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Consultation Proposal For Remote Operation of Dev Studio

Written on March 11, 2009 by Eric M. Scharf of Scharf Creative Services

There are a number of areas, in game product development, in which I can collaborate with or lead the way into potential new frontiers for your company, from my remote office in this case, in the categories of corporate representation, studio management, and project oversight. I have divided these areas up into the following prioritized phases with which I have repeatedly found success in the past:

Phase 1 - Resource Procurement and Management

- Determine the type and quality of personnel required to meet your development goals and properly build your products.
- Generate the necessary employment listings, filter the responses, and arrange phone and in-person interviews with the appropriate candidates.
- Establish studio-wide product development protocols for both internal and external developers for communication, asset ownership, asset oversight, and source control check-ins.

Phase 2 - Concept Development

- Determine which of your game product concepts will gain the greatest attention from traditional game publishers.
- Determine which of your game product concepts will gain the greatest attention from alternative investors, such as non-industry-related angel investors and venture capitalists who, from time to time, may be less familiar with the finer details of game development, thus, potentially being more flexible towards less-refined concepts and more pliable in contract negotiations.
 - **Product Concepts, for our purposes, are specifically defined as a combination of high-level game design documents and supportive concept visuals.**
- Determine what concept elements may be missing or may need to be enhanced and offer an objective, successful course direction.
 - Please note that many game concepts which are proposed to both traditional and alternative investors involve mood music. All core audio decisions and audio requirements, for our purposes, are led by the Design department, with decision-making input on audio quality being rendered from the Art department.

Phase 3 - Development Software Selections

- **Core Technology:** Determine how you should approach making your choice on core game engine technology, whether building proprietary assets in-house or purchasing a

- license of a popular and effective commercial game engine technology, such as Torque, Unreal 3, id Tech 5, Gamebryo, or Hero Engine.
- Determine how you should address making necessary enhancements to your existing core game engine technology, for the following purposes:
 - Quick-and-easy access to simple numeric variables that control gameplay complexity, animation blending, animation speed, and number of objects on-screen which affect frame rate, are needed for anyone on the development team.
 - The need to be able to “make a build” of the latest version of the game (all the latest game code and art assets) from any viable workstation in use by the development team, rather than interrupting far more important tasks consuming the Programming department.
 - The need for custom tools, derived from the core game engine code base, such as editors and exporters, which, from time to time, cannot be built until adjustments have first been made to the core engine code.
 - **Production Tools:** Determine what design, creative, and programming software is required to best generate all of the assets for your game products, such as Google SketchUp Pro, 3D Studio MAX, Maya, Microsoft Visual Studio, Python, or various types of “middleware.”
 - **Middleware products can allow general or specific disciplines within your development teams to bypass high-priority time-consuming tasks, such as character-driven AI, networking, or multi-platform asset optimization, as well as avoid the expense of certain highly-specialized personnel required for those tasks. This fact does not preclude you from hiring some personnel who are familiar with the product components / interdisciplinary tasks being bypassed.**
 - Middleware products, like other development software, typically involve the purchase of a license, and, with product leveraging at an all time high, that license can tend to be expensive and only good for use on development of one of your products at a time, with the very real potential of being charged equally for multiple skus of your product-under-development.
 - A product being generated for the Sony Playstation 3, Microsoft Xbox 360, and Nintendo Wii would require a separate-and-unique middleware license for development on each of these hardware platforms.
 - Depending upon your investment willingness, your product goals, the state of your core technology (whether commercial or proprietary), and your hiring practices, your choice of middleware product is as important as any other decision that affects the production and success of your product.
 - **Source Control:** Determine what your best choice for game asset security application would be, such as Microsoft Visual SourceSafe, Ace Project, Alien Brain, Perforce, or SVN.
 - While the wildly popular and pricey Alien Brain is an extremely powerful source control and asset tracking tool, it has been designed exclusively for art assets.
 - **Tracking Tools:** Determine the appropriate task-and-bug tracking software is best for your studio, such as JIRA, Alienbrain, or Mogware.
 - **Vendor Negotiation:** Communicate directly with the necessary software vendors for specific price points based upon number of seat licenses, tech support requirements, and future upgrade benefits / costs.

Phase 4 - Concept Pitch

- Pitch your best concepts to the best available publishers and alternative investors, and I am willing to travel within the United States to meet with these entities and individuals.
- Assuming there would be pitch meetings I might be handling alone, I would, of course, keep you abreast of all communications from the beginning to the middle and at the end, using meeting breaks to discuss strategic options, or, if necessary, a change in strategy with you via web cam video conference or phone.

- Upon the completion of a publisher / investor meeting, I would send you digital versions of any resultant documentation within 24-48 hours of that meeting, or sooner, following up with a video conference or phone discussion.

Phase 5 – Concept Green Light

- Perform all necessary contract negotiations with the publisher / investor, once one or more of your product concepts have been green lit, including such details as up-front operating money, project budget, production cycle time frame, and milestone delivery dates, as well as commitments and associated dates for marketing, manufacturing, and distribution).
 - Green Light, for our purposes, is defined as a product concept having been approved for funding by a prospective publisher / investor.
- As with the Concept Pitch Phase, I would keep you abreast of all communications from the beginning to the middle and at the end, using meeting breaks to discuss strategic options, or, if necessary, a change in strategy with you via web cam video conference or phone.
 - **Upon successful completion of any and all investor / developer negotiations, I would pursue the following potential courses of action:**
 - I would travel to your offices to discuss the finalized documents and any potential outstanding issues before signing and sending hard copies to the publisher / investor.
 - I would arrange for an official sign-off meeting between the publisher / investor, company representatives, and myself, with sign-off occurring at your offices.
 - I would arrange for company representatives to rendezvous with me and the publisher / investor at their offices for sign-off.

Phase 6 - Pre-Production

- This phase is exclusive to taking hand-picked, finished assets from Design, Art, and Programming (such as GUI, characters, vehicles, interactive prop objects, enemy AI, gameplay mechanics, and multiplayer capabilities) and marrying them together in what is commonly referred to as a “Vertical Slice,” which represents an accurate and fully-functional cross-section of the game you and your publisher / investor have agreed to build.
 - **A Vertical Slice**, to be clear, is important to complete whether your project is going to be self-funded or publisher / investor-funded, as moving forward without this literal proof of concept can be unnecessarily damaging to the end results of your product.
 - While there have been many projects in the history of game development that have lacked the mature-enough technology necessary for generating a proper vertical slice during pre-production, it has always been an issue of proper planning, which guards against over-scoping project tasks, prevents resource limitations, and allows your vertical slice to achieve optimal success.
 - My game development experience suggests that no matter how large or small your game product concept may be, whether you are making an internal pitch or sharing with a potential investor, you need to make it your pre-production mission to deliver a fully-functioning Vertical Slice, tying up the vast majority of your development loose ends in the process.
 - The confidence, trust, and future funding placed in your company by any legitimate investor depend upon a solid vertical slice.
- This phase also involves one of the single most important pieces to the game development puzzle: **the production pipelines** for Design, Art, and Programming.

- I can generate solid production pipelines for each discipline, based upon proven interdisciplinary communication protocols and in consideration of the specific development software you will have chosen to support your studio and products.
- If you already have your core game development leaders hired, then, I can generate production pipelines with their specific needs in mind as well.

Phase 7 – Production QA

- This phase ensures that procedural standards for Design, Art, and Programming are being met and maintained, by everyone within the studio and for every product, from creation of the very first asset to the very last one on the last day of Alpha.
 - This phase is a natural extension of any production pipeline procedures, allowing for task tracking and leading into bug tracking for Post-Production QA.
 - The Production QA plan that I would generate would be implemented through either an on-site or off-site Technical QA Manager.

Phase 8 - Full-Production

- This phase is dedicated entirely to fulfilling the promise of what was displayed within the Vertical Slice.
- While **no further pre-production experiments are allowed past this point**, innocent discoveries may occur within gameplay mechanics, which is common, that require design changes to core game engine code, behavior scripts, or even art assets.
 - These discoveries will cause a shift in task priority or a temporary halt to all related tasks in general, which can jeopardize agree-upon project schedule.
- I can use my game production oversight expertise, in combination with my communication protocols, production pipelines, and Production QA to guard against such scenarios where, if a design alteration had to be made, there would be an absolute certainty of the need before committing to any alterations to the project schedule or related tasks.
- Please note that while you must protect the project schedule and adhere to the agreed-upon tasks so that you can deliver on your promises, gameplay discoveries must still be handled with care and reasonable consideration towards the potential greatness it may add to your product if you choose to pursue it.
 - Once your gameplay discovery has been thoroughly reviewed, within a reasonable time frame that does not jeopardize more than 1-2 business days maximum, while other unrelated tasks move forward, you may determine that:
 - The discovery is better served for use within your next project.
 - The discovery adds substantially to a product concept that has, over time, been exposed as less-refined as originally thought.
 - The discovery is a worthy addition, and you need to find a lesser feature to cut from the project schedule and task list in order to make it happen.

Phase 9 - Post-Production QA

- This phase involves industry standard quality assurance bug testing and product / hardware compliance, and my product development approach has this phase beginning once any project arrives at Alpha, with final Post-Production QA occurring through the end of Beta, resulting in a rock-solid Gold Master delivery.

Phase 10 - Product Visibility

- This phase involves product marketing efforts, whether you are self-publishing or being published by an investor, whether relying on eCommerce web sites, magazine spreads, TV spots, or radio ads. I can recommend, select, negotiate with, communicate your objectives to, and oversee production with eCommerce web site resources for any of the following scenarios:
 - If you are self-publishing, and you desire to add an eCommerce component to the existing the company web site.

- If you are self-publishing, and you desire to create a completely new eCommerce web site for each of your unique products.
- If you are being investor-published, and the publisher wishes your company to generate a unique eCommerce web site for the promised product.
- **If you are being investor-published, and the publisher wishes to advertise and sell the promised product through their existing eCommerce web site, through which all of their products are offered.**
 - I will have previously negotiated, during the Concept Green Light phase, shared decision-making between your company and the publisher / investor to help ensure that any marketing efforts result in your products receiving the most appropriate attention, most detailed visual treatment, and best overall product placement possible.

Each of these product development phases in which I specialize is necessary to the overall success of your game products, whether I am involved with one, a few, or all of them, whether I am local or remote, and with equal commitment being given from me and my client.

The success of this consultation proposal also hinges on the company's game development goals at both the studio and project level. The phase-based consultation structure I have outlined above is easily scalable for dealing with large and small teams, different genres, and personnel groupings made up of both internal and external resources.

While you consider my proposal, there are a set of questions to which I would appreciate confidential answers, which will allow me to identify the level of flexibility required for the company.

1. You explained previously that the company is self-funded: how many of your game products do you expect to self-fund versus publisher-fund?
2. How many products, regardless of genre or hardware platform, do you expect to develop and ship each year or per quarter?
3. What hardware platforms are you interested in developing games on (e.g. Microsoft Xbox 360, Sony Playstation 3, Nintendo Wii, iPhone, Nokia N-Gage, Microsoft Zune, PC, Apple Macintosh, or the LeapFrog Leapster)?
4. What general types of games are you interested in developing for a long-term product line (e.g. AAA, MMO, casual, mobile, social network, location-based)? Consider the following game development facts and overhead risks:
 - Casual and mobile games will allow for small internal teams of no more than 10-15 people, while AAA and MMO products tend to call for teams no smaller than 35 and as large as 100 or more.
 - Casual and mobile games, in turn, allow for more reasonable budgets and turn-around times, keeping your workforce fresh and capable of reuse without deterioration of quality.
 - AAA and MMO products can cost a minimum of several million dollars (U.S.), not including the cost of maintaining perpetual world server farms, community managers, and a regimen of part-time QA testers who operate on a 24/7 schedule.
 - AAA and MMO products can also potentially take 3-5 years to complete. Social networks, however, represent a combination of both casual / mobile games (limited workload with simpler assets to generate) and AAA / MMO games (server farms and 24/7 support staff).
 - Location-based entertainment is very closely associated with the dying arcade market, with respect to Dave & Busters and other similar establishments. If you are determined to get into LBE development, your single largest risk involves being invested in several prime "store front" locations, with dozens of custom-built

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“cockpits” or player enclosures, with game software that has been exclusively tailored to the cockpits (such as was the case with FASA, their Battletech and Red Planet products, their “pods,” and their store locations).

- You must have developed one or more game products that have a home on a base-line mass market hardware platform, like a PC, where it can sell and function on hundreds of thousands of systems located in hundreds of thousands of homes and offices. This approach provides a potential and / or great financial foundation (depending upon the success of your supportive products) that otherwise has not been available in the past with prior LBE efforts.
5. Your feedback to my proposal will determine which of the product development phases would require additional sub-contract support from one or more established industry colleagues with whom I have long-standing working relationships, as their expertise goes hand-in-hand with my own for any project I pursue. Are you willing to allow this branching as an extension of my consultation efforts, if necessary, as long as I ensure that my colleagues' strict adherence to an NDA? If so, the company and I would also need to come to an agreement on a cost structure that includes both me and my colleagues, in the event that my colleagues do become necessary.
 6. Do you have an internal game development team already established, and if so, how many developers are on that team, and what is the head count between disciplines?
 7. Do you already have an external set of development resources established, and if so, how many developers are on that team, and what is the head count between disciplines?
 8. Do you already have the core leadership positions for your game development team(s) established, such as Executive Producer, Producer, Design Director, Art Director, and Technical Director? If so, can you share short bios or personal URLs with me so that I might study their backgrounds? Are your leadership personnel internal, external, or both?
 9. You can generally share your game development team across most hardware platforms, specifically when generating stand-alone, low-level assets, as long as you have a reasonable number of internal or external developers who have specific and proven experience on specific hardware platforms: are you prepared to allow for the hiring of such specialists, for either long-term internal tasks or short-term external contracts? If you are on board with this approach, I have immediate access to the appropriate resources.
 10. Do you have an official, reliable FTP site from which I would be able to download / upload material, or, do you rely on services like YouSendIt?
 11. Does your division have a unique operating budget or does it come from an overall fluid company budget that canvases all of its divisions at once?
 12. What is the annual operating budget for the company?
 13. Does the company offer an employee benefits package? The absence of such a package can tend to have an adverse affect on acquiring the proper resources for your products, even in the current economic climate where many people will simply take what they can get.
 14. Is the company already an established licensee with any of the major software manufacturers with whom I would be negotiating licensed software purchases? If so, who within the company has been handling such negotiations, and would I be collaborating with that person on behalf of the company?
 15. One of my game development phases refers to resource gathering and oversight: does the company have an on-sight human resources person, or office manager, with whom I could

collaborate directly? If such a person does not exist, I would want to have a hand in establishing that position with a person who comes with a strong corporate background and has the experience and maturity to properly support free-spirited games industry employees.

16. Under what circumstances should I expect the company representative to join me on any publisher / developer visits?
17. If I am required to visit your offices, how often would such visits need to occur – once per quarter? Once per year? Twice per project – at the beginning and at the end? Or as needed by mutual agreement?
18. In our initial phone discussion, you mentioned company equity in exchange for my services: would payment be exclusively equity or would there also be a retainer or up front cash money payment? Any monetary payments to me would naturally need to be made via wire transfer.
19. If company equity is the only method by which you are currently willing to pay for my services, I would want the necessary documents drawn up and ready to sign on the same day as I would be asked to sign any consultation agreement: are you willing to pursue this course, and if not, how do you propose coming to an equity arrangement?
20. In the event that an all-equity, no-cash arrangement for my services in support of the company would be unfeasible at this time, for either party, how do you propose we achieve a more mutually-beneficial payment method?

I appreciate your time, attention, and consideration of my proposal, as well as your important responses to my questions. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

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