game videos. Then court the media. Budget tight? **GamesPress.com** lets you quickly reach 22,000+ journalists worldwide at zero cost. Throughout development, regularly issue news and updates to whet fans' appetites. The more noise you make, the better your chances of attracting additional buyers and trade partners. Need motivation? Consider how many hundreds of titles are released daily – then how many your mother actually knows by name. I rest my case.

WHO WANTS TO BE A MILLIONAIRE?

Let's speak frankly for a second. As many years as I've been in the business of interactive entertainment, not a day goes by that I don't reflect on how blessed I am to be doing something I love. Counseling software/hardware developers, publishers and investors, acting as a product talent scout and writing about the industry is its own reward – there's no substitute for working with the most talented and creative people in the world.

But let's not kid ourselves either: The game industry is just that – first and foremost, a business. And while money isn't everything, as any successful entrepreneur can tell you, it sure does open doors. That said, Embassy Multimedia Consultants takes great pains to, above all else, ensure that our clients get their financials right first. In other words, we not only want you to see you relish your work, garner widespread acclaim and recognize constant personal growth. We also want you to get paid what you're worth – and enjoy the increased leverage, greater stability and better bargaining power that such success inevitably affords.

It's not about rocking a new Porsche or spending summers sunning oneself in the Hamptons. Rather, for a developer, putting food in the mouths' of dedicated employees and holding enough influence to control the use of original intellectual property (IP), and therefore one's own destiny. For a publisher, being able to deliver on promises to shareholders and investors, and ship the kind of first-rate titles today's discerning fans demand. And, of course, for an individual, establishing the means to make one's dreams reality by starting new companies, developing groundbreaking technologies, or just gaining the kind of life-changing, real-world business education you can't put a price on.

My own personal advice for would-be tycoons:

- **Get Rich Slow** – Learn what it's like to operate lean and mean, and the responsi-

bilities that come with earning large sums of money. Stay humble, stay hungry... It's one thing to see huge windfalls, another to avoid pissing them down the drain.

- **Invest in Yourself** – Cash spent on cars, penthouse offices and vacations is fun while it lasts – but it seldom lasts long. Instead, try building a stable, self-fueling financial foundation for yourself. It'll continue to feed your personal and professional ambitions long after success, and the glamour, inevitably fades.

- **Control Your Destiny** – Do it yourself, or don't do it all. Working for someone else is the best way to learn any craft, but you'll never truly master it without coloring outside the lines. Simple logic dictates that any employer will have their own, not your, best interests at heart. Remember: With great risk comes great reward.

That being said, given the sensitivity of this subject, you deserve feedback straight from the horse's mouth. And so I recently reached out to a few acquaintances that just happen to have enjoyed fame and fortune by virtue of their past and current efforts in the gaming industry.

The mission: Speak to each, to gain firsthand insight into just what it takes to not only break the bank in our beloved field and realize the dreams of millions of aspiring moguls worldwide, but also enjoy a long and fruitful reign at the top. Listen closely to their words. If time truly is money, well... consider yourself about to enjoy several tens of thousands' worth:

NOLAN BUSHNELL

Founder of Atari and the Chuck E. Cheese's restaurant franchise. Now head of uWink, an innovative food services chain which combines high-quality dining with even higher-caliber interactive entertainment.

“The most obvious advice for anyone looking to hit it big in gaming – be sure you go where no one else is. Entertainment is all about new experiences: Iconic properties like *Star Wars* and *The Matrix* stood out from the crowd when initially released, and wound up creating entire genres and sequels as a result. These days, people tend to forget that even *Madden* was novel once.

The mistake many companies make is to try to do sequels in categories they don't exclusively own. Ask yourself: What is the essence of a first-person shooter, and nowadays, in that category, what do you have to do to set yourself apart? Step back and assess the odds, and you'll see the probability of success in that space is probably less than 1 in 10,000. That's not what I'd call a good investment.

Regardless, it's possible to be extremely successful with almost no money starting out. Look at properties like *Line Rider* that are tremendously popular, yet had virtually no financial backing. You just have to right-size your approach based on who you are and how much money you have in the bank. Thankfully, it's a fertile field out there: The Internet has dropped the barrier to market entry tremendously. Using online sales and digital distribution, you can easily bypass the bottleneck of shrink-wrapped retail product.

Persistence is always a good predictor of success, as is the ability to successfully read the market. Being flexible enough to change to meet its needs creates a synergy that's unstoppable. You really have to believe in your product because no one else will. But mostly, I'm finding that today's biggest sign of impending victory is not just a good game, but one that's linked to a new technology or economic model. Just look at MMOs and the sale of virtual items, or products like *Guitar Hero II*.

Oh, and something I've learned from experience: When creating new ventures, you really need to stay with the areas where you're most comfortable. Don't think you can replicate your previous successes in another field – as good as you think you are, you need to realize that sometimes, you just managed to capture lightning in a bottle."

JOHN ROMERO

Co-founder of seminal game developers id Software and Ion Storm, as well as founder of Monkeystone Games, one of the earliest providers of games for mobile devices. Currently a co-founder of upstart MMO provider Slippgate Ironworks.

"In the past, everything was about new technology... Whenever you had a computer that could do X, and saw a game that could do Y, as long as it was fresh and compelling, it was going to sell a lot of copies because it was new and exciting. But at present, there's a ton of competition in every area from casual gaming to hardcore. Nowadays, at any point, you have to take a harder look at what's out there, do a lot more thinking, and consider the future of the space before committing to any project. The trick is to either launch something eye-opening before others get to the table, or step up to the plate with something innovative, but not too out of left-field or crazy.

Anyways, if all you care about is getting rich, you probably aren't going to make it, because you're too wrapped up in the money, and not likely to put enough love into your game. That said, to stand out, you really have to look at what space you want to hit and find a niche you can monetize quickly that's not a one-shot. (For example, not console games, which you just put out and hope to sell over a 3-4 month period if you're lucky). What you're really looking for is something sustainable like a subscription-, episodic- or item-based model as MMOs have shown which can generate insane cash compared with traditional channels. But you have to build a really strong brand behind it.

A few guys out of a garage can always make it – you’ve just got to do it really smart, do something people didn’t expect or do something in an established market. For example: If you have just a few guys tinkering away after work who do an MMO (which would be really hard, I’ll admit) and do it right, where there’s just enough technology and compelling content, even a low base of subscribers will carry you to success. And then if you just grow organically, reinvesting money back into the company, product and people, you’ve built yourself a money-generating machine.

The most important thing game industry execs should understand though is this: Don’t put a game out before it’s finished. Quarterly goals aside, it’s always better to take 2-3 months to polish a title than waste 2-3 years of effort. As for my secret to longevity in the industry – stay optimistic. There are too many guys who’ve been doing this 20 years who are massive downers... There are a ton of success stories who are 40+ years old. Myself, I worked all through the ‘80s trying to be a great game programmer and never hit it big. When the 8-bit era died, I felt I’d wasted 10 years: Suddenly, we hit it. Things come together... Keep working hard and create the right team. If you’ve got a small, passionate group, that’s a great place to be. Even if you’re not successful, it’s worth more than a pile of cash.

I can tell you that working at Monkeystone was the most fun I’ve had working in the game industry, from 1979 on up to today. If you have fun making a title, it’ll be reflected in the product. And if you’re having fun creating that game and have the right team, well then... the sky’s the limit.”

KENZO TSUJIMOTO

Founder of Capcom, one of the largest and most storied publishers of computer/video games. Helped grow the company from a small, but scrappy maker of Japanese arcade games into the thriving multimillion-dollar international concern it is today.

“Our industry is very fast-moving. There’s a major upheaval every five years so. Companies have to prepare for this. I’ve been doing it for 30 years now – there weren’t even semiconductors when Capcom was first founded. When these changes come around, companies have to be ready. Many weren’t. We were, which is why we’re still around.

Our company is always looking at how to stay trendy and keep up with consumers’ lifestyles. In the past, when you talked about interactive entertainment, you’d think of those crane games. Now the value these products contain doesn’t always have to be physical in nature: A lot of what the consumer takes away from a game isn’t tangible... it’s just the satisfaction of having had fun. As this has come into play and technology has progressed, we’ve put an emphasis on creating complex games that entertain and excite in new ways. We’re always thinking about advanced entertainment, and that’s what pulls us through.

The chief difference between American and Japanese game publishers: In the United States, publishers are very successful – they’re run by professional management. They focus on money, not making great games. On our side, we always operate under the assumption that there’s a high possibility of losing money, but that’s just our style. American publishers make games so everyone can play. The Japanese – especially Capcom – favor the hardcore gamer.

We’re just lucky to have some great and talented people who are making games, however. And as creative people, they like to make something new whenever possible, not do the same things over and over again. They look for new ideas, and I’ve given them a lot of freedom to operate in this regard. Still, the thing to keep in

mind is that whether you remake old titles or create new ones, as long as you come up with a great product, it always pays in the end.”

SID MEIER

Visionary software creator responsible for more than 25 games including the best-selling *Civilization*, *Pirates!* and *Alpha Centauri* franchises, which have sold in excess of 10 million copies. Co-founder of Firaxis Games; often called “the father of computer gaming.”

“I have to say up-front that, from a development perspective, we have no idea of knowing off-hand which games will be hits: Some strike a chord with consumers, some don’t. Many we thought would be huge successes weren’t, and vice versa.

But I will say that we’re extremely proud of every title we’ve produced, and that, as a designer, picking titles with broad appeal is important if you hope to sell. It’s not just that you can mine them to find juicy nuggets of fun. It’s also that these topics are more interesting to work on, produce better results and offer players reasons to come back and replay the games, offering greater value.

Companies often mistakenly make technology the focus of a product – cool tech is a great way to support great gameplay, but without the latter aspect there, titles just won’t resonate as well with players or be as long-lasting. And play quality is just as important today, if not more so, as it was 10-15 years ago. Developers really have to be true to their passion, and get excited about what they’re doing – if they don’t have fun making a game, no one else is likely to either. Some initial financial successes have allowed me to enjoy a rare degree of freedom in terms of trying new things; I think it’s a grave error to try and follow the latest trend or hot genre.

To really achieve success too, you also have to be careful to stick with what you know. Tempting as it is to consult at this point or run a company, I found what I

enjoyed most was making games, not managing people. I like to think that's reflected in my work. I always think about the audience I'm designing for (say, for handheld platforms versus the PC) and the technical capabilities of the medium as well, so I can deliver a compelling experience that's an interesting fit for the system. I'd like to think that you can't go wrong with this approach.

The key thing to remember though is that every game we make here is fun and accessible, even those based on deep or complex topics. You want players to feel good about themselves at the end of the day. If they're able to jump right in and have a good time with a game, it's a good sign you're onto something special."

JOURNALISTS

BREAKING INTO GAME WRITING

By Dan Hsu

Editor-in-Chief, Electronic Gaming Monthly

<http://egmshoe.1up.com>, www.1up.com

Be Lear-ned

English, writing and journalism are all great degrees to pursue. They'll give you a huge advantage, but aren't necessarily mandatory – we've hired plenty of great writers who don't have any of those credentials. Having a college degree, period, is definitely a good thing as well, but also not mandatory in most cases. (Keep in mind, everything else being equal, an employer is more likely to pick a candidate with a degree over one without one because Mr. BA is probably more disciplined.) But unless you're some superstar genius writer, I'd say some college education is a must.

Japanese (as a minor or something you learn on the side) wouldn't hurt, just so you can be useful when covering Japanese games or trade shows (or even reading Japanese magazines and websites), but depending on the outlet you want to work for, it may not matter that much these days. At *EGM*, for example, only a couple of guys have a very basic, rudimentary understanding of Japanese. If we need something translated, we'll freelance that out to someone more qualified, or we'll consult one of our Japanese correspondents. We have no need to hire a Japanese-fluent editor.

OK, I'm Lear-ned... What Now?

Submit work to a fansite first. That's how you can gain some experience and get some feedback from others... perhaps even get noticed by a bigger outlet. You

won't get paid, but you'll get published a lot sooner than if you wait around for someone to hire you. Some professional editors (including James Mielke from *IUP.com* and Greg Sewart, formerly of *EGM*) got their start on the fan side of things. If I'm not mistaken, James was recruited by *GameSpot* after they read some of his reader reviews. Greg used to write for *Gaming Age*.

Or try blogging! We've already been eyeing a few of you out there who have some serious game-writing potential. But please, don't be annoying in trying too hard to get people (especially me) to read your work. Just let it come naturally. If you're doing a good job, you'll slowly gain your own audience. Maybe someone at *IUP* may even notice your blog and then feature it on the front page one week, thus getting you lots of eyeballs all at once. Just hang in there.

Going Pro

OK, maybe a professional organization is looking for writers, freelance or otherwise. Or they're looking for an intern. When submitting samples to a professional magazine or site for job consideration, custom tailor your work for that outlet! Look at what they do (style, length, etc.) and write specifically for them. It'll show that you're actually serious about this. For example: Why submit a 5000-word review to *EGM*? We don't ever publish any reviews that big. But if you can say a lot in a 100 words, that'll show me what you're capable of – at least, for our magazine.

Take a look at *GameSpot*, who has a very defined, professional style. Along the same lines, don't go submitting them your funniest, *Maxim*-ish, totally off-the-wall reviews. It doesn't match their way of reporting.

Of course, if you're already an established writer with published samples, that's good to show off too. But I don't necessarily like judging a writer's ability from those, because I never know what other editors have reworked that piece before publication – so I like raw, fresh samples. But that's just me, and including pub-

lished work with raw samples is the best combination. This way, I can see how you write off the cuff, prior to any edits, and I know someone else out there digs your stuff enough to print it. Hey, if you're good enough for the *Charlotte High School Daily*, maybe you're good enough for *EGM*.

Before you turn in any work for evaluation though, for God's sake, spell check! Proofread! I can't believe how many well-written cover letters I receive, only to notice one tiny error that kills the whole thing for me. I mean, if you can't be perfect in your one submission to *EGM* for a job, how can I expect you to take day-to-day duties seriously? After all, you have all the time in the world to perfect and fine-tune your samples and cover letter, and if it has just one grammatical error, well then, forget you. I even had one guy write the name of our magazine incorrectly in his cover letter! Guess how quickly I threw that one out. Too bad, because he had potential otherwise. But I have way too many qualified candidates to waste time on someone who can't even get something like that straight. If it's too difficult for you to get your "its" vs. "it's" or "your" vs. "you're" straight, then it's time you looked for a different line of work, my friend. Or apply at one of those smaller mags where such things don't seem to matter as much. Zing! (I probably just jinxed myself...)

So I mentioned gearing the writing samples toward the outlet you're interested in, because we all have different styles (read *EGM* vs. *PSM*, for example). This counts toward the little details, too. Let's take two fictional applicants. Corky gives me reviews on a 5-point scale. No problem. Benny gives me the same level of writing, but he uses *EGM*'s 10-point scale, and gives some "good, bad, and XXX" (see *EGM*'s reviews) text to boot. Who do you think impresses me more? Benny, cause he's taken the extra little effort to make sure I know he reads and understands our magazine. Remember: Employers not only want to know that the skills are there, but that you WANT the job. That ambition goes a long ways in my book.

(We're not hiring, by the way, so don't be emailing me, trying to prove how ambitious you are! On that note, don't just randomly stop by the office, either. We've had people do that, thinking they're showing us how gung-ho they are, but if you

stop by for an interview without ever scheduling that interview, you're only scaring us.)

Bling It In

So how much does a game-writing job pay? Obviously, this depends on where the job is. Most gaming mags in the U.S. are based in the San Francisco or Los Angeles areas. You'll be commanding a higher salary in these two spots because the cost of living is insane compared to Normal, USA where you're probably from. I'm just guessing, but I'd assume *Game Informer* (based in Minnesota) would pay slightly less on average. But I'm also willing to bet that you'd come out ahead over there because you're not getting raped on your rent (and other daily living costs like gas, insurance, food, etc.) the way you are in the San Francisco Bay Area. So take that into consideration.

Most starting positions are Staff Writer, Assistant Editor or Associate Editor... and those titles can mean different things depending on the outlet. For the Bay Area, you may be looking at anywhere from the low to high \$30,000 range for an entry-level salary. When I started as Associate Editor at *EGM*, I was in the mid \$20,000s, but that was 8 years ago. And in Illinois.

If you're an experienced writer (and I don't mean that you like writing in your *Hello Kitty* diary every night), you'll be commanding a higher salary, natch. But it's rare that you'll get hired right into a higher position without previous gaming magazine experience. For example, when *EGM* moved from Illinois to San Fran, a bunch of people couldn't make the transition (families, homes, etc.), so I had to rehire about half the positions. For all the non-entry spots (Art Director, Managing Editor and so on), I was only looking at experienced folks who've worked on magazines before, preferably gaming ones. Turned out I filled those two specific spots with ex-*Next Generation* (remember that mag?) staffers.

Besides Writing...

That brings me to another point: Gaming mags aren't just employing writers and editors (though I suspect that's what most of you are interested in). We also need layout people: Production Artists, Graphic Artists, Art Directors, Associate Art Directors, etc. In some ways, even though everyone wants to be a game reviewer, the art jobs are more competitive. This is because you can hire an art person with a non-gaming background. So while my News Editor will have to be someone who's knowledgeable about the videogame business (and has gaming magazine experience), my Art Director doesn't. He or she just needs layout experience. For example, *EGM's* Associate Art Director came from *Wired* magazine. Even though he plays games, he's not a "true" hardcore gamer like the writers/editors on staff. (Though he did beat *Ninja Gaiden*, which is pretty tough to do...)

And beyond that, our company employs marketing folks, salespeople, and lots more (circulation and production departments, etc.). So really, you may have an "in" through other avenues... or if you simply want to be involved in this business on some level and don't care whether you're a writer or not.

Note that gaming magazine jobs are great springboards to other fields. Just in the last few years, Dan Leahy (*GameNow*), Todd Zuniga (*Official PlayStation Magazine*), Greg Sewart (*EGM*), Joe Fielder (*EGM*) and Kraig Kujawa (*EGM/Official PlayStation Magazine*) have all gone from editors to game designers.

Advice City

Back to the writer/editor gigs: Game knowledge is obviously a must. In fact, *EGM* used to make game-playing part of the interview! After I interviewed with the Editorial Director at the time, he sat me down with one of the *EGM* editors so I could prove that I really did know how to play videogames. They hooked me up with a game that wasn't out yet: *Alien Trilogy* for PSOne, if I recall. I beat the first

level while chatting with the editor, so that was that. I must say... Walking through the *EGM* offices and seeing game systems and televisions on everyone's desks, then playing an unreleased game as part of my interview (this was no stuffy corporate environment), I was pretty much on cloud nine and was surprised I was able to interview well at all.

Not-so-quick side note: This game-playing test actually worked one time. We had this qualified writer – some dude who wrote for a paper in Iowa with apparently great samples. The Editorial Director interviewed him then sat him down with another editor and me to play some games. Hoo boy... Good thing we did. It was the funniest thing, and we still bring it up when we tell stories around the campfire. This interviewee didn't even know how to hold a PSOne controller properly. We gave him *Ridge Racer* and quickly explained the controls. Then he asked – I kid you not – “How do you hit the gas button and steer at the same time?” Turns out, he had both thumbs on the d-pad: Left thumb for pressing left, right thumb for pressing right. No joke! He had no thumbs left for any other buttons, you see. Try to envision this radical new way of holding a controller and you'll know why we still laugh about it to this day. Writer from Iowa: If you're reading this... well, what the heck did you think we did at *Electronic Gaming Monthly*?

OK, I'm spending entirely too much time on this, but it's my party and now I'm on a roll making fun of this guy. So then he's picking his *Ridge Racer* car and selects Manual Transmission. We were like, “Are you sure? You may want to take Automatic.” (Obviously, he doesn't have the job now, but at this point, we were having too much fun watching him play games, so we kept him going.) He took MT, so OK. Next thing: The race starts, and he's gunning the engine in first gear, redlining it to hell. Us: “Try shifting. You picked Manual, remember?” The guy jams on the shift button and goes straight from first to fifth gear. So now he's only about 100 feet off of the start line and going about 40 MPH in fifth gear. It was awesome. First guy I've ever seen not even make the first checkpoint on the first track of a racing game.

Then we scrounged up the easiest game we could find: Puzzle game *Bust-A-Move*. Easy, right? Just aim the damn ball and match three of a color. Well, we play some two-player to see how badly we can smoke him. Ten minutes after we first started playing and about 20 matches later (well after we've explained how to play this game), he asks, "How come my bubbles aren't popping?" It turned out that matching-three-balls-of-the-same-color thing, which we taught him already, just went over his head. For real.

Back on Track

Sorry about that sidetrackin'. If you've been hanging in there, you get this prize – probably the most useful tip I can give you (besides spell check/proofread): Write a good cover letter. This includes the actual body of an introductory email that may contain a separate, proper cover letter as an attachment. Whatever is the first thing I read from you, if it doesn't catch my attention right away, I'm throwing it out (I have way too many interested, qualified candidates to put any effort into making any one work). To me, it's more important than the resume, and I'll tell you, it's the only reason I got the *EGM* job (the Editorial Director liked my cover letter – he didn't even read my resume).

Remember how I said earlier that one tiny error can kill the whole thing for me? That's because with your submissions, we assume you spent a lot of time making sure everything's perfect; that these are the best pieces of work that we're going to see from you because you want to impress. So a bad cover letter means you're probably not capable of writing any better than that for day-to-day work, under deadline strains, with 10 other projects waiting for you. Of course, if you cheat and get someone else to write an awesome cover letter for you, you're setting yourself up to disappoint the magazine later, so don't go there (but getting feedback from your friends or teachers or whoever isn't a bad idea... you can always learn from others). Make it the best you can so the magazine knows what you're capable of. And again, don't forget Mr. Spell Checker.

Freelancing

I'll tell you it's much easier for a new writer to get a PC freelance gig than with a console magazine. Reason: You need special equipment to play pre-release console games. For example, at *EGM*, we have special "debug" PlayStation 3s, Xbox 360s, and Wiis to play the discs that the companies send us for preview and review. Those discs won't work on your Wal-Mart PlayStation 2s, you know.... Most people don't have these machines, but pre-release PC games usually do install on any PC (it's an open platform, after all). Therefore a PC gaming magazine is in a better position to send out their discs for other people to pre/review.

Now, certain people in the know have "modded" systems that make them act like debug systems. But that doesn't mean you're all ready to freelance for *EGM*. We're not going to send out these highly confidential discs to just anyone out there, just because they sent us a few good writing samples (same with PC magazines). If these discs get lost or pirated somehow, we're liable. So we're never going to send this stuff out to anyone we don't know, PC disc or otherwise.

Classic catch 22, eh? We're not going to give you freelance work if we don't know you, and we can't know you unless you're already in the business. But some people have figured out ways. Some freelancers I know, for example, have made a name for themselves by working hard and being persistent, working and writing for whatever outlets they can (fansites, for example). After a while, they may get invited to industry events, and that's how you can establish contacts with some of the professional magazines or websites.

One of our Copy Editors and regular contributors, Greg Ford, for example, was writing for a fansite and did various small-time work until he was invited to a Sony press conference. There, he met me. A year later, he sends me his resume and reminds me he was the guy I met at the Sony event. I didn't hire him at the time (I was at *Gamers.com* and didn't need anyone then), but then a couple of

years later when I went back to *EGM*, I was looking for a new Copy Editor... I remembered him and looked him up. Now he's a full-time editor at Ziff-Davis and one of our regular reviewers on the side.

That said, please don't be stalking us! "Making contacts" or "trading business cards" is a lot different than "being annoying" and "borderline obsessive." Just remember: It's still a professional business, so treat it like one, and you'll get places.

Bottom Line: Start off small. Patiently work your way up. Be ambitious (but not annoyingly so). And be really mindful of every single piece of work you submit and every letter, word and sentence you type, whether it's something for a fansite, your blog or an email to a potential employer. Stick with it, and you may get there someday. Good luck.

REPORTING TIPS

Excerpted from
The Videogame Style Guide and Reference Manual
www.gamestyleguide.com
by David Thomas, Kyle Orland and Scott Steinberg

The style of game reviews ultimately depends on the editorial direction and philosophy of the publication running them. There are, however, some general guidelines to keep in mind when crafting game evaluations.

Avoid first- and second-person references in your reviews. Keep your writing squarely focused on the subject matter. Remove yourself and the reader from the review.

Example: The boomerang is used to defeat the boss found in the third dungeon.

Wrong: I defeated the boss in the third dungeon with the boomerang.

Wrong: You defeat the boss in the third dungeon by using the boomerang.

Remember that each player's experience with a game is unique. Avoid generalizing about experiences or features that might be unique only to your playthrough. For instance, avoid using the phrase "hours of gameplay" to describe the longevity of a game, since different players will spend different amounts of time with the title.

Craft the review to the audience. Avoid use of jargon like "boss" or "1-up" if the readers might not have a deep familiarity with gaming.

Use specifics as often as possible. Avoid abstractions. The more specific details included, the more likely you will engage a reader with your writing.

Example: The lock-on targeting feature allows players to spend less time aiming and more time trying to figure out how to defeat the enemy troops.

Wrong: The game's targeting system is well-designed and fun to use.

Ask yourself: How did the game make you feel while playing it? Frustrated? Angry? Powerful? Overwhelmed? Useless? Make those feelings come through for the reader.

Avoid cleverness and word games. Get to the heart of the matter. Be quick about it.

Keep your reviews concise. Time spent reading about videogames is time that your reader could be spending playing videogames!

The easiest games to write about are the ones that are very good or very bad. The hardest games to write about are the mediocre and/or nondescript games.

Unless specified by your assigning editor or formal publication policy, don't separate your review into distinct sections. (Paragraph one covers graphics, paragraph two deals with gameplay, etc.) Instead, weave all these elements into a single, compelling critical narrative.

When editorial policy calls for giving a game a review score, be fair. Not every game produced is an A, and most probably are not even a B. In a world where C is average, dole out the praise sparingly. Puffing up the score for an average game is not fair to the game or the reader.

Be bold. Be brave. Say something interesting. Ask yourself: What makes your review stand out from the hundreds of other reviews being written at this very moment?

HOW TO WRITE BETTER REVIEWS

Start Off Strong – The importance of a controversial, funny or simply offbeat intro can't be understated: It pays to be punchy. The first few sentences set the tone for your article – if you can't hook readers with a quick overview of what's on the menu, it's a safe bet they won't stick around for dessert. Gamers aren't known for their attention spans, after all...

Cover the Bases – Don't assume the reader knows anything about games – help frame everything in a broader cultural context. Serious enthusiasts may get what you're saying, but let's face it... Like virgins at a video shoot, they're in the minority. Mass appeal is everything: If you really want to people to feel what you're getting at, make sure they know what the heck it means to begin with.

Stick to the Facts – Make like an action movie director: Can the b/s, and cut to the chase. People ultimately read reviews for one thing: The straight dope on the product. Instead of wasting time with cute stories or personal anecdotes, give 'em the facts – they want to read about the game, not your depressing social life.

Do You – As a rule, your personality and point of view should shine through in any article – otherwise, what's to make your opinion stand out from the other 50 million out there? That doesn't mean you should go off-topic or make yourself the subject of the piece... Just, as in real-life, give people a reason to listen when you speak.

End on a High Note – The last paragraph of any article should sum up the entire piece quickly and concisely. No matter how well-worded or entertaining the article is, it always pays to summarize, and restate, your key points. Don't be afraid to have fun with it, however – an entertaining kicker's essential. It's the last thing a viewer will read, and the last to stick out in their mind. Besides, as any entertainer will tell you, it always pays to leave an audience hanging...

GAME WRITING BASICS

Following are answers to the most commonly asked questions I'm posed concerning how to write about games for living.

Everything you need to know to make your dream of sitting home on the couch jabbering away on Xbox Live, chomping down cookies while making dough (Get it: Cookies, dough... oh, never mind) lies herein:

Q: How'd you get started in the industry?

A: Living in a city that wasn't a hotbed for game development, and not possessing many leads within the business at the time, like many folks interested in breaking into the industry, I didn't have much choice in terms of a career path. I wanted into the game industry badly, so I did the only thing I knew: I took my experience writing for fansites and small-scale professional outlets, and attempted to parlay that into work with larger, more respected outlets.

Thankfully, because of my experience writing for little to nothing and tireless passion for scamming free games, I'd already been published, and invited to various events courtesy of several publishers: Luckily, I was able to take the contacts I made there by simply shooting the breeze with various editors and apparently convince someone I'd be good for the occasional article. These far-sighted and generous (OK, desperate maybe? Who knows...) individuals have my respect and gratitude to this day.

Moral of the story: Don't be discouraged – opportunity is what you make of it. Get out there and start writing, and take advantage of every chance you have to network. You may wind up working long hours (or even years) for free and little to no recognition at first, but all that effort will eventually pay off in spades.

Q: Is it hard finding enough work to fill up the day?

A: That all depends on who you ask – but honestly, no matter the freelancer, it’s generally a feast or famine situation. You always have too much or too little... Never just enough. Thankfully, it all evens out in the end.

Two points to note here: 1. The more work you do, the more that comes your way and 2. Sometimes, the hardest thing isn’t finding more work, it’s saying no – I literally grind 12-14 hours a day, 7 days a week. Hint: That’s not what you’d call healthy.

Q: How do you go about approaching an outlet that you’ve never written for before?

A: Fancy stuff, let me tell you (note the sarcasm) – I just make contact and keep it brief: Shoot them a note or drop them a phone call and simply explain who I am, who I’ve written for and why I’m so witty, naturally, in about a paragraph (or under a minute, in case of a conversation) or less.

Then I just follow up religiously, at respectful intervals (say, every 2-3 days) until they provide an answer one way or not. There’s no trick to it, and you shouldn’t be afraid to approach people or make cold calls. After all, the worst someone can say is “no,” and being married well... Let’s just say you get used to that.

**Q: Is the market for game freelancers growing or shrinking, in your view?
Has it gotten easier or harder to find work since you’ve started?**

A: The market’s certainly growing, and it’s easier to find work thanks to the explosion of blogs, video distribution sites and other online outlets: There’s more places to write for than ever, and with greater frequency, even with print media in the midst of what I suspect will be a permanent decline. But at the same time, there’s also more competition than ever – so good luck finding steady gigs, let alone publications that pay a decent rate. Thousands of people want in, and the market’s completely oversaturated. But hey, let’s be honest: For richer or poorer,

nothing beats playing *Halo 3* for a living.

Q: Do you miss the camaraderie of the office, or do you enjoy working in solitude?

A: I prefer solitude, but it's just a personal quirk – I work best in complete silence. But working alone can definitely drive you a little stir crazy: I'm happiest when I'm on the phone, as any freelancer should be – the gig's more about schmoozing than writing. Besides, the dog's not been laughing as much at my jokes lately...

Q: Is it hard staying focused without the structure of a 9 to 5 job?

A: No, but then, a true freelancer's a walking ad for ADD. I remember virtually anything a prospective client says in passing, yet strangely, I'm lucky if I remember my own name half the time...

Q: Are you looking for a full time game journalism job? If not, how long do you think you'll be able to keep on freelancing?

A: Alas, no – frankly, if I wanted to be serially abused, overworked and underappreciated, I'd just start dating again. Happily, thanks to the kindness, forethought and goodwill of gaming editors, some of the smartest, hardest-working and most vastly undervalued individuals in the business, I've been privileged enough to enjoy 10 years of horrendous jokes, and (knock on wood) am still going strong... Let this be a lesson to you: A. Sanity and political correctness are no prerequisite to success and B. If you want to get anywhere in life, in terms of self-employment vs. corporate solidarity, it generally pays best to go it alone.

THE VIDEOGAME FREELANCER'S BIBLE

Shocker: Once upon a time, long ago, I wasn't the gorgeous, silver-tongued author and marketing/publishing/PR guru you all know and love. (Or as full of self-aggrandizing b/s, but hey, I digress...)

Nay, before all the glitz and glamour, I was just another starry-eyed fansite owner dying to break into the biz. Just one catch – being based on the East Coast, lacking insider contacts and disinclined to pack and move cross-country, game industry jobs weren't exactly easy to come by.

So, circa 1999, after several months writing semi-professionally for websites such as *Online Gaming Review* and *The Adrenaline Vault*, I did what any fresh-faced newbie would do and took the plunge. I quit my cushy day job and went full-time freelance, using contacts I'd acquired by attending the occasional media event.

Pissing into the wind, some might say. Me? I'd go with "spraying a fire hose filled with raw sewage into an oncoming tornado." To keep it brief: I had no savings, no sense of how tough the business really was and no way of comprehending the stumbling blocks ahead. Amusingly, my timing couldn't have been better either: If you were out of the industry at that time, be glad you missed the dot com bust.

Thankfully, ignorance means nothing to a young, twenty-something male – in retrospect, second to getting married to a certain special lady, it was the best decision I ever made. The resulting years of struggle and hardship taught me invaluable lessons about marketing, sales, public relations, accounting and countless other aspects of running a small business you won't come across in the average day job. And, of course, many other crucial elements of the gaming industry and career development in general. The end result: I've gone on to found several successful businesses, pen three books and contribute to 300+ outlets from CNN to *The New York Times*, including virtually every videogame magazine in existence.

That said, I remain a realist: Let's skip the hype and cut to the chase – if you're reading this, chances are you want in. Can't say as I blame you: All things considered, getting paid to travel the world, play games months in advance of release and rub elbows with the industry elite is nice work if you can get it. It certainly doesn't hurt that the vast majority of editors, fellow freelancers, marketing/PR reps and developers I've encountered are some of the hardest-working, most intelligent and interesting people you'll ever meet.

Still, while several manifestos outline the path to getting a job writing about games for a living, they're nonetheless somewhat incomplete. The kicker being that none tell you what you fully need to know to truly DIY, or Do It Your-Darned-Self, as a home-based scribe hoping to make a long and successful career of hustling slang by the word or project.

Therefore listen up, because I won't say it twice. Couple the aforementioned resources with the following advice, gleaned from years in the proverbial trenches, and you'll be ready to start cashing in on your passion for playing *Pokémon*. So easy literally anyone can do it, so hard it can break the best of men, either way, the future's yours. It's high time we got some new blood in this business. Read up, soak up, then step up and make ol' pappy Steinberg proud:

GETTING STARTED

1. The first and most crucial thing you need to do is build a writing portfolio – read: get as many published clips as possible. This may mean writing for free for ill-paying, off-brand magazines, newspapers, websites or weeklies. So be it: I'm not too proud to admit I've offered services pro bono in the past just to toe a door open. Creating opportunity is everything; when things seem tough, or like you're not making any headway, redouble your efforts. Breaking in is a killer, but these things tend to steamroll; build an established background, and it'll be that much easier to approach top editors and gain additional gigs. Key takeaway here: The more you work you pump out, the more that comes rushing right back in.

2. Looking for leads? Try the local bookstore – simply taking the time to flip through the pages of certain publications and send the editors an email got me dozens of placements in the past. Get to know each outlet as well: All are basically larger entities consisting of smaller, self-contained departments headed up by specific overseers. The trick is simply pitching the right idea to the right editor. Either way, no one's going to come to you with their hand out – you'll be the one having to suggest story topics. Bearing this in mind, take the time to come up with several custom-tailored suggestions before approaching these individuals as well. (And remember that magazines generally operate on 60- to 90-day lead times, so stories must be relevant for 2-3 months from the date you submit.) It's a pain, but it does keep your name top of mind, and give you some control over the topics you work on. Hot tip: If there's one thing publications in every field are consistently looking for, it's feature stories.

3. Persistence pays. Except in the case of dating, 'no' does not mean 'no,' typically – coming from most editors, it just means “not now,” or “possibly later, if you manage to actually catch my attention.” Follow-up is essential too: If an editor says “write back in a week,” take the time to do it. If they don't respond to queries (the most common outcome), wait a respectful interval, e.g. 2-3 days, then reach out again. If it helps get your mind right, consider: In all my years of scribbling, I can count the number of writing ops that fell into my lap on one hand. It's murder out there, sure, and you'll fight to gain every inch of ground, but that just makes victory all the sweeter. Most people give up and accept things resignedly; don't, and you'll see how rewarding it can be.

4. Always treat others with respect and dignity. They teach you this in pre-school; sadly, not everyone remembers it, and after a certain amount of wining and dining, many writers get a fat head. You're a freelancer; never forget that everyone's a potential friend. If you're genuine, and not just some corny dweeb trying to fleece them, they'll recognize this. Ensuring, of course, that even if these folks don't help pay the bills, at least you'll have someone to snicker and pass notes with at the next boring press demo.

5. Never lose sight of this maxim: You are who you know. Most of the time, it's a multi-way street. In other words, you need editors to assign work; PR people to help make a story happen; experts to provide the commentary that links it all together; analysts to offer hard data; and so on. Assembling most stories requires interacting with several individuals and getting them to two-step as deadlines approach, guaranteeing that those with the best, most reliable social network come out ahead. Mastering the art of knowing whom to call in a pinch is one of the single most important attributes you'll need to survive out there.

STAYING AFLOAT

1. Treat your career like a business, because that's exactly what it is: Your reputation precedes you – never forget to act professionally, or with integrity and respect. John Q. Public might not sound like much on paper, but your name is your brand: Always meet assigned deadlines, live up to your word, deliver solid work and watch your career and repute grow. Mind you, editors are gossipy sorts; all it takes is one blown deadline or drunken brawl to tarnish your sterling reputation across several outlets.

2. On the flip side, don't be overly sensitive either: Fellow freelancers are, by definition, competitors. It's inevitable that at some point, whether by design or serendipity, you'll be perceived as taking food out of their mouths, and catch hate as a result. So be it: Real chums will always treat you as such, and peers who respect one another can simply sit down and discuss any difference of opinion. Want to be Mr. Popular? No sweat – you can always apply for a job handing out tax refunds.

3. Customer satisfaction is crucial; clients work nights and weekends – if you plan on keeping up, you may very well have to too. Going the extra mile in terms of both effort to make a story better and expedience (remember: editors live harried lives, and the less callbacks and edits they must make, the happier they'll

be) is also imperative. Essentially, if you're going to convince sponsors to assign something out of house at added cost, you'd best do everything in your power to make their lives easier, thereby proving you're a justifiable go-to guy/gal. Fun fact about human nature too: People don't like change. It may be hell getting there, but once you're in, as long as you maintain these high standards, chances are you're there to stay. Pardon the pun, but freelancing is not a game. Dependable, hard workers get ahead, others don't – end of story.

4. Don't get depressed: The first 6 months are the toughest in your freelance career, as you struggle to establish a reputation and build a client base.

Certainly, ups and downs are frequent afterwards. And experienced freelancers know that it's always either feast or famine. Just remember: It all evens out in the end. The easiest way to save yourself untold heartache? Keep a 6- to 12-month savings cushion in the bank, restocking and adding to it as opportunity permits. Interesting trend you'll note as well. There's a shakeout every few years, whereby those who've failed to save for a rainy day fall by the wayside. The bonus being that those left standing afterwards appear all the more able – and survive to dine on the scraps – when the smoke eventually clears. Moral of the story: Freelancing is not a sprint, but rather a marathon.

5. ABC – Always Be Closing. Networking is crucial, as is having the moxie to walk up to potential contacts and freely speak your mind. You have to be outgoing. A good freelancer's as much a schmoozer as he/she is a writer. Trade secret: In the videogame biz, do a great job with your stories and most people will be amazed that you're simply making deadlines and actually giving them what they asked for. But getting in the door is the real challenge, not doing the work – attend events, and don't be afraid to approach people, make cold calls or whatever else it takes to nudge it open. Should you need incentive, just ask yourself: If there are a million other jealous guys/gals out there vying for the same few dozen opportunities, were you to keep silent, what would make you stand out from the crowd to a prospective backer?

GOING THE DISTANCE

1. Philosophically, here you have two choices. You can try to get in good with a few publications and do a lot of work for them. Alternately, you can do less work for a larger number of clients. I recommend the latter; in the former event, if someone goes under, it can be problematic, because you've been leaning too heavily on them. The best job security you can have is a lot of clients; one goes kaput, no biggie – you've got 15 more lined up. Sure, some folks love the prestige of being known as “*Hotwired*” magazine's exclusive guy or head correspondent for “*The Bollywood Reporter*.” Me, I wouldn't want my career to be defined by a singular gig that can, and will, eventually fizzle. Take it from experience: In a best-case scenario, even the most established magazines undergo proverbial regime changes as editors constantly join and depart, taking their stable of writers' fortunes up or down with them. Nothing is static, least of all a writing job.

2. Save grand, involving pieces of work for clients you trust. Freelancing is a business, plain and simple, and time is by far your most valuable (and limited) resource. Days and weeks wasted on a project that goes unpaid for are unre-coupable and, last I checked, compelling a read as it may be, you can't eat an unpublished essay on the artistic merits of *Ico*. Granted, it's nice to do 3000 words of insightful counterculture prose for your favorite underground fanzine that's always on the cusp of going bankrupt – I still get a kick out of it today. But if the local newspaper that's been around as a stable business for 100 years asks for a 1000-word review of *Forza Motorsport 2* for a similar or slightly less asking fee, go with the latter, unless you can afford to take the hit. Seeing a story in print is nice: Actually getting to see a check for your work is what will afford you the freedom to write day in and day out and eventually explore more artistic endeavors at your leisure as time and chance permit.

3. Embrace diversification. An experienced writer can summon up artful prose about anything from vacuum cleaners to vegetables when pressed. So why limit yourself to just games? Books, movies, music, half-dressed supermodels – surely there are other, related topics you love. Take the time to explore them: It won't just

heighten your stability, expand your portfolio, increase your knowledge base, provide future points of reference and make you more marketable, not to mention a more talented penman overall. It'll also help ensure a steady stream of incoming work – and the more aspirin, or copies of *Quake*, you'll eventually be able to afford.

4. Don't tie yourself too heavily to trends. Cultural phenomena such as these tend to be cyclical, which guarantees huge popularity swings. While being known as an expert in one field can help increase your visibility and land you a lot of work quickly, it can also send you sinking down with the ship. Convergence, for example, may seem a hot topic now, but it also was back in 1983, before the fad went into a 15-year death cycle. My advice? Do yourself a favor that's equally good for your self-esteem and resume: Like any good entrepreneur, teach yourself to be a jack of all trades.

5. Stay positive, and maintain your sense of humor. As in any highly competitive field, even the most able-bodied workers are subject to the vagaries of the marketplace. Trust me on this one: You're never out of the game if you keep actively playing.

Still there? Bully for you!

That stubbornness won't just serve you well in your future career as a superstar videogame freelancer extraordinaire, sipping cocktails and shaking hands with Z-grade celebrities, or at least getting the odd free *Super Mario Bros.* keychain.

With any luck, it'll keep you hacking away on copy long after I've quit spewing these snarky monologues and settled down to a quiet life of *Super Street Fighter V Turbo: The Director's Cut* and *Tony Hawk's Project 367*.

PARTING THOUGHTS

EXPERT INSIGHT

Finally, we come to the end of this volume – and, naturally, I’ve saved the best for last.

Who better to tell you how to stack chips, make waves around the world and dominate the field than those very iconic individuals who’ve survived their meteoritic rise to the top and, along the way, gained dozens of stories to share?

And so, without further ado, ladies and gentlemen, I give you the game industry’s best and brightest: Let their words serve as a guidepost, as well as warning, to would-be jet-setters and entrepreneurs.

Moral of the story: Be careful what you wish for. Heed the following advice, and you just might get it...

TRIP HAWKINS

Founder, Electronic Arts, 3DO and Digital Chocolate

Q: As one of gaming’s most well-known figures, what do you credit as the secret to your success?

A: Passion, determination, practicality and bold ideas backed up by tons of analysis. And I can hang with the best of the ponytails and the suits.

Q: Any major gaffes you’ve made on your journey to the top, and lessons learned, that you’d care to share with readers?

A: OMG, that would require another entire book! Icarus comes to mind when I think of 3DO. You have to become self-aware and figure out early which people, ideas, and opportunities are a waste of time. To my surprise, great companies like Apple and EA turn out to be built from executive teams where 50% of the executives are mediocre or worse, but you just don't realize it at the time. My biggest mistake in life is having an emotional desire to be optimistic about human nature and wanting to trust people even when I don't really know them. It's okay to have these kinds of feelings, but if you are self-aware and paranoid, you will waste less time and get into less trouble.

Q: Where are the big bucks in gaming these days?

A: For future growth, three words: Mobile, social, casual.

Q: Ways individuals operating in the videogame field can help themselves stand out?

A: Figure out where you need to be to learn what you need to know, and go there and volunteer to work for free. Very few people demonstrate insightful analysis, have legitimately interesting new ideas or go sufficiently out of their way to demonstrate passion. I've flown to countries without appointments. I've shown up in building lobbies without appointments. You need to put yourself on the line. And then you had better have something to say.

Q: The trick to picking hits is?

A: I have a strong personal commitment to learn the history of all media, all media titans, all media companies and all media platforms... and also to be a constant historian and critic observing popular culture across all media. A wonderful Disney consultant once said to me, "Creativity is the rearranging of the old in a new way." Many great new things fit that model, but you have to know all the history of what has come before so that you have reference points and know how to mash an old idea into a new medium. If it is your passion, then you can develop experience and insight because you are living and doing it. But just because you

play games does not mean you know how to make one, any more than attending a Green Day concert would make me know how to succeed as a rock star. Finally, to quote from a story on the TV industry that happens to apply to games: “And never forget: All hits are flukes.”

Q: How can one train and educate themselves in order to maximize chances of striking it rich in the gaming business?

A: In formal education, you need to go as far as you can go in every disciplinary direction that is available, from management to marketing to finance to art to engineering to design. When you find your boundaries, you will know what you should do and you will have context for the other areas as well as the know-how to speak the language.

Q: Any fallacies about the typical game mogul's lifestyle you'd care to clear up?

A: How hard you have to work. For most successful people, they are doing what they do 24/7.

Q: Things folks should watch out for on the path to success?

A: It's important that you stay true to yourself and stay humble. None of us is more important than anyone else.

Q: The one thing every hopeful game industry titan should remember?

A: As I've always said, keep it “simple, hot, and deep...”

RICHARD “LORD BRITISH” GARRIOTT

Creator, *Ultima* and Founder, Origin Systems

Q: What's the secret to your success?

A: For me, it was timing. I had a very unique opportunity that was created by getting into the business early. Computers were far more simple than they were today. That allowed me the opportunity to not just deal with one specialty, but rather become a master of sorts at all trades (i.e. programming, art, design, sound).

That unique background is very hard to achieve today. It takes much more of a concerted effort for someone to really figure out how to put a game design together and really understand the impacts of changing any part of that equation. How it's implemented, what the cost would be... it's an infinite array of tradeoffs you have to make – almost too much for one man to handle anymore.

Q: But surely timing wasn't entirely the reason for *Ultima's* popularity?

A: Oh no, that was just a unique trait that allowed me to grow as a game creator. If you look more specifically at the success of the game, the key was innovation. It's funny because I stumbled into success more than planned my way to achieving it.

If you look at the early *Ultimas*, and by that I mean *1* to *4*, or even *Akalabeth* (what I like to think of as *Ultima 0*), there really wasn't much of a game to them. *Akalabeth* was basically a dungeon crawl where you hunted monsters and collected treasure. There really wasn't much game there. There was no end or winning condition, even.

Over a period of time, from *Ultimas 1* to *3*, even though I'd succeeded with the first of the games, instead of creating what I call a cheap sequel, I did something different, as opposed to my contemporaries. If you look at the early *Wizardry* titles, they actually outsold the original *Ultimas*. But *Wizardry 2*, the sequel to *Wizardry*, came out as essentially just an expansion to the first game, with new weapons,

spells, and stuff, but it was primarily the same game engine.

In contrast, the early *Ultima* engines were very primitive, so I started throwing away the large quantity of code I'd written between games due to the fact I'd learned so much in the intervening time and felt I could go so far beyond it. So I'd write each new game over from scratch and create a better engine. It's just kind of a fallout of the process.

But if you look at the sales curves of the early *Wizardry* games versus the early *Ultimas*, each sequel tended to sell to a subset of the people who'd bought the previous edition, whereas each successor to *Ultima* was actually outselling its predecessor by a substantial margin. And if you look at those, you can actually say *Ultima 2* was a much better game than *Ultima 1*, whereas *Wizardry 2* was just a different game from *Wizardry*, if you follow my drift.

That habit of maximizing innovation was important to the franchise's staying power. I think you can see that even today, with some other great companies (for example, the folks at id Software): With each new *Doom* or *Quake*, it's a substantial revamp of existing technology. If you're going to do first-person shooter games, for example, you need to push the technological boundaries. That particular truth of our industry is interesting and is created because we're building on top of technology, since we're advancing so quickly.

If you look at the movie industry, which has been around for 100 years, save for instances like *The Matrix* where technology has begun to play a role, films are judged solely on creative content and the quality of the storytelling, pacing... a wide range of qualities that have little to do with technological innovation. In the games industry, technological innovation is still one of the predominant ways to ensure the success of your product – and an unfortunate one at that.

Q: So you believe for someone to stay relevant, they have to keep reinventing themselves?

A: Yes, definitely. If you look at the first three *Ultimas*, it was a maximization of technology. *Ultima 4* was a new kind of reinvention, in that by the time I'd had four successful games out there (counting *Akalabeth*), while all had gotten successively better from a technological standpoint, they hadn't improved from a storytelling or content standpoint. You know, technology improved, you could talk to characters, but up until *Ultima 4*, the actual craft did not much improve.

In fact, if you look at almost all old role-playing games, the storyline is pretty much the same. You're the hero. Your goal is to defeat the bad guy, because you're told to do so. And what you do as a player is pillage and plunder, because that's the game's instructions, with the ultimate goal being to gain enough power to fight the bad guy, who generally has been doing nothing during the tenure of the game. He's been waiting there the whole time waiting on you to get enough power to knock him down.

So the storylines are what I'll call morally ambiguous at best. Just not well-crafted in the sense of giving you a compelling reason to participate in the proceedings. *Ultima 4* was for me the first opportunity to craft real storytelling. And that's just one example of ways outside of core technological advancement you can reinvent yourself.

Other games that have done a good job along similar lines exist too. I thought *Medal of Honor* was brilliant as far as advancing level and mission design went. Things like *American McGee's Alice* did a great job of creating an atmospheric environment. *Myst* too... it created a very compelling universe to play in. There are lots of ways to be innovative – sadly, many products are simply what I describe as “me too, plus one feature.”

Q: Roughly how much has the *Ultima* franchise generated?

A: Right now, upwards of \$100 million. *Ultima Online* currently generates \$25 million a year to this day.

Q: Of that, how much did you see?

A: Nowhere near that much, but several million, certainly. Back in the pre-Electronic Arts days, I got a large portion of royalties. I go back to the freelance era – the first few *Ultimas* I created on my own ticket. I hired the teams myself... even paid their salaries when I ran Origin.

Q: The best thing the money bought you?

A: The biggest fringe benefit of that success for me has been to have the opportunity to explore the world, which has been a passion since youth. It spawned a lot of the creative energy which went into the *Ultima* series. I've now traveled the globe... been to Antarctica and the South Pole twice, deep diving in a submersible almost ten times. I've visited an undersea wreck that had never been discovered and brought up chests of gold and silver coins, the threshold of space via the Russian space program. In my mind that's a part of the lifestyle we try to create for players in the virtual sense. But to do it in the real world's a costly endeavor.

Q: Biggest drawback of the loot?

A: The expectations which get built around you. There's an inertia that builds behind you, and people are always wondering what comes next. There's a lot of pressure... you can't really back off and work on a game that people won't expect to be epic and have an epic level of success. It actually interferes with your willingness to take risks or do small projects.

Q: Was establishing a character like Lord British crucial to your success?

A: It was a big part of it... crucial, I don't know. There's no question that it substantially increased the level of success and gave the franchise longevity, though. It also lent a lot of credence to the fact that I'm just as much a player and want to live in these virtual worlds as much as anyone else. And the moniker sticks - it's helped me become more memorable than other equally successful game creators.

Q: Did it ever cause an identity crisis?

A: In Austin, I'm commonly recognized as Lord British ahead of Richard Garriott. Funny thing is, my father is a NASA astronaut. There's times we'll be in a science circle and people will recognize me ahead of him. But then there are times at game conventions when they'll recognize him ahead of me.

WILL WRIGHT

Creator, *The Sims* and Co-Founder, Maxis

Q: You've already had a lifetime's worth of hits. To what do you accredit your success?

A: Luck's a big factor. It's hard to predict what's going to be fun to someone else. It's much easier to figure out what I would enjoy playing and design that. Execution is also extremely important. A lot of the credit goes to the teams I work with, who bring so much to each product.

Q: How has success in the game biz enabled you to indulge your passion for nearly any project?

A: Two ways. First, the money side... it gives me the financial wherewithal to do it. That has more to do with having been in the industry in the early days and co-founding a company than anything else. Second, the contacts it's helped generate. Now that the industry has mainstream acceptance, it helps people see crossover potential in other fields. It helps you get in the door at places you normally wouldn't.

Q: Can success in the field of interactive entertainment be a stepping stone to Hollywood?

A: Well, it's not like Hollywood is that grandiose. It actually matches the stereotype exactly. But now that people are looking at how games have skyrocketed, yes, I'd imagine so.

Q: When you got into the industry, did you see it as a springboard for future ventures like robot hobbyist group Stupid Fun Club, *Spore* and other initiatives?

A: Truthfully, I didn't see gaming as a vehicle to get elsewhere. It sort of just happened as I grew personally. In the beginning, I just loved gaming... a job in the industry seemed a match made in heaven. Seeing trends and figures that show that games will outgrow movies at some point though, I'd think that such an evolutionary step has to happen in the future.

Q: Must an artist have certain notoriety before they can take chances like you always do with your games?

A: Anyone can produce interesting stuff on a shoestring budget. It just depends how much money you need. Investors like to see a proven track record.

Q: Any advice for developers who'd like to follow in your footsteps?

A: Be patient. Hit games can take years. It's easy to get sick of them. Maintain your passion... it's the biggest indicator of eventual success.

DENNIS "THRESH" FONG

Co-Founder, Xfire / "The Michael Jordan of Videogames"

Luckily for those of you who haven't had an original thought since *Pac-Man* was all the rage, even everyday scrubs can score big off this industry. Just ask Dennis "Thresh" Fong, former *Quake* champion, serial entrepreneur and winner of John Carmack's Ferrari. "Gaming was just a hobby... I never realized I was any good

until I started winning tournaments and money started rolling in.”

While hardly likely to give the average oil tycoon a run for his checkbook, make no bones about it... Fong *has* prospered. Riding the Internet boom, he sagely used his newfound fame as a launching pad for businesses like Gamers.com, FiringSquad.com and gamer-friendly instant messaging client Xfire, which MTV Networks bought for \$102 million circa April 2006.

Want to follow in his footsteps? Good luck, says Fong, who advises, “This industry changes every six months... you’ve gotta stay ahead of the curve.” He describes the situation for aspiring armchair entrepreneurs as a volatile one. “For people today, it’s easier and harder to break into the business like I did. Gaming’s become more mainstream... lots of professional leagues exist now. At the time my fortunes changed for the better, there weren’t. I was once undisputed champion... now there are many.”

Indeed, clawing your way into the big time doesn’t take much, what with so many new paths one can take. Where once there was only Twin Galaxies’-sponsored tournaments, players can now sign up to become part of bustling organizations like the Cyberathlete Professional League or Major League Gaming. Even Yahoo! offers card and board game competitions that reward top-ranking players with cash and prizes. All told, between upstart confederations like the Global Gaming League and event-based competitions offered at expos such as QuakeCon and the World Cyber Games, there’s ample room for advancement.

Don’t count on getting rich quick, though – with so many contenders currently in the mix, competition for top slots is fierce. Considering the potential payoffs, however (“The Ferrari I won still sits in my parking lot looking real pretty” affirms Fong), I’m confident at least a few of you will try rising to the challenge. Go get ‘em...

TOMMY TALLARICO

Founder, Video Games Live

Q: How'd you fall into this gig?

A: I've been playing piano since I was 3 and composing music since I was a teenager. I grew up on videogames but never thought to put my two greatest loves together until I moved out to California when I turned 21. I moved out in 1991 with no money, no place to stay, no friends or family, no job... nothing! I was literally homeless and sleeping under the pier at Huntington Beach. The first day I was in California I picked up a newspaper and got a job selling keyboards at Guitar Center. I started the next day and the first customer to walk in the store was a producer at a new videogame company called Virgin Mastertronic (which later turned into Virgin Games). I was wearing a TurboGrafx-16 t-shirt and we struck up a conversation about games. I went down to the studio and was hired the next day as the very first games tester. It was then that I decided what my career was going to be.

Q: How did you first get sign-off to start making music for games? And at what point did the whole virtual audio thing snowball?

A: I wanted to help change the way people thought and felt about videogame music. I didn't want it to be associated with child-like bleeps and bloops; our generation had grown up and we were still playing games. I wanted to create thematic film score music, rock, blues, electronica and all the music I would normally listen to. At the time you had to be a computer programmer in order to do music for games. I barely knew anything about programming so I had programmers build me systems in which I could play my MIDI keyboard into the actual game systems. I then convinced the programmers and bosses to give me an unheard of amount of cartridge space so I could use samples and other tricks to create the best possible audio experience. It all worked out great for my career and the games I worked on. Titles like *Global Gladiators*, *Cool Spot*, *The Terminator*, *Aladdin* and the *Earthworm Jim* series were all getting lots of attention for their audio, which helped me prove my theory that game audio should be taken a lot more seriously.

Q: What's the secret to making great in-game audio then? Is it different from composing songs for traditional mediums?

A: Let's say you've got an adventure-style game where you're trapped in a cave, looking for an exit. You might have a two-minute looping ambience in the background until the character pulls a lever to open a stone door. Then you would quickly fade out the ambience and play a four-second music sting, like a harp glissando or string crescendo, then quickly fade in a 30-second loop of suspense music while the character walks down the corridor behind the door. When the hallway opens into a big room – where 30 guys are waiting to attack – you could hit with a big orchestral cue.

We've come so far in the last 10 to 15 years. The biggest difference was the creation of CD-ROM as a storage medium. We were no longer limited to creating MIDI files and attaching sounds to them. We could now use live musicians and create real music which could be recorded and produced. This change came in the mid-'90s. We went from bleeps and bloops to live orchestras. It took the film industry 50 or 60 years to get where we are today, but the technology is changing so quick, we're actually surpassing the film industry now... using multiple streams and interactive 5.1 crossfades, things that movies aren't even capable of giving you, because it's a linear experience.

That's what keeps this all exciting to me, and I've worked on over 250 games. What keeps me excited is that every year, there's something new that no one's ever done before, that the technology allows for. It's really exciting for me, because I'm a videogame player too... not just a composer.

Q: The craziest or most expensive production you've ever arranged to put together for use in an interactive outing?

A: For *Advent Rising*, I used a 72-piece Hollywood union orchestra with an Emmy award-winning conductor (Mark Watters). We recorded on the Paramount Pictures stage with Academy Award-winning recording engineer and mixer Armin Steiner.

We then went to Salt Lake City to record members of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir and a full childrens' choir. We mixed and mastered the music in the most prestigious studios in Hollywood and had a full team of orchestrators and copyists working on the scores. From the voice-over side, we also had the talents of Orson Scott Card helping to write the dialogue as well as some of the top union talent for the acting. After everything was said and done, we spent around \$400,000 on the audio, which (when compared to the entire game budget) isn't a lot of money for such a high-quality production. In the end we released the *Advent Rising Soundtrack* CD as well.

Q: You created the Video Games Live events. What was the inspiration, how successful has the tour been, and do you think we'll see more of this stuff in the future?

A: Over four years ago my partner (and fellow videogame composer) Jack Wall and I wanted to bring the greatest videogame music and visuals to an audience not only made up of gamers, but non-gamers as well. At that point there had never been a videogame concert in North America and we felt strongly that the time was right for something like this to start happening over here. The Dear Friends concert came out a few years later and really helped us to prove our concept to the right people because that show did so well initially. It was very important to us to come out of the gate as big as possible, which we did by putting on the biggest videogame concert in the world on the most prestigious stage in the world. On July 6th, 2005 we premiered Video Games Live at the Hollywood Bowl to over 10,000 people with the LA Philharmonic Orchestra.

It was an incredible accomplishment for us in a number of ways. Not only were we able to prove the concept and have a great number of people show up, but, more importantly, we turned on many non-gamers to the beauty and emotion of videogame music and their visuals. We got amazing feedback from people like grandmothers who brought their grandkids saying things like "WOW!! I never knew that videogame music was so emotional and amazing. I now understand why so many people are into this." That was always one of our goals from the beginning

and to see it happen before our eyes was very special for us.

The split second right before Jack and I walked out on the stage for the first time I looked at Jack and said, “What the heck have we done?!” It was such an emotional and incredible feeling to know that after four years of hard work, sacrifice and many bumps in the road that the dream had now become a reality. Not only was it the first time any of that music had ever been performed in North America, but having the entire industry there to support us was very special. My friends like *Metal Gear* series creator Hideo Kojima and *Sonic the Hedgehog* creator Yuji Naka traveled halfway around the world just to be there for us. Everyone from Nolan Bushnell (founder of Atari) to the *Halo* guys (Marty O’Donnell and company) were there on hand to take part in the celebration. We had over 50 well-known industry people there, so at the end of the show, I brought them all up on stage and introduced them to the crowd. It was amazing!

Please check out www.videogameslive.com to get all of the latest info.

Q: Are your days of showing up at E3 with strippers on each arm over? Why so/not? And any cute stories you'd care to share from one of those occasions?

A: Oh hell yes! That was strictly a publicity stunt I pulled at the first two E3s because...

a.) I wanted people to pay attention and get my name out there.

b.) Back then there seemed to be a LOT of suits and not enough personalities.

Developers were still pretty much looked down upon and most of the time not even mentioned.

I thought I would be wacky and dress up like a flashy idiot with a big entourage which included tons of hot scantily clad girls, bodyguards... and, of course, midgets. It was strictly just a marketing ploy to get people to ask... “Who the hell is that?”

Most people laughed and got the prank and others took exception and thought I was being serious or something. The fact that you knew about it and asked me the question over 10 years later proves my point that it must have worked.

I've learned from the entertainment industry that reinventing yourself (or the products you work on) is a very important way to stay at the top of your game and always be a topic of discussion for people, which is important when you are always trying to network and be involved with the next coolest thing.

As far as "cute" stories go, we were at the first E3 and had the 17-person entourage going. I had girls on each arm and bodyguards all around me. In one of the booths a *Star Wars* stormtrooper would jump out and try to startle people in a tunnel. As we walked in the stormtrooper jumped out and without hesitation one of the bodyguards (without even looking) stiff-armed the guy out of the way... The bodyguard dude didn't even flinch. It was pretty funny and no one was hurt but I did actually hire real bodyguards so they were just carrying on business as usual. Suffice it to say that when the Empire came a-knockin, I was prepared.

Q: How can others make a name for themselves creating game music and/or break into the industry?

A: Well that's easy... Just show up at E3 with a crazy outfit and a bunch of strippers and midgets!! Seriously though, there are three simple things which will REALLY help out anyone looking to get into doing audio for the videogame industry.

1. Join the Game Audio Network Guild (G.A.N.G.) at www.audiogang.org. It's a non-profit organization established to educate the masses in regards to interactive audio by providing information, instruction, resources, guidance and enlightenment not only to its members, but to content providers and listeners throughout the world.
2. Attend the Game Developers Conference (www.gdconf.com) and E3 (www.e3expo.com).

3. Buy the book *The Complete Guide to Game Audio* by Aaron Marks.

Similar to Hollywood and the music industry, talent is important... but it's not the most important thing! Networking goes a very long way in helping to achieve your goals.

Q: Do you need tons of expensive equipment, studio time, or access to any special connections to start composing?

A: Not really. Technology and equipment is so advanced now that you could have a complete digital studio at your fingertips for under \$10,000 thanks to computers, software and plug-ins. The same quality would have cost millions of dollars in a studio less than 10 years ago.

Q: What are the perks of your job?

A: Again I would have to say that the pleasure I get when I accomplish something that no one has ever done before is the greatest perk and feeling. Ptolemy once wrote of Alexander the Great, saying: "His failures towered over other men's successes." This has always been a saying I've kept with me. Even if you dare mighty things and fail, it still may be a great accomplishment. Being defeated is often only a temporary condition... Giving up is what makes it permanent. Nothing I have ever tried to accomplish has ever been easy, so when something positive eventually happens it makes it all worth the time, effort and sacrifice that was put in.

Q: Rumor has it you live in a theme park ride of a house: Do tell...

A: Yeah... think Michael Jackson's Neverland, except replace the young kids with strippers and midgets. Seriously though, I've always prided myself on being the kid who never grew up. I love the fact that I have Peter Pan syndrome and I'm damn proud of it. I like to surround myself with all the things I ever wanted. If you can picture giving a 10 year-old lots of money to build his dream estate... that's pretty much my place. Spider-Man rooms, magic Houdini bathrooms, a full arcade, movie theatre, game rooms, cartoon cels, indoor waterfalls, dinosaurs, cas-

tles, Egyptian tombs, pirates and baseball rooms are just some of things that inhabit my lair. Oh yeah... my music studio is there as well.

I like to be surrounded by things that help me create and remember the feelings and thoughts I had as a kid. At its core, the videogame industry is all about having fun. I like to surround myself with as much fun as possible, especially in the place I spend 90% of my time. It inspires me.

Q: How lucrative can game music be as a profession?

A: You can make anywhere from \$50,000 to \$1 million a year depending on how hard you work, how good a businessman you are and how good the projects you work on end up selling.

GREG FISCHBACH

Founder, Acclaim Entertainment

“This business goes through cycles – at times, there aren’t enough suppliers of game product to meet demand for certain platforms and titles. Then, when there are finally enough providers, the market switches to a licensing model, where the brands themselves are needed to get product onto the market... And, in many ways, become more important than the content itself. Right now: Licenses are strictly a marketing vehicle – content is the most important thing.

One thing I see that’s troubling is how the mainstream videogame industry somehow went off on this bent where it began to think greater realism and more buttons meant better titles. It’s begun to limit the audience. If you look at a phenomenon like casual games, the user interface is incredibly simple – anyone can pick up and play these titles, and the mouse used to control them has what, two buttons? The problem is that marketers have always looked at their traditional audience as well-educated 18-24 year-old males. That’s OK – they’re a part of

the market. But what we're starting to find out now is that maybe casual gaming is the bigger part of the pie, suggesting that companies should start to design titles that are more accessible.

Looking back over Acclaim's history, I'd say one of the smartest things we did was to be the first company to move into licensed games – it gave us a real edge and the ability to strengthen our marketing dollars. It's easier to sell something consumers already recognize, and saves millions, since the product already has brand recognition to support it. We were also the first game publisher to be platform-agnostic – a decision based on economic modeling, the method all smart companies should use when making the decision to go exclusive or not.

I would also advise prospective publishers to have a solid green-light process in place that fosters dialogue between various departments including sales, branding, product marketing, development and finance. All areas have to be involved, no matter if your company is 25 or 2500 people, and everyone has to buy into ideas being considered for approval. Teamwork is everything – you need to invest in your people, because when they're motivated and trust in one another, it's amazing what you can accomplish.

As for pitfalls I'd caution people about, let's start with this – sometimes being first to market with a certain concept can be very profitable, but sometimes, being cutting-edge is very dangerous. From a marketing standpoint, *BMX XXX* brought more visitors to our website in the 3-month period before its launch than any other product in our entire history. You'd think we'd have been shipping millions; instead, thousands were more accurate. There was a complete disconnect with mass merchants: They just weren't ready for such an edgy product.

Likewise, review scores don't always tell the tale. Our inline skating game did great with critics – I think we sold 3 of those as well. And fun games don't always sell the most: Our *ATV Quad* game played poorly, yet kept selling out at Wal-Mart... we couldn't stock them fast enough. The lesson here is that there's no sure formula for guaranteeing a hit.

Otherwise, unless you're really of a large size, I'd caution publishers to stay out of the next-generation console market. It takes too long to see returns, and a small company can't sustain the potential losses. Right now, young and hungry publishers need to reach out to fresher parts of the business to find success and look for newer, better market segments and revenue streams. I think it's a strategy casual and mobile publishers are proving is quite viable."

LORNE LANNING

Co-Founder, *Oddworld Inhabitants*

Q: You guys came out of nowhere with *Oddworld*... Was the company a pipe dream, or...?

A: [Co-founder] Sherry McKenna and I were working for a special effects company, where we had no creative input. I wanted to be a storyteller and own my own intellectual property, and knew videogames were the medium of the future. It's all about creative control.

Q: And the money to do this came from where?

A: Venture capital. We ran into a guy who saw how much money the publisher Rocket Science had raised and wanted to write his own get rich quick story.

Q: You must've been wishing on the right star, eh?

A: It's all about who you know. And smart business negotiation... But there was also some random, dumb chance to it.

Q: So you attribute your breakout star power to luck?

A: I think luck is something you create. Timing was everything for us, but we knew that money was going to be coming into the technology business in coming years. Because we did our homework, setting out to get some of that money was much easier. You have to understand the market before you can master it.

Q: Then *Oddworld's* grand reception was no surprise to you?

A: Heh. I always say it's pleasant to have success, but when you borrow a million dollars to make an entertainment product, you really have to plan on succeeding. We were even ready to walk away from our initial investment proposal if we didn't get what we want, because we were so confident in our capabilities.

Q: But not everyone can afford to be that ballsy...

A: Hey, I believe being creative and innovative is safer than taking the "me too" route most game developers do.

Q: Your best suggestion for anyone who'd care to break the bank via gaming, then?

A: [Hitting it big] has more to do with work ethic than any approach. You can't have low standards. If someone thinks they can do great work that'll blow people away on a 9 to 5 schedule, they're getting into the wrong business. It's like the Olympics... Don't train your ass off, and you'll never win a gold medal.

BRUCE HACK

CEO, Vivendi Games

Q: Vivendi controls quite a large number of big-name properties. Any secrets you can share for successfully managing and leveraging so many brands?

A: Franchise planning is critical. VU Games' brand strategies are developed

through quantitative and qualitative information; we assess market opportunities by geography, platforms and genres, and then place what we believe are well-educated bets on our key properties.

Q: Forget new franchise entries, though. Rumor has it even your older titles still do big numbers...

A: Yes, VU Games has a wealth of internally owned intellectual property like *Warcraft*, *StarCraft*, *Diablo*, *Crash Bandicoot* and *Spyro*, which are hugely important to the future success of our company. Mining our vast library of more than 700 titles is a priority for VU Games.

Q: Every enthusiast out there thinks they can run a videogame company better than you. But what are some of the challenges you face running the business on a daily basis that the average gamer would never dream of?

A: Games are expensive and risky, often take two years to complete, aim at global markets which differ substantially in taste, and are in no short supply. All that said, I welcome any idea a fanboy or fangirl wishes to send my way.

Q: What's your company's publishing strategy in a nutshell?

A: Our publishing strategy is global – based on consumer tastes by region, platform and genre. We believe we can make nearly any game demanded by the market. Some of our franchises, such as *Crash* and *Spyro*, appeal to younger audiences. Others, like *Diablo* and *SWAT*, appeal to a very specific demographic – usually males 18-30.

ED BOON

Co-Creator, *Mortal Kombat*

“One thing you should never, ever do if you want to market a hit title: Set out to copy a game that’s already out.

Saying ‘let’s do *Gears of War*’ in a different setting, for example, doesn’t work. The whole point is that *Gears of War* is different – that’s what makes it so amazing. A game that’s novel has a way better chance of monopolizing sales charts and headlines. It may sound like a smart bet to clone something popular and add a slight twist at first, but if you go that route, you’re screwed to begin with.

So many companies play it safe – and I can understand that, given that game development now requires such huge investments. There’s this perception that the only way you’re guaranteed to succeed is by doing something that’s worked before. But formulaic titles never turn out to be as big a sensation as you’d hope. You have to set out trying to do something big to accomplish something big, so to speak.

As for maintaining some sort of longevity when it comes to hitting it big in this business and staying at the top, the trick is to do something different with every new game that helps to revitalize the franchise on which it’s based. I’ve seen a lot of game sequels where designers and marketers do the same thing over and over... they all do well at first, but sell fewer and fewer units with each successive iteration.

Developers and publishers are afraid to change. But the only way to win big is to gamble big and take risks. Novelty is important. People like to lump games into categories, e.g. another World War II shooter or fantasy role-playing game. So if you don’t have a game with an immediate, original hook, it’s instantly discounted.

As for when you’re working with an existing property like a movie or TV show, marketing and PR need to play a huge role in your publishing plan. Programmers

and artists aren't trained to promote these types of titles. However, conversely, when it comes to original IP, I'd like to think that marketing and public relations people would take the time to ask creators about their games and get to know each product.

Striking gold when it comes to achieving commercial success with games is elusive, though. It's honestly like winning the lottery – it's a combination of luck, hard work and timing. If there was a set formula for topping the charts, everyone would be using it."

DON BLUTH

Co-Creator, *Dragon's Lair*

"Coming from a background in movies and storytelling, we knew that there was something magical about a tale in which a character goes through incredible hardships, but somehow triumphs at the end. That's the secret to success *Dragon's Lair* hooked into. Nowadays, videogame companies are recognizing this and hiring professional writers to come in and pen their scripts. But blending a fun element with a story that grabs you right away is an essential concept for gaming success that *Dragon's Lair* picked up on way back when.

Even so, when we were doing the game, we didn't have an idea that it was going to be successful from the start. We just thought we were making another title that would make a little money. So everyone was just animating and the super caution that's always present when you're animating for a feature film went out the window, and everyone just started having fun. The animators would try new things and there was a spirit of adventure that permeated the air. Everybody was just trying to make themselves laugh. Playtime was what it was all about, and at the end of the day, this relaxed atmosphere translated into the final product – much to its benefit."

JANE JENSEN

Creator, *Gabriel Knight* and Co-Founder, Oberon Media

Q: A lot of women love your games – is there a trick you can share to successfully designing titles for or marketing interactive games to them?

A: It's hard to stereotype a gender, because some women do like traditional action games. But it's generally true of the studies I've seen, especially for older women, that what they don't like is violence, intense competition, things that take a long time to get into and, in general, 'twitch' games. They do like story, character, an interesting setting, and a relaxed pace.

Q: How do you design products that appeal to the mass market's tastes?

A: For me, it's not really a choice. I design games that I would like to play, and being a woman in my early 40s, I tend to have the same likes and dislikes as the demographic I'm trying to hit. I love puzzle games and a good story and personality in any game.

Q: Are women more prone to certain genres – say, adventure or action? Why so?

A: Yes, adventure games always had a very high female ratio at Sierra – much higher than any other genres of games at the time. And puzzle games like *Bejeweled* have as high as an 80% female audience ratio in the downloadable game market today. Female gamers shouldn't be underestimated.

Q: Do you believe the industry provides enough content to address these topics?

A: Not traditional publishers like Activision or UbiSoft. However, the online downloadable market is a completely different story. On places like RealArcade or Microsoft Zone or Yahoo! Games there are many titles aimed at the female market, and they've done very well.

Q: Critics and designers largely lament the relatively small number of girls that are passionate about gaming. Could it be they just haven't figured out how to market the message, or are women just not the game-playing sort in general?

A: Women and girls are absolutely game players. *The Sims* is a great example of how strong that demographic could be. There's just not great product available in most game venues so women tend to ignore gaming as something that they're not interested in, [creating an opportunity smart game makers can capitalize on].

Q: If given free range to design a product that appealed strictly to women, what would it be about, what would gameplay involve, etc?

A: When I founded [casual gaming giant] Oberon Media, we decided to squarely target that downloadable games market. I focused on puzzle games, but injecting more story and character work into them with the goal in mind of appealing, if not strictly to women, then particularly to women. Women don't have 3 hours an evening to get into something heavy like an RPG. They want something that's fun and relaxing to play for an hour after the kids are in bed or on their lunch break – the digital game equivalent of a crossword puzzle or solitaire. At the same time, women also tend to be big readers and want to get emotionally involved with characters and a gripping storyline. An adventure game is just a more interactive version of a novel [at heart].

Q: Anything to say to game manufacturers who spent years foolishly ignoring this market, and those who still have yet to realize what a moneymaker it can be?

A: I think there's going to be much more attention paid to the female market in the future. The downloadable game market is growing like mad and is very profitable. It's a nice vindication that women DO like to game.

Q: Why is it you feel the titles you've worked on personally resonate so strongly with both genders?

A: I think any good writer can hopefully appeal to a wide range of people. Many good female novelists do not appeal ONLY to women. I write in more of a mystery and thriller genre, which does have a pretty good crossover rate. And then I don't tend to put in gameplay that I don't like, so I guess that makes it more accessible to women like me.

Q: Will any lessons learned in terms of the female market be applied to your upcoming project(s)? How and why so?

A: I'm just doing what I've always done. What I have learned is that you can build the right product, but if you can't get it to the right audience, there's a problem. I think the real challenge is in marketing and sales. If we build a game women will like, how do we let them know about it? That's where we have a real mountain to climb.

JONATHAN "FATAL1TY" WENDEL

Professional Gamer

"The secret to anything is practice. Even though I'm playing games for a living, it's just like a full-time job. You have to put in your hours. There's a lot of travel involved too. I've visited so many places that I can hardly remember them all. Germany, Singapore, Australia... I just got back from Dallas, and was in Los Angeles the week before. Now I have to return almost immediately after. In the last 4 weeks, I've been away on business trips equally as many times.

If you want to make it big though, you have to be smart with spending. Any cash I earn is invested right back into my company. I want to sponsor teams and events... host my own LAN party. Helping others make their dreams come true and growing the gaming community is what's most important. You'll never make it big if you don't care about your fans. In the past, top gamers wouldn't even give normal people the time of day. I've got 200 emails from fans in sitting in my inbox right

now... I always do my best to answer every one.

As for gaming tips that'll help you climb the ranks? You have to understand the pro mentality. I study opponents, learn how to counter them. It's all about performance under pressure. There's this internal drive that compels me to win. Like how Tiger Woods dominates his sport, that's how I have to do mine. No matter what I do, I dedicate my focus to one thing and one thing alone: Being the best there is.

There are downsides to success, though: It's like how [Andre] Agassi trained all the time as a kid.... he missed out on his entire childhood. By doing this, I effectively threw away any hope of having lived the life of a normal teenager or twenty-something. But I'm blessed to be a part of the professional gaming circuit. It'll make one hell of a story to tell my grandchildren. And while I intend to keep competing, if it all goes away tomorrow, it's no big deal... I've earned enough to see me through 4 years of school without student loans!"

BRUNO BONNELL

Founder, Infogrames

"We, as an industry, sell dreams. You have to respect that.

Still, I'm a firm believer in market share. And a company is a living body – nothing about it should ever be set in stone.

Let's say you buy an Accolade or a Legend. If a studio isn't performing up to standards, you can always change your mind, change the management, etc. Failing that, you can also incorporate people into other parts of your organization.

Shutting down an operation is a purely pragmatic decision – in many cases, a studio, as much as we're fond of it, just may not be delivering the necessary level of quality in its products we demand. I may have been too hasty in the past in acquir-

ing minor studios like Accolade and Gremlin. But from the point of view of learning experiences, all of these milestones were very important.

I'm a big fan of [Sun Tzu's literary classic] *The Art of War* – it's my secret to success. As the book teaches, one shouldn't fight an enemy on their strengths. For example, Electronic Arts – in the sports arena, I can't match them face to face. There are a lot of people in the videogame business you just can't go head-to-head with in certain categories. But you can be smart, and attack in areas where they don't expect.

I'm a strong believer in different corporate identities too. Say you go to a club, and you're a good looking man, but blonde. Other good-looking men can also be at the same club who are bald or have brown hair. Some women will prefer you; some women will prefer the other men at the club. The reason for the analogy is that business as a whole revolves around freedom of choice, and therefore it's nothing but a competition. Never forget, everyone is a rival.

The future of interactive entertainment is clearly headed towards easier user interfaces and more accessible games. People want to play what they want, when they want.

Remember the old days of radio in the U.S.? People listened to music all day long, and programming was formatted. Then we became surrounded by music. The videogame business has been similarly insulated. Now we can download on-demand, and play outdoors. Consumers are pushing towards having much more freedom in terms of their gaming experience – that's why mobile and online gaming is growing.

A second evolution is also going to happen in the space where games have traditionally been seen as an art form. In the past, game designers have viewed making their creations as something like producing an opera... they want to produce something epic, titles that offer 30-40 hours of in-depth (and sometimes open-ended) play. Consumers are moving towards a desire for something more complete, and more

exciting. It's as if they want to make the move from opera into pop music.

A new generation of consumers is growing that wants quick, fast-paced entertainment that's instantly gratifying. After all, dancing along to a pop song is more fun than watching a 3-hour opera, isn't it? The problem is that in the past, the critics in our game industry have largely been opera specialists. This is going to change going forward."

HOWARD SCOTT WARSHAW

Designer, *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*, *Vars' Revenge*

"People joke about [Atari 2600 mega-flop] *E.T.* being the worst game ever, but keep in mind – to this day, it's still on people's lips. So if you subscribe to "there's no such thing as bad press" school of thought, then *E.T.* is a huge success. There are literally thousands of games that never come up in conversation anymore. Besides: Even after returns it still sold over a million copies. And the game was done in five weeks, start to finish. No other game had been done in less than five months before that (and usually much longer).

I wouldn't buy the rumor about millions of copies being buried in the desert either. No one has ever presented any solid evidence or a single copy (or piece thereof) from that hole. Here's my take on it: It didn't happen.

Here are two reasons why:

1) Burying stuff out in the desert is expensive. Running truckloads of carts, bulldozers and all that cement into the middle of the desert costs a lot of money. If you were a financially failing company, would you spend a bunch of extra money getting rid of an old product or would you recycle the plastic and components to save money while making new products that might sell? It doesn't make any sense.

2) I was pretty tied into the Atari grapevine. If a project like this was going on, I'd have heard about it and I would have grabbed a photographer and flown the two of us out to the dumpsite and got a picture of me standing on top of the heap. That would have been irresistible. Ultimately though, I'm just glad I don't have to store them in MY garage.

Anyhow, after two decades of answering questions about this development I have pretty much covered everything, but there is one moment I never shared before. The project started with a secret phone call to my office.

Once I agreed to do it, I was given two days to get myself and a design to the executive terminal of San Jose airport where a Learjet would be waiting to take me and the design to director Steven Spielberg. And there it was. I was blown away with flying on private jets and riding in fancy limos on the way to see such an iconic figure. The limo from Burbank airport to Warner Bros. studios had a TV, a phone (hey, this was 1982), a full bar and a sink. I had never seen anything like this. I thought it was just soooo cool.

The chief legal council for Atari tried the sink. When nothing flowed, he seemed seriously put off and disappointed. Of course, I'm loving every moment of my trip and it really shocked me that his experience seemed tarnished by the sink. It really struck me, and I remember hoping I would never become that jaded, a [trap potential rich kids] would do well to avoid.

Since leaving Atari, I have been all over the place. I got a real estate broker's license and tried that for a while (hated it), taught classes in everything from Object Oriented Programming to life skills for pre-teens, wrote two books, worked in industrial robotics, did some commercial photography and even got back into videogames for a while. Sometime around the mid-90's I began producing videos and that is truly my passion. Capturing people revealing themselves on camera and delivering that to an audience is irresistible to me.

Laugh if you will, but remember – I also made [huge hits] *Yars' Revenge* and

Raiders of the Lost Ark. Even if you hit it big once, not everything you do will be a success. If you're smart, you'll remember that – and not let the failures get to you.”

MARK REIN

Vice President, Epic Games, Makers of *Gears of War*

“There’s no secret to succeeding in this business besides making what you love. Make sure you love to play and are passionate about any game you’re working on, and hope that there’s a ton of people out there who agree. You should always listen to the fans and other game developers, but ultimately, a successful product has to be one you enjoy. If you love it, chances are others will too.

The main thing, though, is just to be smart about what you do. Epic’s succeeded because we’re financially independent, and have spent sweat equity to develop our own intellectual property. That way, we’ve been able to self-fund titles and take games to publishers from a position where we have ultimate creative control. Of course, that said, luck plays a huge role in any game [industry] enterprise.

I would also warn you not to let other people get in the way of your ideas and to always think about products’ commercial viability. As a developer, you want to make something that you adore, but also that a publisher can sell. I guess the key is to have a product that people are interested in and want to talk and learn more about, then giving them the means to do just that.

You also have to be smart about how you handle your business once you’ve achieved some measure of success. The most intelligent thing you can do: Reinvest in your own studio and people. A lot of the money we make at Epic goes into our employee bonus plan – we put a high value on our team. You can do well too by creating your own IP, hiring the best people and treating both with the utmost respect. That said, developers too determined to hold onto their

IP or obsessed with making certain visions become reality can sometimes wind up going down with the ship...

But if there's one piece of advice I'd say game makers and marketers should take away above all else, it's this: You can't build a successful title based on someone else's expectations. There's no way to second guess what the market wants or reviewers will respond to. All you have control over is your own game. Make what you want, the way you want, and chances are, everything will fall into place."

MORGAN WEBB

Co-Host, G4's *X-Play*

Q: How'd you get started in the gaming industry?

A: I have enjoyed games all my life, starting with classics like *Combat* on the Atari 2600 and later *Zelda*, *Phantasy Star* and tons of *Contra*. Now I have to say my favorite games are first-person shooters, but I also have a soft spot for RTS titles and RPGs. I officially got my start in the gaming industry on *X-Play*. They needed a woman with a passion for playing games, and I wanted to play games all day. Sometimes these things just work out.

Q: Any thoughts on climbing the corporate ladder?

A: I got my start in broadcasting doing computer help and tips on a live daily show called *The Screen Savers*, and it was hard to gain credibility with viewers. They assumed I was just a mouthpiece who had no idea what I was talking about, and they had no qualms about telling me so via email and message boards. Over time the viewers started to accept that it was possible for a woman to have an interest in and understand technology. I suppose the challenge was partly my own fault. I chose technology as a field partly because it included few women. I enjoy challenging stereotypes.

Q: How can other folks, especially women, looking to make a name for themselves as advocates of gaming get a start in the media or television business?

A: Before we attempt to force women into the gaming industry, we need to get more female gamers. It's a natural progression. Publishers can help: We need to start outreach when women are young, to get them hooked early. Most games aimed at younger girls are cheesy and terribly made, such as *Mary-Kate and Ashley: Sweet 16 - Licensed to Drive*. The mechanics were so bad I just imagine girls putting it down in frustration and assuming they were just bad at games. These games do a disservice to the industry.

AL LOWE

Creator, *Leisure Suit Larry*

Q: How'd you get started in the gaming industry?

A: Growing up in the countryside in the '50s outside of St. Louis, I was a musician, and wound up getting a masters degree in education. What background would better suit someone for this biz? (Note the sarcasm.) I guess it helped that I was a geek before that term even existed; the type of guy who jumped up and fixed the projector when it didn't work.

When it came to computers, I started out thinking I'd explore the lucrative field of management software for music festivals: I actually wrote a 20-program suite. Thankfully, I started making adventure games and things just snowballed. The key takeaway being that background doesn't matter, talent does: Nobody in the game business gives a damn if you have a degree if you can't perform. If you're looking to break in, you need to train yourself to be good at some aspect of game creation, which, on a happy note, can now be self-taught by working on a Web-based game or mod.

Q: How can developers or designers make themselves stand out in today's next-generation game industry?

A: Back in the old days, one person with a vision could do something spectacular. Today, it costs too much to take a chance on people – games are so expensive, publishers can't afford for them to fail. Nowadays, everything's done based on focus groups or testing: Games get watered down because they're designed by committee.

So don't go the traditional route if you can avoid it. The Web's the way to make a name for yourself. In fact, I think the retail game business is in serious trouble. The rise of independently developed games is imminent, just as it was for indie music and films. Either way, you have to be an auteur – a successful scriptwriter, for example, makes a movie in his or her own vision. If you rattle off the most successful games in history, very few are designed by committee.

Q: Is there any consistent predictor for how successful an interactive title might be?

A: Unfortunately, you just can't predict success – good games don't necessarily always sell, nor bad games fail. But having a great game does help. Ultimately, the success or failure of most hinges on whether they're effectively handled by a visionary: Someone must take the responsibility at the end of the day and make sure the concept isn't tampered with or diluted from its original form. Honestly, the best games are made by a team that fits in one room (if you can't fit, you're too big).

Some general advice, though:

- Avoid doing everything yourself – we're long past the point and era where major hit games could be designed in this fashion.
- Skip out on going to work for a large corporation filled with nameless cogs powering the machine; you'll never be heard from again.

- If you can, limit yourself to a small group. A handful of talented people can produce something truly great.
- Only attempt projects you can handle: For a tiny team, this would not include first-person shooters and MMOs.
- Don't attempt to create titles in large, bloated genres. These categories are filled, and have been done to death.

Q: Why did *Leisure Suit Larry* succeed – and might its titular hero ever stage a triumphant comeback?

A: Because people can relate: Every guy has put himself on the line at one time or another and failed, and been put down for it. The loveable loser has been around as long as comedy itself – I just put a new spin on the stereotype, that being quirky humor and borderline naughtiness.

The truth is that Larry was the perfect character for his time, just as adventure games were the perfect titles for their time. Unfortunately, more people recognize him than a “leisure suit” these days, and it’s kind of hard to tell a joke that folks aren’t in on...

BILL KUNKEL

Co-Founder, *Electronic Games* Magazine and Author, *Confessions of the Game Doctor*

Q: To what do you attribute your success in the videogame industry?

A: Durability and flexibility. If you last long enough and continue to stay abreast of the industry, you’ll come back into vogue. It’s like any other form of show business... Remember, John Travolta was doing “Look Who’s Talking” flicks before

Tarantino rescued him with “Pulp Fiction.”

Genuine veterans, people who have paid their dues in this industry, will similarly go in and out of vogue. The trick is being able to stay alive during the slumps. That’s where the flexibility comes in; the more skills you possess (journalism, marketing, design, art, programming, etc.), the more scenarios become available for remaining plugged into the culture, even when you’re not at the top of the food chain. Games are tech-driven and even a short time out of the loop can make it almost impossible to get back in.

Q: Any lessons you’ve learned scaling to the top of the biz others would do well to remember?

A: Never sell yourself short. Put a value on yourself and, if it’s realistic, stick to it. Someone once taught me that hungry people make mistakes. Even if you are hungry, never let them know.

Q: If someone wanted to get rich off gaming, where should they focus their energies these days?

A: There are so many areas to exploit, from garage band-level creations that sell to mobile systems and online sites to \$20 million games... But the real money is always at the same place – at the top.

Q: If I wanted to set myself apart from the average rank and file, how would I do so?

A: Wear your underwear on the outside? Do a good and consistent job? Honestly, if you’re waiting for the industry to make you a star, good freaking luck. Look at guys like Tommy Tallarico and CliffyB; they marketed themselves to the point where their name had value in an industry that does anything it can to keep the creators largely anonymous.

Q: Is there a trick to developing hit titles or picking hit games to publish?

A: If it was a trick, people would establish that they could perform it, lease the secret and then retire. Tricks only happen in cheat codes and in magic shows.

Q: The most common misconception about those who succeed?

A: That they were lucky. Luck, as Branch Rickey once observed, is “the residue of design.”

Q: The one thing every game industry mogul should remember?

A: Life’ll kill ya.

SHIGERU MIYAMOTO

Creator, *Mario / Donkey Kong / The Legend of Zelda*

Q: Most of the smash hit franchises you’re known for aren’t just huge moneymakers – they’re also 20 years old and still generating massive returns to this day. How do you continue to pump out the blockbusters?

A: Well, if you look back at [franchises like] the *Mario* and *Zelda* series, we don’t really update those games until we have some type of new capability or technology to apply to them. We don’t take the same engine and just create a sequel. Every time we create a follow-up to a title, we rebuild the game, recreate its systems and create an entirely new game. I think that’s one of the biggest reasons we continue to innovate and do so well.

When I think back on how an iconic character like Mario is different from an iconic character like Mickey Mouse, to maintain that popularity, it has a lot to do with the way they’re presented. When new technology and enhancements occur, and the character is presented again alongside them, they appear to stay fresh. Whereas with a character that’s pure 2D animation, you’re stuck within the confines of that

medium and so it doesn't retain the freshness, even though you create new versions, because you're basically retaining the same elements as before. I think I've been very fortunate that over the years, as I've created new games, I've been able to keep the characters fresh [and sales figures high] by keeping the experience fresh.

Q: What makes Nintendo a continued family favorite – and why will it win this generation's console war?

A: I'm not sure there is a war – it's the media who's calling it that. When you look at the situation in different terms, we don't see this as being a "next" generation for us – we see it as being a "new" generation. We've said this before; it's very easy for a company to look at an existing market, think about what it wants, and create a product to try to serve consumers in that market.

But when you do that, you only capture the attention of a portion of that market, and you never get beyond that. That's why we're looking at a new market. We're trying to find out what it is people desire that they're not getting elsewhere and going in that direction with the Wii. We're demonstrating that we've created a product that goes beyond the boundaries of what people expect from a videogame and bringing in new consumers. Whoever gives the people what they want; that's what'll determine who the winner is on tomorrow's battlefield...

Q: What do competitors like Microsoft and Sony miss about salesmanship that Nintendo seems to comprehend so well?

A: What they really haven't done is attempt to expand beyond their core user base. Nintendo is looking at a much broader market. Our motto for some time has been to target people from ages 5 to 95 and everyone in-between – people will all types of interests. If we can really go after this mass market, and manage to create a meaningful impression, it's better for the industry as a whole.

Nintendo has been talking for a long time about its direction, and it should be

apparent that we're moving in a very different direction than everyone else. I don't feel like a part of any next generation. We're entering a new generation. Microsoft and Sony are doing the same things. We're doing different things. And because of that, it's not even a competition.

Q: With costs and associated risks higher than ever in the videogame business, what's the solution to saving the industry from itself?

A: I think the answer is "Wii," naturally. As you've seen with Nintendo DS, we've sold a very large number of systems and attracted a new audience. Similarly, with Wii, by making these new types of interfaces, even people making the same types of games year after year are being inspired by the opportunities this new control scheme creates. We're filling them full of new ideas that they can then take and incorporate into their own game design. As they wind up creating new videogame experiences that people are able to experience and play, the audience for these titles is going to expand and attract new users. As long as we continue to expand the overall videogame audience, I think that will prove the solution to our industry's current problems...

Q: Any advice you'd be willing to share with aspiring designers hoping they can come anywhere close to filling your storied shoes?

A: My design philosophy is that you have to take the overall game environment, including the player him or herself, and use that to really capture people's attention. The thing about an interactive environment like a videogame is that it's fun and interesting because people voluntarily enter the interactive space and have an experience there of their own accord. It's not somewhere you go just to look at flashy images on-screen; it's that interactivity that makes things interesting. Because of that, in my game designs, I have to try to think up ways to not only make the game design itself interesting to encourage people to enter that interactive space. I also have to think up ways to make the image of people playing games interesting, because it's something that entices other people to play the game.

TODD HOLLENSHEAD

Co-Owner and CEO, id Software

Q: Should you go into this industry planning to achieve overnight success? If not, what are some more realistic expectations people should have?

A: Well, I don't think that there's any proven formula that says that if you do these X number of things that you're going to have a massive success. And everybody who has had success, there are a lot of different factors you can credit that success to, as well as different approaches. At id, our track record speaks for itself: Not everything we've done has been a great success. We've had projects we've had to cancel, game design directions that we experimented with that didn't work out, months of the company's effort that was wasted, huge negative returns on investment from an economic standpoint.

But obviously, we are game-focused. We don't think for our titles it's about a movie license or big-name actor, not that we haven't worked with these sorts of people before. That's not the core of the experience we're trying to create; we think it's the game itself that matters. So that then is really our formula for success: To have an exacting standard of quality and make sure that you put play itself first and foremost. You always have these competing philosophies about how long you should take, what your technology window is... Those definitely have to be taken into account, but for us, game quality has always been paramount, and the way we've always approached every project.

That won't always work if you're an Electronic Arts who has a title like *Madden NFL* that comes out every August and have to waste millions on tie-ins and licensing, or gearing products to launch timed with movies and other franchises. It's not to say that that's a wrong approach – it's just not the right approach for every title.

Q: Is there some background or insight you'd like to share with developers, financiers or publishers looking to achieve a similar track record as yours?

A: Generally, most publishers that have been successful in the business know that there are competing priorities, and sometimes those priorities have to be different depending on what the project is. Timing may be far more important on one title than for another. For us, we don't lose any sleep, or marketing leverage, over trying to synchronize with specific events or licenses. If a game's release date slips for us, it's not a big deal. But if we ship a bad game, then we've wasted all the time and effort we put into making that IP and trying to make it successful. And if it's the sequel to one of our franchises, like *Wolfenstein* or *Doom*, then we've diluted the brand – not to mention cost ourselves in terms of sales down the road when we go to work on another project.

I think most publishers understand that, but, because of a shareholder-driven focus on quarterly returns, priorities in retrospect tend to get out of whack. At the end of the day, shipping May 15th vs. March 31st isn't a big deal in the grand scheme of things, even if it causes a publisher to miss a quarterly number. Unfortunately, the market's not sophisticated enough to take that into account. I think people have to be a little bit more Warren Buffett-ish about it, and try to court more long-term investors versus those just jumping on the bandwagon because of momentum behind the stock. When we have tough conversations with most publishers about games, they understand the financial commitment, but they always worry about what Wall Street or their shareholders will think. In that case, you really have people involved in the decision-making process who aren't helping you to make better choices. That I think is the big issue on the decision-making side for publishers.

And I think that for financiers, they need to remember that anything great requires a great deal of time to come to fruition – and sometimes, seeing it through to the end requires more patience. Sometimes it also requires a greater investment to reap a more meaningful long-term reward. You can look at a lot of examples in the industry, such as [legendary designer] Will Wright: *The Sims* was like a sandbox experiment, and it's the biggest game franchise of all time now. But if he wasn't given the time and freedom to make the game, and develop it to its fullest potential, look at what the opportunity cost could have been...

There are a lot of people in the industry who don't get the same sort of long leash he does, and it's to the detriment of the games they work on.

Q: Common mistakes developers often make when it comes to the business side of videogames include?

A: Probably the number one mistake the business people at developers make – and I'm probably going to catch hell for saying this – is that they go and figure out what their schedule is based on information from programmers. Generally, bugs are what take the longest to fix, but biz people on the development side are constantly misguided by their programmers. Not intentionally, mind you, but programmers, coming from an engineering standpoint, have a very difficult time conceiving of the unknown, unexplained problems that inevitably come up on the production side that can cause them to have to totally rework various features or in-game elements.

So the businesspeople get bad information, end up making statements to publishers in terms of delivery timing that end up not being true, and don't apply the proper level of discretion in terms of leaving themselves a way out if schedule forecasts are inaccurate. The thing about software development is that, especially when innovating technologically, you're trying to push the envelope and fix problems that haven't been solved before. So you really don't know what it takes to correct them. And until you're in optimization mode, you're really just making wild guesses about what the schedule will be, and if you present what's really a guess to somebody as fact because they want you to have that confidence that what you're telling them is true instead of just admitting that there's some uncertainty, well... You get into a situation where you postpone very hard conversations until the point in time in development where it's worst to have them, so you just compound your misery.

Q: id Software has always played to the hardcore gamer with most of its concepts – thankfully, you always back them up with superior technology. For the benefit of all these developers focused on similarly-themed sci-fi or run-n-gun outings,

please tell us once and for all. From a business standpoint, should so many people be trying to do the same things you folks do?

A: Certainly, I'd be dishonest if I said that having John Carmack and his technological skills wasn't a huge factor in our success. So I don't think that game development is just taking some genius kernel of an idea and figuring out how to make it work with minimalist goals in terms of implementation. We do things a little bit differently: We are a technology-centric company – John always thinks about where he can get the most impact from a technology standpoint that'll make a casual audience go wow... something that immediately stun anyone, even if they're not a gamer.

Whatever you do, you can't simply copy the greats and hope you'll succeed – you have to make some sort of impact. There are people who've licensed our technology who haven't overwhelmed people visually that have done huge business. Look at the Infinity Ward guys with *Call of Duty* and Valve with *Half-Life*; games that were built off of technology licensed by id, years after the first id game came out using it, so the sheer technical wow factor was lessened. What made these games successful was that the developers innovated in their own ways, whether through scripting, atmosphere, whatever... There are copycat games out there that can achieve some measure of success, but to have the breakout hits, you really have to push the envelope somewhere. It doesn't have to be everywhere... you don't have to try to innovate everything at once. That's a flaw a lot of developers have: They see something cool, and their eyes get real big, but their appetite exceeds their ability to execute. They want to cram in every gee-whiz technical feature; you just have to pick your spots where you have your core competency and execute as well as you can.

Q: Any famous last words for people hoping to break in and master the business, then barnstorm the charts?

A: Breaking in is tougher than it used to be, just because the financial requirements to get a full-blown PlayStation 3, Xbox 360 or PC title done are a lot more than

they were back in the *Doom*, *Wolfenstein* or even *Quake* days. It's not easy to get a game out. But I think that the studios that keep their ego in check and are willing to learn as they work can be successful. Guys like Croteam with *Serious Sam*, or Remedy with *Max Payne* or DICE with *Battlefield 1942* – there's a lot of blood, sweat and tears that went into making those games, before any of these guys got any notoriety at all. They slaved away in obscurity until they had something that was really impressive to show that could move them forward. To me, it's better to show someone something that's great that you've been working on when it's ready, rather than talk about what it is you don't have yet, and then have to figure out how you're going to have to put it together.

SCOTT MILLER

Founder, Apogee and 3D Realms

Q: From *Kingdom of Kroz* to *Duke Nukem 3D*, *Max Payne* and *Prey*, you've got quite the knack for churning out hits. What's the secret to your success?

A: Self-education.

This started in the mid-'80s when I really poured my focus into learning how to run a business, and I began my lifelong quest to learn everything I could about business and marketing. Even 20+ years later, I read no less than 50 books a year that relate to making games in some way. Just yesterday, I finished *Crafty TV Writing*, and went through half a highlighter doing so, as the book is filled with knowledge we in the game industry can put to great use.

One of the books that influenced me the most was *Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind*. This marketing book, along with others by the two authors, radically altered my worldview on how to make a product that sold itself, rather than needed to be sold. Positioning is a cornerstone of how 3D Realms makes successful games, and was applied to *Duke Nukem*, *Descent* (back when Apogee first kicked off this

brand with Parallax Software), *Max Payne*, *Prey* and even our more recently-announced title, *Earth No More*.

I read about 100 books a year, about 80% non-fiction. I'm passionate about self-education. Practically everything I learn ends up being useful to designing games and running a business. And because this has worked out so well for me, it's my best recommendation for anyone else.

Q: What game industry lesson(s) do you wish you'd learned sooner?

A: That everyone makes mistakes. The key is not to repeat them. Mistakes are part of learning, same as the successes. When I'm asked this question, I always have trouble searching for a good answer though, because I never live in the past, I never have regrets and I stay focused on what I need to do to keep climbing.

Q: Where does the real money lie in gaming now?

A: For developers, it's always been the same: You need to own your own IP. This single thing gives a studio everything it needs: Clout, leverage, profits, control and the right to exploit the IP in other markets. This is why publishers so thoroughly resist allowing any IP ownership to studios they work with. Look at the richest, most successful independent studios, like Epic, id, Valve, 3D Realms, Gearbox and Remedy, and they all own IP. This is not a coincidence.

Q: In this era of 100-man production teams, is there a way for someone working in the development or executive trenches to make themselves stand out?

A: I believe people who excel will always rise to the top, unless they work at a company that doesn't appreciate talent. Executives, in particular, need to know games. I can't count the number of industry execs I know or have heard about that do not play games. I wonder if there are movie execs who don't watch movies?

Q: The trick to developing hit titles or picking hit games to publish?

A: The trick is differentiation. You cannot make a clone and expect to have success. And yet the play-it-safe, cover-your-ass mentality of most publishers is just the opposite. If you pitch a project that cannot easily be compared to an existing hit, you might as well be pitching an un-hittable screwball. Publishers will just about always pass on a game concept that isn't basically a clone of a recent success.

And yet differentiation is a core principle of positioning. What it means is that you need to develop a product that has something substantially unique about it, that sets it apart in a meaningful, yet compelling way. For example, with *Duke Nukem*, we created a talking hero while every other game had a silent hero. With *Max Payne*, we created slow-motion gameplay. With *Prey*, we created a story revolving around Cherokee mythology, and also added other never-before-seen gameplay elements, like deathwalk, gravity effects and portals. So, the trick is to zig when everyone else is zagging. Think of it this way: If you're following someone else, by definition, you can't be a leader.

Q: Essential skills every would-be game industry player should possess?

A: Just to give an answer I'm sure will be unique, I'll say this: Learn how to write. Seriously – everyone should take journalism, creative writing and technical writing classes. Luckily, I did, and it has helped me to no end. And even beyond those classes I've read several dozen books on writing in various forms (that self-education thing again). This knowledge helps me tremendously with something I do most of the day: Communicate. When people you deal with cannot write well, it's a helluva problem to have to fight through.

Q: The most common misconception about those who succeed in the game business?

A: That we all have sports cars! Seriously though, I can't speak for anyone but myself, but for me success just means I need to keep trying harder. I never want to let myself, or those around me, down.

Q: Once you do break the bank, what stumbling blocks should you watch for?

A: If you have a lot of cash at your disposal, it's all too easy to go on a spending spree, and buy companies, services, equipment or super-nice offices that you really don't need. You see this time and again when companies hit a new plateau of success, and then burn it up before they know it.

Q: The one thing every budding game industry mogul should remember?

A: Failure is always nipping at your heels. What will you do to outpace it?

TOMONOBU ITAGAKI

Head of Team Ninja and Creator, *Dead or Alive*

Q: To what to attribute your continued critical acclaim and chart-topping commercial performance, as well as status as a proven hit-making videogame creator?

A: Success is simply an outcome of our entire development team's hard work. If anything can be said about my success, or that of the *Dead or Alive* and *Ninja Gaiden* series so far, it's that we didn't focus on being "successful." Instead, we just focused on making the best games possible.

Q: Got some tips you'd care to share for those who'd like to climb the same heights you've scaled?

A: It's important to be in the right place at the right time. But it's also crucial to maintain mutual respect amongst those you work with. In today's competitive game market, it's almost impossible to create a mega-hit title without a group effort – so you've got to be [a team player].

Q: People tend to glamorize the game development lifestyle – what's it really like for you?

A: First of all, our day is not 9-5. On the average, my team members all work 20 hours a day. And, in many cases, 7 days a week during crunch times that can last as long as 6 months. Altogether, I have about 150 guys working day and night.

Q: After all this time and so many smash titles, how do you stay motivated?

A: As many milestones as I've seen in my game development career, I continue to strive to create ultimate games for gamers. They're the ones who keep raising the bar – and pushing me forward.

CHRIS TAYLOR

Founder, Gas Powered Games and Creator, *Dungeon Siege* and *Total Annihilation*

Q: What are qualities, in your mind, that a visionary game designer absolutely has to possess?

A: I would say it's important to understand state-of-the-art gaming technology – but also know the difference between something that looks good and plays good. To understand that videogames are for entertainment and not a sugar-coated IQ test. Lastly, it doesn't hurt to have a sense of humor about this whole business of making videogames, because it really is quite a ridiculous job.

Q: With titles like *Supreme Commander* and *Dungeon Siege*, how do you constantly continue to breathe new life into aging genres?

A: We start out by immersing the player in gigantic 3D worlds. We also use open-ended systems so that the player has the freedom to develop their characters or units any way they like. It's important to focus games on what we consider to be

the most entertaining aspects, things like exploration and combat. We also present players with the most important decisions, the ones that have the largest impact on how the in-game experience plays out.

Q: Since development team members are encouraged to keep their head in the clouds, how does any work ever get done around your offices?

A: We try and think of this job as fun. That way we are never at work, and so it follows logically that no work is ever done. Simple!

BRAD MCQUAID

Co-Founder, Sigil Games Online and Co-Creator, *EverQuest*

Q: The secret to hitting it big with massively multiplayer games would be...?

A: Massively multiplayer games require large teams and quite a bit of development time, due to their scope and scale. Entertaining thousands of players in one world for month after month, even year after year, necessitates a very large and detailed world, full of entertaining things to do. *EverQuest* took almost three years to develop before commercial release, and the team grew to almost thirty people. And years after release, [Sony Online Entertainment] still has a very large team and significant budget keeping the franchise updated and interesting, as well as working on expansions.

Q: How else do MMOs differ substantially from standalone counterparts?

A: They are a very different animal, requiring not only large development teams and budgets but also significant amounts of network infrastructure as well as customer service. I guess that's the key [to success]: Customer service. Ultimately, we're not simply making games, we're also running a service, and this does require some very different approaches.

Q: In what ways do you design entire worlds as opposed to levels?

A: Levels are usually associated with single-player games, which are meant to be played from beginning until end. Massively multiplayer persistent games don't really end, and must provide content that entertains players long-term. A large world, lots of areas to explore and quests to complete, as well as something to fall back on (character development, socializing and adventure) do tend to make our games more worlds than a series of levels.

Q: What makes your titles so darned addictive, leading people to coin phrases like "EverCrack?"

A: Three primary areas of focus: Character development, community building and an immersive world. Players build up their characters over time and also acquire experience, knowledge and possessions. And because of the social and interdependent nature of these games, players also develop relationships with other people. Both of these aspects create an ownership that compels players to keep playing over a long-term period, all the while exploring and experiencing a very immersive 3D world.

Q: Let's settle the issue once and for all: Was your original smash hit game so huge just because it was one of the first MMORPGs to market?

A: Actually, *EverQuest* was probably the third MMORPG to market, following *Meridian 59* and *Ultima Online*. And while I do think timing had a lot to do with the game's success, I also think there were many other factors, including its cooperation-centric gameplay, true 3D world and emphasis on character development and game balance.

Q: When setting out to develop blockbuster games, do you and your associates do anything out of the ordinary to get in the creative spirit?

A: We have a very casual working environment and we do a lot of brainstorming and outside of work get-togethers and activities. It's really a fun environment, but

there's also a lot of work, and game developers often work many, many hours towards the end of a project.

MARC ECKO

Founder, Marc Ecko Entertainment

Q: From the beginning, you've set out to change the gaming industry's status quo. Why so?

A: Because it needs changing. Consumers don't care about everything that goes into making a game – they only care about the final product. What the industry is producing now is good for people already in it, but it's not good enough if they don't understand what the consumer wants – product that speaks to phenomena in the broader pop culture pool. Not just “games for gamers.”

Q: Why is the time right to strike hard in the business – and strike it rich?

A: It's the Wild West out there. We are on the eve of a new platform cycle. Film and gaming will blur. How we consume entertainment is evolving faster than our capacity to understand its impact on us. It is a crazy exciting time, and I'm just glad to be part of it.

Q: Why is it we don't see more individuals of your stature recognizing its potential?

A: It's not that these people aren't out there doing games... it's the level of commitment shown towards creating a credible end-product that is sometimes questionable. I could easily slap my rhino logo on a game, add a dose of sex and violence, and call it a day, but I want to create properties that can stand on their own and be recognized for their rich, original content. That's where success truly lies.

Q: What's the message you're trying to get across to peers, game industry heads and haters alike?

A: If I can make a game, the person reading this can make a game. Hopefully my efforts will open up opportunities for more outsiders. Just because you're categorized as an outsider or you don't know how to program a game doesn't mean that your point of view isn't worthwhile. And just because they continue to put sh*t product on the shelves doesn't mean that you have to keep buying. It's time for a change of pace.

VINCE DESI

CEO, Running With Scissors, Creators of *Postal*

Q: How have you managed to get ahead in the videogame business?

A: By knowing my goals as well as my strengths, and assembling a great team to support my weaknesses.

Q: Any mistakes you've made on your journey to the top?

A: Being too cautious when I could afford to take greater risks.

Q: Where's the true payout these days in gaming?

A: Where it always has been from the very beginning: DISTRIBUTION!

Q: How can someone make themselves a bankable commodity in the game biz?

A: The best thing any individual can do to succeed in the game industry is to focus on a specific mission/goal/talent and then relentlessly pursue it. And, if that isn't clear, don't just go out there and pretend you're a programming

designer/artist/modder/marketing genius/publisher or anything that you are not.

Q: The best way for those just getting started to make a name for themselves?

A: Make a game that gets banned in 12 or more countries.

Q: Is there any rhyme, reason or methodology to making hits?

A: There's no trick or secret other than having a clear vision and the will to deliver the vision into a finished product. The ultimate commercial success of the product is based on numerous key factors all coming together and working in a favorable way. If charting success was as easy as defining a theory or creating hit games and a plan to implement them as well, then 99% of the crap that's out there today wouldn't exist!

Q: Vital skills every aspiring game industry hustler needs to possess?

A: A knack for communication and honesty! Not to mention knowing what you're *not* capable of – and finding a way to overcome your weaknesses and what you are missing.

Q: What's the most common misperception about those who realize success in the interactive entertainment biz?

A: That they somehow were more talented than others and that their games were inherently of an excellent design.

Q: Let's say you do strike it rich: Any potential pitfalls big spenders should watch for?

A: Don't invest your own money. Once you've proven you can be successful with your own money, the next time around, find an investor. Because, honestly, light-

ning doesn't usually strike twice... and there's no reason to lose your ass.

Q: The single most important thing every hopeful game tycoon should remember?

A: You're nobody without your customers and fans!

BRIAN FARGO

Founder, Interplay and InXile Entertainment

Q: How have you managed to make such a name for yourself in the gaming field?

A: I think more than anything that I have been both a gamer and an opportunist. Being successful takes the ability to spot a trend or hole in the marketplace and fill it with the right title. Anyone can be creative for creativity's sake, and there have been many great games that didn't sell well because they don't fulfill any [market need]. It's also important to be nimble and move fast on opportunity when it arises. I've had countless successful games or ventures that had I moved just a week or month too slow I would have lost out. People don't appreciate the sense of urgency you have to have if you want to be successful.

Q: Major errors you've made climbing the career ladder others would do well to avoid?

A: Probably my biggest mistakes have been in spending too much time with employees that don't buy off on the program. There is a certain vibe and mantra that each company has and your fellow workers all need to subscribe to, and when they don't, you have to swap them out for people that do. I spent countless hours trying to get people to come along and in the end we lost a lot of time and missed out on great opportunities.

The other thing to be wary of is trying to grow outside your core business too

quickly. In the beginning of a company you look for every possible opportunity, but then with success, you then need to filter out all of the possible opportunities. There is nothing wrong with expansion, but it's a matter of how many things you should take on at one time.

Q: With development and publishing teams being so huge nowadays, how can someone hope to make themselves more than just another nameless gear in the system?

A: I can comment on the things that would impress me for standing out – and most of them are obvious things that people don't do. A full 50% of standing out would just be good old follow-through and professionalism. This industry lacks in that department, and whenever I see people on top of it I am impressed.

People need to return phone calls, keep organized by writing everything down, and they need to communicate the status of projects even if nothing is happening on them. Sounds simple, but most people don't do this. If I see 700 messages in someone's inbox, I know they are disorganized. Development is a bit different in that you need technical skills and gameplay philosophy skills in addition, but you still need to possess the basic attributes that a professional executive needs to have in order to stand out as well.

Q: A key point wannabe industry players should never forget would be?

A: The first thing every mogul should remember is the consumer who buys the games and the people in the industry who helped work with them along their way to the top. It's too easy for success to breed contempt for the people who helped make you successful in the first place.

I've seen certain individuals lose track of the fact that there are people using their hard-earned dollars to buy a game and that these fans expect a certain quality level. I hate to see some of the junk I've seen shoved out knowing it will sell well because of a license or because of its high concept. Not all games come out

as “A” quality, but you at least have to do your best to try.

And any mogul should strive to be a great person, and that means returning phone calls and helping give advice to others who also seek to be successful. Once again, it’s too easy for success to make people behave poorly... It is always so much more impressive when people are benevolent with their new-found mogul-ness.

Q: Any thoughts on how to improve one’s chances of picking hits?

A: For me the trick was to be able to spot voids and other opportunities in the market and fill them with a quality product. I’ve been involved with wonderful and creative games like *Giants: Citizen Kabuto*, for example, that didn’t have the identifiable niche and subsequently didn’t sell. And then I’ve had titles like *Descent* (one of the first retail games that used the Internet for multiplayer gaming) that went on to sell millions.

One needs to be a student of the marketplace to pick those hit games. Developing a hit game is even harder in that you have to first identify and discover an opportunity and then do all the work to make a game happen. Every game I ever shipped had a war story behind it.

SCOTT ADAMS

Creator, *Adventureland* and Founder, Adventure International

Q: How’d you manage to hit it big off gaming?

A: As an early pioneer, I simply wanted to provide the games to play that I wished others were selling! I also tried to treat people fairly as best I could.

Q: Any key errors you made that you’d warn others hoping to follow in your footsteps not to make?

A: Know when to cut your losses. Sometimes you must retreat before charging ahead again! I failed at that. Also, trying to totally self-finance my company was both an asset and a liability...

Q: Where does the real money lie in gaming now?

A: MMORPGs: Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games.

Q: How should someone looking to make as big a name for themselves in the business as you've done go about doing so today?

A: Become widely known and have a website that attracts a lot of visitors. Blogging and having an interesting twist to their views on the world would help.

Q: Trade secrets those hoping to make hits should keep in mind?

A: Find players who represent Joe Average and see what they like to play!

Q: Essential skills every would-be game industry player should possess?

A: Perseverance, and having a dream that you are willing to drop all else to follow.

Q: The most common fallacy about those who succeed?

A: That they are different (i.e. better) than anyone else. Many are simply in the right place at the right time; others may be cutthroat businessmen that walk all over people. And really, most important to remember, success is not always measured in dollars in the bank. In 100 years how much do you think this will all matter? Try thinking (and planning) for eternity instead. For example, the life of Mother Teresa measured against a gaming superstar? Which one do you think in the long run made the right choices?

Q: Once you break the bank, what stumbling blocks should you watch for?

A: It is still important to watch the bottom line and cash flow. Also, don't forget: The bottom line is important, but more important is your own sense of ethics. [If you don't play fair], you can win the round, but eventually, you *will* lose the game.

TED PRICE

CEO, Insomniac Games, Makers of Ratchet & Clank

Q: You've enjoyed more than your fair share of success over the last decade – surely it didn't all come down to luck?

A: Actually, I'd prefer to talk about Insomniac's success as a company, since any success I've had is directly attributable to what Insomniac has achieved. There are a lot of reasons Insomniac has been successful as an independent developer. Everyone here loves making games. Everyone here has an opportunity to contribute to what we make and where we're going as an organization. We offer a lot of creative freedom. We're independent and not under a giant corporate thumb. I could go on for several pages...

But what's been most important to me personally has been everyone's commitment to open communication and constant collaboration. This is a commitment that's stayed consistent since we began almost 14 years ago. What I mean by "open communication" is that we make huge efforts to keep everyone in the company fully informed of what's going on with all our projects and with the company. And by "collaboration," I mean that we push people to work face-to-face with others on the complex problems we encounter versus taking an insular approach. In my opinion, giving a lot of weight to these two concepts is essential when you're working in a field like videogames where so many different skill sets are involved.

We're not perfect in either area. But we try really, really hard to address communication problems and collaboration issues as soon as they crop up. And we're always experimenting with new ways to improve on both.

Q: The biggest mistakes you've made during the company's come-up?

A: Lots. But I'll focus on the biggest mistake I've made: Refusing to delegate. It took me years to figure out that I was the worst bottleneck in the company. Early on, a lot of crucial decisions were routed through me, especially design and art decisions. As the company grew and I began to manage more and more people, I couldn't effectively balance what I had to do to run the company *and* to contribute to the games. I was holding on to far too much responsibility as well as micro-managing.

A few years ago, we instituted a department head structure that forced me to let go of trying to manage every person in the company. Then we introduced our project management team, which inherited the responsibility for creating and enforcing schedules. Both moves meant that others ended up doing a much more effective job at something I had been struggling to do for years.

At first I had a lot of trouble staying out of everyone's way. I drove a lot of department heads crazy by continuing to micromanage. But over the last couple of years, I've realized that everyone in the company is far, far happier and more productive when I just let people do their jobs without interference from me. I'm still involved in design and creative direction. And I still run the company. But I feel very comfortable delegating big decisions to many others here. Fixing this issue has certainly helped make Insomniac a better place.

Q: If I were looking to cash out on gaming, these days, where would I want to turn?

A: This industry moves very fast and is constantly changing. There's a pretty good chance that what's making money for developers and publishers now won't be raking in the dough five years from now. (Unless you're Blizzard, that is...)

Anyway, there's money everywhere in the business – handhelds, consoles, PC games, casual games, hardcore games, downloadable content, etc. But there's no way to identify the best company, genre or platform to make money on. And while it's important to find a place where one can be successful and make money, I think it's even more important to find a place where a) people are passionate about what they do and b) you're passionate about whatever it is the team is doing. When people have passion and drive, great things happen and success usually follows.

Q: But let's be honest – in this era of corporate giants, it's pretty hard to stand out...

A: True. So if you want to make yourself attractive to future employers, I'd recommend a few things:

1. Demonstrate Loyalty – Don't jump from company to company. Choose where you want to apply wisely and stick things out even when times are bad. Follow through on your commitments and finish the projects you start. Even when things suck, you'll always learn something. Personally, whenever I see a resume where someone hasn't stayed more than a few years in any one place, it's a big red flag for me. The resumes that are *most* attractive are those where the applicant has been at his or her previous companies for over 5 years and has shown advancement within those organizations.

2. Know Your Craft – We get far, far too many resumes from folks who desperately want to be in games, but who don't want to make the effort to gain an education in their desired field. You need to know your stuff cold if you want to get into the best companies. Plus, the videogame business has become an industry of specialists. Many companies no longer look for a "programmer" or an "artist." They look for engine programmers, effects artists, riggers, etc. To be successful in a more specialized world, it's important to demonstrate that you can handle these more niche roles – another good reason to seek out training and take it seriously.

3. Work On Great Games – This is a bit harder to control, especially if you want to demonstrate loyalty and are working in a place that doesn't produce amazing titles.

But having a bevy of AAA titles on one's resume speaks very, very loudly. Do whatever you can to join driven, passionate teams and you can accomplish this.

Q: Sage advice – but what about someone working in a sterile, mega-corporate environment?

A: I think the answer depends on your company culture. Here at Insomniac, those who stand out demonstrate the kind of traits that are commendable in any industry: Teamwork, creativity, problem-solving ability, efficiency, passion for the craft, reliability and drive. Yet, more importantly, they also demonstrate these traits *consistently*.

Q: Is there a formula for developing hit games?

A: Obviously, there's no formula or there would be a lot more hit titles. But I'd say the key ingredient is working with a talented and motivated team. The team is where everything starts. If you have great people, great things will happen.

Q: The most common misconception about those who succeed in the videogame industry?

A: That they did it alone. While I agree that our industry needs "rock stars" to elevate our profile with the general public, I think it's important to remember that today's most successful games are big, hairy beasts that require a team of dedicated zookeepers.

I believe that when people do well in the industry, it's because they've worked with others of like mind who contributed as much blood, sweat and tears as the ones who are given most of the credit. It's something we deal with at Insomniac all of the time. For example, I'm generally given much more credit than I deserve on our games simply because I run the company. It's up to me to make sure others receive their due in whatever way I can. If I don't, people get pissed off and rightfully so.

Q: Once you break the bank, what stumbling blocks should you watch for?

A: I'll tell you if I ever break the bank. But I imagine hubris would be the big one.

Q: Something every game industry mogul should remember?

A: Mogul, huh? I'll bet you most developers would cringe at hearing that term.

Anyway, a good industry mantra is “you’re only as good as your last game.” With more and more smart, creative and motivated people entering our industry each year, no one can become complacent and assume that the same old thing will continue to work for each game. The competition level has always been insane and if you falter, someone else will be there to take your place, whether we’re talking about companies, franchises or individuals.

But I think this competitive atmosphere is what actually keeps a lot of us in the industry. It’s stressful, fast-paced and sometimes infuriating – but it’s still a lot of fun.

DANIEL BERNSTEIN

Founder and CEO, Sandlot Games, Makers of *Cake Mania* and *Tradewinds*

Q: For someone who started out with little more than a dollar and a dream, how’d you manage to eventually wind up doing so well in the business of videogames?

A: By sticking to why it was I got into the business in the first place, and not being distracted by diversions like work-for-hire projects. Instead, as a company, we focused on our main goal – the creation of original IP in the casual gaming space.

In retrospect, we probably didn’t grow as fast as we could have, or enjoy the benefits of short-term cash, as a result. But it was the right decision to make from a long-term standpoint. We concentrated on being creative and focusing ourselves as

a game studio first, then letting other elements of the business like marketing and distribution evolve later on when needed to support that.

Work-for-hire projects can be profitable, but the real value is in growing a business' long-term revenue potential. *Cake Mania*, as an example, no longer stops where the online downloadable game ends. Even if you don't count sequels, there's the retail, mobile, handheld versions... Basically, when you control the IP, it opens up tremendous opportunities for you. But if you don't control it, you can't capitalize on these chances.

Q: Mind explaining a little further?

A: Sure. To clarify, we made the decision to create a business that's almost like a traditional media company that controls the rights to its IP and licenses out content. Others focus on building high-traffic websites or portals where people can socialize and shop. But I truly believe that consumers simply go where the best content is. The trick is that you have to differentiate in terms of the material you're offering, and really make it stand out, to create that kind of distribution. It's like with the premium cable channels: You tune into HBO to watch certain shows because you know you can't see them anywhere else.

Q: The next great platform aspiring execs should be focused on if they're really hoping to cash in off the medium would be...?

A: In all honesty, there's no one right platform to focus on except the ones that are making money. The funny part is that there are so many competing for people's attention now that are like bright and shiny objects that there's all this noise being created. People need to learn to be smart about how they do business, and learn to sort through the confusion.

I've gone through the dot com boom and bust. And I wind up laughing a lot at some of the decisions people make. A lot of picking the right platform to roll with just goes back to business fundamentals. You have to ask yourself: How does that

shiny object relate back to the consumer? I have to question the wisdom of developers who just jump on a platform because it's "the next big thing," like the iPhone. OK – now how are you going to make money off that?

There's something to be said for not being the first to market, but the best: You can learn a lot from people who got their asses handed to them by showing up unprepared for the party. That said, calculated risks are important – just don't forget to calculate properly before taking them.

Q: Speaking as a self-made man, got any handy strategies for rocketing up the corporate ranks you'd mind sharing with industry hopefuls?

A: Learn as much as you can. Coming out of school, I was a programmer and musician: I didn't know anything about business. But the president of [game maker] Monolith let me go out and license some Russian games (the *Rage of Mages* titles) I liked, and suddenly, I was working on the licensing side.

I remember asking my wife if I should do this – I was a musician, remember, and thought I should stick to the sound department. But she simply asked me: When else would you get an opportunity like this? And so I took it. So that's the best advice I can give. Do the same: When you see the opportunity, take it. You can't be afraid of failure either – it's inevitable that you'll fail, but so what? You'll learn from it. And, many times, on someone else's dime. I've done plenty of bad deals myself, but I've learned from them, and by the time I got to Sandlot, I had a clear vision for what the business should be.

Q: Finally, is there any particular game business stereotype that you feel might need airing out?

A: Yes – a misconception that haunts any game development organization: The fear and loathing that surrounds various departments like marketing, biz dev, sales, etc.

As a game developer myself, I started out fearing the marketing department.

(Often with good reason, or so I thought, such as the time a new female marketing manager removed the sword in [pioneering online game publisher] Kesmai's logo, because she felt it was "too phallic.") But if you want to effectively lead an organization, you have to understand the value of all pieces of the business puzzle, and how they fit together.

The best insight I can share to help dispel this stigma – just try putting yourself in these people's shoes, and understanding the challenges and issues they face on a daily basis.

RAY MUZYKA

CEO and Co-Founder, BioWare

Q: Credit for your string of hits ranging from *Jade Empire* to *Neverwinter Nights*, *Mass Effect* and *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* lies where?

A: BioWare's success is based entirely on the fact that we have a lot of very humble, hard-working and smart people at our company who are allowed to take creative risks. We put quality as our number one studio priority at BioWare, because we believe it leads to long-term success, and as a result we don't release a game until we've achieved and exceeded our high quality targets.

Q: How can someone make themselves a bankable commodity in the game biz?

A: In my opinion, you shouldn't be looking to make yourself a 'bankable commodity,' but rather think about what values you believe in and set high goals for yourself and your organization, then stick to those values and goals. For BioWare, the values we believe in are quality in our products, quality in our workplace and entrepreneurship – all in a context of humility and integrity. Our studio mission is to deliver powerful, emotionally-compelling experiences, and the best story-driven games in the world.

Q: Is there a way for someone working in the development or executive trenches to make themselves stand out?

A: There are a lot of ways to stand out, but in order to create enduring success as an executive you must be willing to commit yourself to what you are passionate about. And surround yourself with people who are passionate subject matter experts in their fields, always remembering that long-term successful consumer brands are not built overnight or with just one product. I've always felt fortunate to be part of an industry that I love and which is always changing, which has made it all interesting and fun, and helped make the long hours, hard work and sometimes hectic pace worth it.

Q: The most common misconception about those who succeed?

A: The most common misconception in business (and it seems to keep coming back once every generation) is the myth of the superhero. As an entrepreneur, never forget how important the people you work with are to your organization's long-term success. Rather than being a solo mission, entrepreneurial success really is founded on finding the best people to embark with you on your journey, and continually focusing on taking care of the people you surround yourself with.

Q: The one single rule for succeeding in the games business that should never be forgotten?

A: Stay humble. If you truly understand what it takes to make something successful, you find that it is never just one person or department who makes something successful. Rather, it is the culmination of teamwork from a variety of different people that drives the success of your organization and brand, long-term. Humility is one of the core values that my co-founder Greg [Zeschuk] and I try to instill in everyone around us.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

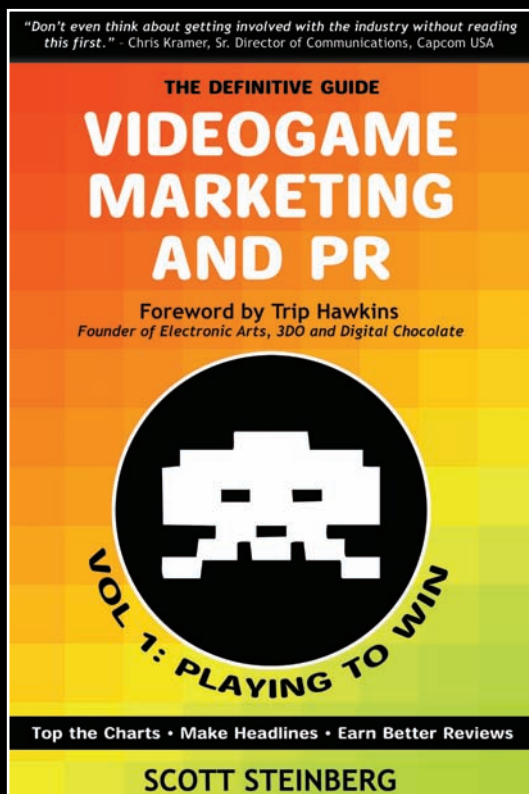
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Steinberg's other books include *Videogame Marketing and PR* (www.sellmorevideogames.com) and *The Videogame Style Guide* (www.gamestyleguide.com). The industry's most prolific author and radio/TV host, this former *Los Angeles Times* Game Design columnist has covered gaming/technology for 300+ media outlets from CNN to *The New York Times*, *Rolling Stone*, *USA Today* and *TV Guide*, including virtually all computer/videogame publications. He's also the founder of half a dozen companies including copywriting outfit Clandestine Media Group, PC game licensor/publisher Overload Entertainment, book publisher P3: Power Play Publishing and Games Press USA, the ultimate resource for game journalists.

Past ventures include turns as a VP of Product Acquisitions for French videogame publisher Microids, Director of Acquisitions for DreamCatcher Interactive/The Adventure Co. and game designer/PR director for Iridon Interactive. He's additionally a proven hitmaker and talent scout for several of the world's largest and most-renowned software houses, and a successful self-publisher of PC/console titles, e.g. *Heavyweight Thunder*, which was produced out of a back bedroom and sold over 75,000 units worldwide. As a decade-long career spanning every discipline from administration and development to finance, marketing and public relations illustrates, he lives and breathes interactive entertainment.

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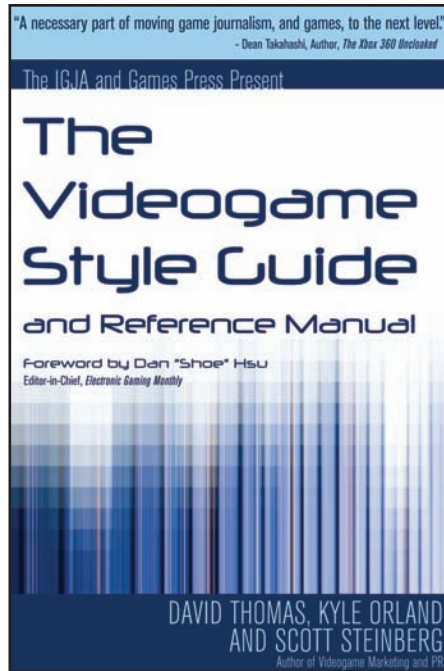
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