Management in Video Games

By Matt Worrell

Since the 1970s the video game industry has steadily increased to be the most profitable form of digital entertainment surpassing that of the movie industry and doubling the music industry in the U.S. (Sieberg, 2011)[i]. With the increase in profits has come an increase in size. In the early years of game making, the developers were all programmers that took on multiple roles of art, design, programming, and management (Spaulding, 2009)[ii]. Now in a studio it is common to see over a hundred employees working on a single title. This increase in size has led to a great need for well trained and experienced managers. Studios have risen and fallen on the merits of their leadership. Only recently have game companies realized that the industry calls for managers that are different from other forms of digital media and businesses of similar structure. A need for managers that cannot only produce games, but can manage game developers has come about.

The industry needs managers who understand the make-up of a good game and can manage very talented employees to get the most of their time and effort. What makes gaming different from other electronic media is that the length of time the managers will work on a single project. While there are small studios that will produce a mobile game in sixth months, others can spend up to fourteen years on a single title (Schiesel, 2011)[iii]. The average time a game spends in production is two to three years (Campbell, 2012)[iv] compared to the music industry's months they take to make an album or the under a year shooting of a movie. The AAA game industry trends towards only producing games that have sequel opportunity. (Campbell, 2012)[v] This means a single studio works on a series of games for many years. In order for an AAA game to be successful, it must sell around two million copies (Campbell, 2012)[vi]. Therefore, the manager must attain quality with the time and money allotted during the game's production.

Video games are challenging and risky to make, but are also part of a fast growing industry and can be very successful. The game industry needs leaders up to the challenge of seizing its opportunities. The makings of a good video game manager are not as apparent as other industries because the industry is so young. "One difference (to other industries) is everyone is young here. There isn't a lot of management training or experienced managers, so we are making it up as we go. We must also manage a generation of people who don't really like to be managed. The work is hard to manage, because we are always on the cutting edge. We never know what we're doing because we can't do what we did last time; we always have to make new stuff. It's really different than managing, say a factory, because there you just have to get the work done, but here it's more about getting good ideas" (Code, 2013)[vii]. Video game managers have to be different than other managers. There are similarities, but a game manager needs to do the following to be successful; establish a company structure with a hierarchy, open communication channels and develop a culture of quality, they must possess certain behaviors and traits, they must know their role as a manager, and they must know how to select the right people for each job, retain talented employees, and to rely on them.

The term company structure means many things. The company structure determines how its employees operate. The structure gives employees the knowledge of whom to report, the appropriateness and accountability of their message, and culture expected by the company. Therefore, the company structure is made of three parts; hierarchy, which is the chain of reporting, communication channels, which are how messages are sent and received, and company culture, which in gaming needs to gear towards quality.

Establishing a hierarchy is up to the manager, typically the producer, but each group is dependent on their lead to establish superiority at all levels. Employees must know to whom they

report, whom they receive approval, and whom they are responsible for. In the game industry, it is important to have a vertical organizational structure with no more than five employees reporting to a single person (Spaulding, 2009)[viii]. If too many subordinates are reporting to a single source then the manager has created a critical flaw in that he has created a bottleneck. Much like in a supply chain, game production has many different facets working on different elements of a game. If those facets are waiting for approval of a superior, it will slow production, which cannot happen in the deadline intensive industry. Large companies can avoid this by their managers setting up a hierarchy for employees and trusting their judgment. As you can see in the picture below all the art teams report to the art director, in those teams there is a lead that do reports for the team. The teams will consist of no more than five artists.
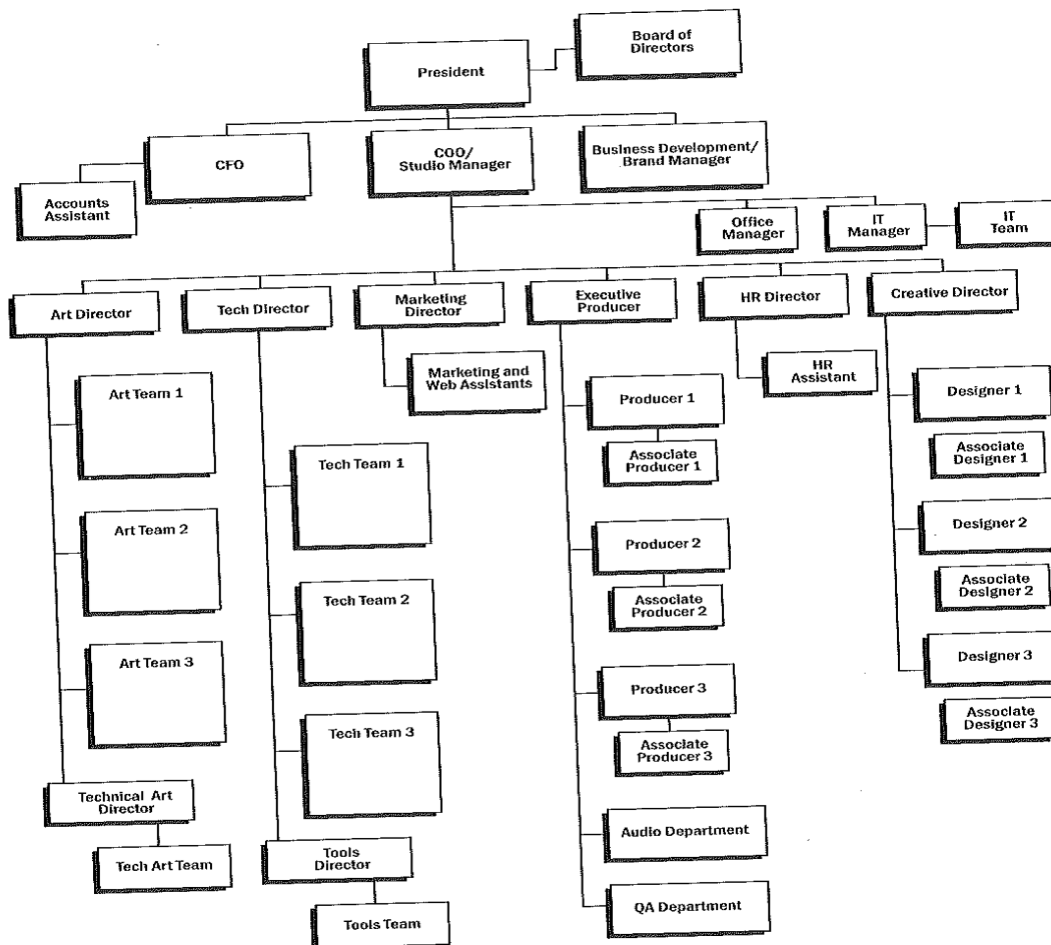
For this hierarchy to be effective, the manager must promote open communication with employees and know who to respond or direct questions given to him. For example, if a member of art team two approaches the art director asking how the game characters should look. The director will need to make it clear that this would be a question for the team two lead and not him. If the director gave his opinion and answer, the team member would then look to the director for approval in the future and this would destroy the already established communication channel. Alternately, if the director reviewed a team member's work and found it incorrect he would need to talk to the team lead and not the team member because the director would be undermining the lead's authority. Establishing clear channels of communication is key to a video game manager's authority and trust (Spaulding, 2009)[ix]. The organizational structure needs to symbolize how communication will happen, but a manager has the responsibility of ensuring that within the channels subordinates respect and carry out messages. "I think that when you look at the structure of communication. It's very good to have clear communication channels, but I also believe you need to have a common language. I don't mean literal language like French and English. What I mean is that there is many times where you can have a person sitting in the right place talking to a person on the phone in the right place and there are not talking to each other in a way that is perceptible in terms of understanding. Things are lost; it's a lot like playing broken telephone. My experience has taught me that structure is fifty percent, but personality and responsibility is the other fifty percent. You got to be able to trust the people on the other end of the line and the people who are sitting next to you are going to try when you fail to help you up. If you have just structure and you're career litigate across the communication line it's not going to work" (Hay, 2013)[x]. A manger must not only ensure the channels are set, but that they are

working. "If you have established clear communication channels and things are still not working it's a big sign something else is wrong" (Code, 2013)[xi].

A manager must also establish a culture that promotes quality (Spaulding, 2009)[xii]. Strict deadlines can influence employees to have a "get it done at all cost" mentality. While reaching deadlines are important managers must praise high quality and be positive about due dates. A company atmosphere that challenges workers to produce higher quality is critical for a manager to establish. In order to create this atmosphere, or culture, a manager must be the model of that behavior. A positive and passionate director will have complementary leads that produce such a team (Spaulding, 2009)[xiii] . However, managers that dread deadlines and have a "just get it done" attitude will get results that are poor, rushed, and employees not wanting to stay under their lead.

Another decision for a manager is the layout of the workspace. For this, managers must ask for feedback from their employees. Artists might like a dark space so they can see their computer screen more easily while programmers might want light so that they do not feel so locked away (Spaulding, 2009)[xiv]. The manager can also choose where to seat people. Seating people that are working on similar features together will establish a good flow of communication. This does not mean seating artist by artist or designer by designer, but environmental artists, next to level designers, next to graphical engineers working on the same section of a game. This will help build a strong companywide community so that the departments will not make the separation of specialties and push a "versus" mentality (Chandler, 2010)[xv]. Also, managers need to recognize who the positive workers are and spread them throughout the work space to keep everyone in good spirits. At Ubisoft desks are frequently moved around to accommodate iterative development.

Video game managers must possess certain behaviors and traits. While there are many that would help them at being more successful, there are a few all game mangers must possess. "You're (producers) going to be dealing with an army of artist the same day you're dealing with an army of engineers, the same day you're dealing with somebody who's an actor who wants to deliver some key performance, and at the same time you're talking with someone about audio all at the same time. There are armies of these people. You have to be nimble and realize that it's a marathon" (Hay, 2013)[xvi]. In order to properly organize these armies of people game managers need the behaviors and traits of good communication, faith in others, mentor, and caring about the needs of your workers.

The first behavior/trait of a video game a manager is being a good communicator. A successful communicator knows the person whom they are communicating with as an individual. A manager must attempt to understand his workers and relay messages based on their personality. For example, if a worker is new, shy, or uncertain of his work it would be wise to point out positive contributions they have performed before becoming critical of their work. Alternatively, if you are working with a senior worker it is best to skip the hand holding and be straight and precise in your critics. Experienced workers will respect your directness and appreciate your understanding of their prowess (Chandler, 2010)[xvii].

A good manager is also trusting of the people around him. While it is the responsibility of the manager to ensure the game is moving towards a previously imagined goal, he must trust that his specialists are knowledgeable and trust their artistic and technical judgment so long as it fits in the confines of the producible goal. Producing a game is a collective effort. The manager will make the critical decisions, but needs to recognize his opinion might not always be the best one. (Spaulding, 2012)[xviii] "Trustworthiness is important for the creative process because the manager

can't do everything. You can't check every little detail. You have to trust that everyone is doing the best job possible… Don't do everything, trust in others" (Simpson, 2013)[xix].

A gaming manager must also be a mentor. The gaming industry is highly competitive, and so, the employees will only be satisfied if they feel their time under your management is beneficial to their career path, in that they are learning the skills and experience they need to expand their portfolio (Spaulding, 2009)[xx]. "The manager's responsibility is to have a well balanced team, to mentor that team, make sure each of their careers are going in the direction they want, and to deliver the product on time and the quality level that was set" (Code, 2013). A lead can do this by asking his employees where they want to take their careers and how they think you can help them. If the worker feels you are interested in them, they will be interested in working for you. If the worker wants to expand their career in the same direction as you, share your knowledge onto them. Building strong managers under you only raises your prowess as a successful manager. "I think it is incredibly important that leads are always mentoring. If I get hit by a bus tomorrow who is going to take my place? How am I building the honeycomb in the hive when I'm gone? Good leadership is figuring out a way to mentor yourself out of a job. That's really easy to say and it's hard to do, but I firmly believe that currently a lot of what we do as leaders is firefighting. If you set up good systems and you have people that you trust and you hire and you're able manage the stuff that's coming in you should be able to do as little as possible and sometimes that ninety-six percent, sometimes that's as little as possible. At some point the Holy Grail is that you can move up a stage when everything beneath you is now set and can run on its own and can manage those fires themselves" (Hay, 2013)[xxi].

Finally, gaming managers need to be empathetic. The game industry is notorious for having "death marches" where a studio pushes overtime for weeks on end to reach a critical

deadline. Workers have families that suffer by the extra time forced on them. Therefore, it is up to the manager to keep the thoughts and feeling of his workers in mind when creating schedules. If there is a deadline, be sure to mention it well ahead of the crunch time so employees can prepare, and so, their home life is not so strained and they can hopeful avoid a harsh schedule. "There is a lot of pressure to make our time lines. We'll keep changing the requirements and pushing the tech limits and we'll end up burning out the team because we are expected to deliver on all fronts and the only variable we can change is the number of hours we work. It's not very effective and it's not going to be effective long term because as people age, they won't want to work like that. It's fair if you compensate people, but we don't always do that" (Code, 2013)[xxii]. When workers struggle during these times, good manages send thank you cards, bonuses, and gifts to show the studio cares and values not only them, but their families (Chandler, 2010)[xxiii]. "We're getting older and we need to approach how we produce games differently. The balancing of family and work… Planning is needed and we need to avoid crunch times. At some point, you need to crunch at the right moment and we're not well prepared. We over plan and think we can do more than we really can which leads to cuts and overtime and we lose money" (Poirier, 2013)[xxiv]. Stressed workers can lead to a longer production time and thus major money loss. Empathy towards workers can solve this. Thinking about their needs of the employees and acting on them can give a manager a happy, healthy, and productive workforce.

The manager must also understand his role. There are many different types of managers in the game industry such as executive producers, producers, directors, and team leads. The degree of management required for these positions vary, but the managerial roles of each are the same. Those roles are motivator, visionary, asset manager, peace maker, and decision maker.

Motivating goes beyond pep talks and a cheery mood. Often in game production, teams do not meet deadlines and fans must wait for the game longer than expected. As a result, the game's stakeholders question the integrity of the manager. It is the role of the manager to create a positive working environment where subordinates truly believe the task can be accomplished and more importantly that their manager is confident in them and their project. Having an open office and making sure that the workers understand goal deadlines, allow workers to grasp the scope of their role. Having consistent meetings where the team reports task builds a sense of timeliness that gets deadlines met (Spaulding, 2009)[xxv]. "Be prepared for chaos, but that's the fun of it. You sit down and do your homework and have your stuff, but after that, the plan changes, always. You make your plan and you expect that everything is going to be wild and not freak out when it does. Be prepared to make cuts. After that, give a little spark when people need a spark" (Plourde, 2013)[xxvi]

Another role for the manager is to be the visionary. This role is for the higher up managers, but something that should be in the back of the mind of all leads. The team creates the game's vision in pre-production with concept art and game demos. It is the director's responsibility to have his leads believing and understanding the vision of the project and to make sure resources requested by his leads are within the scope of the initial vision. A director needs to share a mission statement with the leads to ensure the goals they set are accomplished (Spaulding, 2009)[xxvii]. "It's important to focus, especially on small teams, on your original vision. And don't try to broaden it too much" (Simpson, 2013)[xxviii].

This leads us to another role the manager, which is asset management. It is critical that a manager understands the budget he is given and ensures each department has the resources they need and nothing more. It is common that whatever department the lead came from receives

most of the resources and attention, which can lead to departments fighting for power. To overcome this it is important that the manager has weekly meeting with the lower leads where they can discuss what each department needs and come to a unified understanding of how resources are being spent and moving towards the shared goal. "I kept having this weird reoccurring dream about a waterfall and having to deal with the water with a little bucket and then getting some people and putting other buckets underneath the waterfall and not being able to control the water, but being able to manage where to put it. What a manager needs to understand is that you're not going to be able to control the flow of the water or how wide the waterfall is you just know it's going to come down and if you don't do something you're going to drown as is everybody around you. To me the manager is the first person to pick up the bucket and then they figure out how to get everybody in a line and they figure out where to put that water and then candidly if they're good they figure out how to put it to use, but that doesn't mean that they're going to be able to fix the waterfall and it's going to be there long after they're gone" (Hay, 2013)[xxix].

Sometimes, even when managers distribute resources evenly to departments fights break out in the studio. It is up to the manager to find a mutual solution to these dilemmas and ensure they do not repeat. The manager must speak with both parties to find the issues and determine if there are truly differences in opinion or if personal vendettas are the cause. If it is the former, the manager will make the decision that agrees with the vision that had been determined earlier in development and explain to the parties the reasoning behind the decision. If it was the latter, then the manager needs to speak with the parties and find a solution by either resolving the personal issues through discussion, changing their roles, moving the parties to separate teams, or in extreme cases firing one or both parties (Spaulding, 2009)[xxx]. "Wrong hire (answer to the

question 'have you made any managerial mistakes?'). After that, it's very difficult to work with them. A good producer could say you're out of the project and boom you're a peon that's moved. Otherwise, it gets rotten. Having the wrong person, then having to work with them and there's always one or two that are not working" (Ploundre, 2013)[xxxi].

Decision making is the last role of a manager. As mentioned before, all the decisions should not be made by the manager as this will create a bottleneck, but it is up to the manager to ensure all game changes are feasible with the time and money allotted, all personnel changes are well thought-out and explained to the employees involved (Spaulding, 2009)[xxxii]. "It's shipping the game on time, on budget, and on quality. Quality should be more for the creative director. If the game is good and was given the means to achieve it as long as the game ships on time and budget the producer did his job. If the title is not fun it's not his (the producer) fault. If he puts people in power to make the game, but then acts against that then he is at fault. If you have a budget to do two out of three things and the producer cuts the wrong thing, then it is a little bit his fault. But I think a responsible director will ask, 'Okay, we can only do two out of three and once you're done let's do those.' I think that's the best choice, a fair trade because there isn't infinite money and time and a creative (director) should be aware of that. I have x amount to produce with x amount people, money, and time if I over scope or if you don't realize your dream, then it's your fault because you're a junior guy that had dreams, everybody has dreams. You're supposed to be there to galvanize and make it happen" (Plourde, 2013)[xxxiii].

Selecting the right people for command, retaining talented employees, and relying on employees is a must for game managers. Employees move up the hierarchy quickly in the game industry because the industry is so new and the positions are constantly being created, but not every worker is suitable for leadership. The industry is also incredibly competitive for quality

workers. With so few gaming education schools, the need for experienced talented employees is a constant struggle. Gearing the studio and leading with positivity is crucial for game managers to keep those employees.

In the gaming industry, a trend of seeking management positions in order to advance career tracks is common. However, this leads to wasted talent in management and managers lacking the necessary soft skills to be successful. Being able to identify strong managerial candidates is essential for gaming managers. The task of being manager takes away from the time spent developing the game, so selecting which worker to groom for management needs to be one of complexity and not the worker that is the most talented. After selecting a lead for a team other members might be upset, as they feel they were more deserving or need the position to advance their career. It is the responsibility of the manager to explain why they made the decision and show that individual how they can advance to the position they desire, but also explain that reaching that position is not necessary to advance their careers. If a team member is very talented, but was not right for lead, management should raise their salary to comparable, equal, or even greater to that of the lead. Without talented team members, leads would be worthless. Identifying an employee's hard and soft skills is very important. Some employees might be very social and get along with team members, but that does not mean they are right for leadership. Workers that have a good sense of time management, organization, and communication are the ones that would be best for leadership (Spaulding, 2009)[xxxiv]. "We're human, so we're subject to every conversation we have with ourselves in the mirror, in the shower, in the drive in, with our significant others, and all that other stuff. We're subject to the ups and downs of the chemical balances that we have and subject to the professional windfalls and the disappointments and it's like a roller coaster of emotion. Managers have to deal with that

roller coaster of emotion while being on their own roller coaster. So it's tricky… You just have to do your best, you got to try and be nice. Seriously, here's my answer (on how to retain talent), be nice. Be nice, that's it (laughs)" (Hay, 2013)[xxxv]. A manager must possess the soft skills necessary to handle the roller coasters. The stresses of the industry magnify the ups and downs of this roller coaster. Finding the right person to handle these situations is very challenging, and critical for the success of a manager.

The most important role of a game manager is acquiring and retaining talent. To acquire talented employees the studio must be as attractive as possible. This means letting the work schedule be flexible, have an environment that is fun and productive, and showing potential employees how they will grow at the company. "Retaining talent comes from people being invested in what they're doing. Why would they go elsewhere even if for 10,000 dollars more per year? Are you going to run the chance of taking a promotion when three months after they're miserable? If people are invested, feel like they can really contribute, and the atmosphere isn't toxic the people are not going to leave" (Plourde, 2013)[xxxvi]. In order to retain the talented employees, managers should sit down with them and ask what they want to do in their careers and come up with ways for the company to provide that. Offering benefits packages can also help give employees reason to stay with the company (Spaulding, 2009)[xxxvii]. Finding out what benefits they need for themselves or their families is the responsibility of the manager. The manager considering each individual shows that the company values its employees. He can do this by celebrating all employee birthdays of that month at meetings, celebrating production milestones, and giving the team time off after they have crunched for a deadline (Chandler, 2010)[xxxviii].

Leading a team is a very difficult task for first time managers to understand. This is due to the move from development to management. Leads will often see themselves as workhorse and overload themselves with the teams' task. This is the opposite of what they should do. The task of a lead is to manage their team which means assigning task, setting deadlines, and coordinating assets. When a team member moves into a lead position, their workload should decrease because they now have managerial responsibilities. The lead reports to a higher manager who has many leads reporting to him. Therefore, the lead should be more of a reviewer of his team's work and collaborate that work in order to deliver results. Given new responsibilities, leads should only take on development task that are not in the critical path to completion. Far too often first time leads take on task that are of major importance because they feel it is their responsibility to do the most they can, but in turn, their managerial responsibilities suffer causing the whole team to suffer. The lead must rely on his team and only be the director of the team members (Spaulding, 2009)[xxxix].

An example of a lead not relying on his team would be the 2012 Bioware game, *Mass Effect 3*. The bookend to the five year series had tremendous fan anticipation. A key selling point of the game was it wildly diverse story. The player's actions or inactions had long lasting effects on the game's story. Before the game's release, the script leaked revealing the surprise ending of the game. To keep the game's story fresh for players, Project Director Casey Hudson and Lead Writer Marc Walters rewrote the game's ending. It is rumored that the two wrote the game's new ending without the influence of the development team's other writers (Harmon, 2012)[xl]. This went against the studio's writing process up to that point, which was open discussion writing with all the game writers. Fans received the game very poorly, claiming it betrayed the themes of the game, the main theme being choice. Massive fan protest and boycotting took place to have

the ending changed. Bioware met these protest by releasing free extended content that extended the ending and explaining it further. While this did make some fans happy, long time mass effect players were still unhappy with the game's ending. Casey Hudson and Marc Walters took on too much development responsibility and did not believe in their teams' ability. They had assumed they were saving the situation by taking on the problem, but in doing so, they created and even greater problem. After the games release, fans and employees of Bioware were displeased with how the leads handled the change the ending and like most failures in gaming, fans blamed the manager, Project Director Casey Hudson.

The gaming industry has grown quickly and will likely grow a lot more. Talented managers meet this growth through their organization. Even now, the industry is seeing schools dedicated to studying the production process and training not only developers, but managers (Guildhall, 2013)[xli]. Bringing managers in from other industries does not work. "If you put a movie producer in the video game industry you would have a harder time adapting than an associate producer that has the skills and video game experience" (Poirier, 2013)[xlii]. These new managers will be successful if they establish a company structure with a hierarchy, open communication channels, and culture of quality, have certain behaviors and traits, know their role as a manager, and select the right people for each job, retain talented employees, and know how to rely on them. Some managers in the game industry are already doing this. Still with the growth there needs to be more training to create smarter leads. "We need to work more smart and less hard" (Code, 2013)[xliii]. As the industry grows, it will get older and not have the youth that was able to handle the hard work. It is the responsibility of managers to take on the challenge of working employees smarter instead of harder. With the growing need to face these challenges, the industry will rely on these new smarter talented managers.

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