

# The Fifth Annual Game Design Think Tank Project Horseshoe 2010



## Group Report: The Renaissance of Game Designers

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### Introduction

How does game design progress as a profession? Game designers should have the same level of empowerment and credit for creations that is customary within other industries/media (movies/music/painting/etc...) Yet, this is rarely the case We gathered both positive and negative insights on how design is practiced from dozens of projects spread across successful game careers spanning decades.

Our exploration yielded three major topics:

- **Design Hindrances:** Common patterns that hurt the game designers and prevent them from reaching their creative and professional potential.
- **Design Facilitators:** Common patterns that greatly facilitate the creation of great design and great designers.
- **Declaration of Game Designer Independence:** A summary of key practices and attitudes that yield great design.

### Design Hindrances

The following are activities, biases and other practices that impede both game design and designers.

- Customers are rarely educated about designers, a branded quality signal in the same fashion that occurs in movies (directors) and books (authors). Companies use marketing or PR people as the face of the game, dehumanizing the creative individuals behind the game.
- Designers are usually regarded as lower in the pecking order after marketing and engineering.
- Many non-designers hold a persistent belief that anyone can be a professional game designer with no training required.
- Non-designers treat design as a 'solved problem' instead of the singular essential factor that drives the success or failure of the product.
- Design is seen as a hard technical skill set that can be easily identified, trained and hired for. As a result designers are always in a position where their credentials are uncertain. This is amplified by the fact that they deal on a daily basis with engineers and artists technical skills are readily ratified.
- There is no credit for success or or appropriate blame for failure. When success does occur, there are a dozen political agents interested in taking credit, often leaving design unheralded.
- Designers, and their teams, are viewed as easily replaceable. There is no thought given to the team's culture or value given to person within the organization. They are often beaten down and told they are "lucky to have a job."

- Student designers are graduating at a faster pace than the industry can absorb from varying qualities of schools. Some of these schools are designer puppy mills – more worried about taking students tuition than teaching them the proper tools of game design.
- Designers get pigeon-holed into a certain role of design such as combat design or UI design.
- Designers are encouraged NOT to make games outside of companies. Non-compete clauses de-motivate the designer wanting to better themselves by working on their trade outside of work.
- Designers are treated as being only as good as their last product – products fail due to many factors, most not in designers control, yet they will be judged heavily on the last title they launched because this is the current standard. This issue is compounded by games that are canceled and the fact that most of the time a game designer does not choose what title they work on.
- Products have a lack of durability and staying power. Games are launched are usually only relevant for a small window of time. The result is that designers are rarely able to build up a past body of work that is seen as meaningful to a new project.
- There is a significant lack of diversity within the game designer field. Cultural gates lead to lack of perspective and narrowed vision.

## Design Facilitators

The following are conditions where designers thrive and the game design profession advances.

- Small teams are excellent places for designers. Teams of 7 (+/-2) are where communication and design thrive. These teams can be grown during production or can even be teams within a team. These foster the communication and autonomy needed to creative and directed.
- Be promiscuous with ideas. Encouraging sharing ideas and accepting ideas and improvements. The designer does not have to have all the ideas – they can act as a filter for ideas.
- Designers that work on more than one project. Having a side project grows the designer's skill, provides an outlet for designer's creative process and can even benefit the main project with the acquired knowledge.
- Designers owning their ideas, at least at some point. Treating designer's game pitches as property owned by the game designer, or at least the company having first right of refusal/statute of limitations provides the designer with an environment that fosters sharing.
- Designers as business owners. Many woodcrafters and painters not only create the product but also market and sell their craft.
- Designers speaking and understand the language of business. This puts the project in perspective and aligns both creative and production with the same end goal.
- Allowing creation within set amounts of time or time boxing. Giving design a period of time without meddling to accomplish a creative goal.
- Egos are checked at the door. Past titles and experience provide a reputation, not a right to walk on other people and designs.
- Designers who have technical literacy – they can interface easily with engineering, art and other disciplines.
- Building up teams and trust. Focusing on the source of the problem instead of how to fix it provides a repressive atmosphere. Build up teamwork and trust by allowing mistakes.
- The designer as the product champion. They should be the mouthpiece of the game both internally and externally.
- Financial stake in the product – money is not the motivator, ownership and respect are. Game designers just want to be treated fairly.
- When design is allowed to have the time and ability to flip the table over and explore a completely different route.
- When metrics are defined and the team can validate the design by failing faster.
- Environments that foster iteration. Tools/tech and processes should allow for quick iteration and there is not a perception of “thrown away work.”
- Design friendly tools and tech – the more a designer can implement, tune and tweak the more the game can benefit.

- When the benchmark is defined – not the features.
- Proper credit is given to the development team.

## Designers Unite

To guide game designers and the profession forward we created a *Declaration of Game Designer Independence*. This is not only for the designers who run their own companies or the creative directors who own the creative process but also for the designers in the trenches, aspiring to a leadership role. Let this drive our profession forward and keep us strong and united, ready to face and adapt to the ever changing market. This declaration defines a code by which design with thrives, becomes empowered and gets the credit of creations that is deserved.

## The Declaration of Game Designer Independence

1. **Without game design, there is nothing.** You can get rid of visuals, music, business or technology and we will still make great games.
2. **Designers must drive the vision of the game.** We are prime movers, not replaceable cogs.
3. **We dedicate ourselves to the lifelong mastery of design.** Dilettantes need not apply.
4. **We strive to be renaissance designers.** We fluently speak the languages of game development and business:
  1. **We speak the language of creative.** All art and music ultimately serves the game play.
  2. **We speak the language of production.** Game design determines the scope and need for the content that production shepherds.
  3. **We speak the language of engineering.** Technology is one tool that enable the experiences designers choose.
  4. **We speak the language of business.** Modern monetization, retention and distribution are directly driven by game systems.
5. **We will not be silenced.** We tirelessly promote our vision both internally and to the public.
6. **We fearlessly embrace new markets and trends.** We then reinvent them to be better.
7. **We demand the freedom to fail.** Design advances through experimentation.
8. **We have a choice:** Create with our own voices or sell our talents into servitude.

## Appendix: Game Design Board of Certification Proposal

With the creation of a code describing what it means to be a game designer, the related topic of a professional organization to help game designers achieve their goals also is in the air. After much discussion of various guild models, we decided the most appropriate group was one that existed to provide a guarantee of some kind that any designer possess certain skills and has been vetted by peers to be certified. To that end, we present these points (for more and discussion of these as well).

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### Proposal

1. Candidates take several part tests (not unlike those from High School) which ensure that the candidates have a minimum necessary vocabulary and skill set to be called a Game Designer. It would not be necessary to excel in all portions; system design, content design, dialog, scenes, story arcs, level design, GUI, and so on would comprise the suite of tests. These tests would be offered biannually to cover the demand.
2. Candidates must document some sort of apprenticeship, working under or with an already

accredited Designer.

3. Continued certification (every 4 years) would entail proof of mentoring of new designers.
4. Candidates must serve 1-2 years in a role as a tester, producer or intern. This can substitute for apprenticeship.
5. What the board gives back
  - a. Standards of expectations for skills of someone claiming the title Game Designer
  - b. Classes? Master classes? Talks?
  - c. Certification testing
  - d. Mentor training

## Guilds versus Certification

- The functional role of guilds: I've spent a fair amount of time studying the Guild model (an easy task in LA) and have generally found that they are designed to keep people out rather than actually show any degree of competence on an individual's part. This is not a our goal.
- The concept of a guild is too fraught with excess baggage regarding the perennial discussions of unionization of different parts of the game industry. This baggage is generally negative in nature and likely to meet resistance from developers and publishers alike. I'd like to avoid this particular pitfall by proposing that we design a Certification Board, by which designers' qualifications are tested, vetted and acknowledged. This is a fairly common professional practice, used by doctors, realtors, etc.

We realize that the arts tend toward a Guild model. A Certification Board implies a sense of business as well as craft and, we believe, will suit us better.