

The Seventh Annual Game Design Think Tank

Project Horseshoe 2012



Group Report: Design Feedback Loops for Successful Independent Productions

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Problem Statement

Some games are born of passion and vision, others of opportunity. We all can be, and when fortunate enough, are working on designing projects of passion, that resonate with us to our creative core. As commercial artists (we need to make a living at our craft), if a project of passion is not commercially viable, it may not be in our best interest to produce it. "If you build it, they will come" is unfortunately not a business model. Being a responsible game designer means being responsible to business needs as well.

What then are the methods for assuring a design resonates with its audience in the current business environment? This report is a study of how design plays a role after having been evaluated, prototyped, and accepted as a valid, fun game mechanic; though some ideas regarding pre-evaluation validation were presented.

The author presented a development model to a number of industry professionals with different backgrounds and specialties across the spectrum of interactive entertainment development and publishing. This paper is a presentation of the model and a summary of the comments from the contributors.

Production Model Diagram and Process Considerations

The author interviewed 8 Horseshoe participants, each of whom advocated a solution from their own perspective. Interviewees ranged from pure game and content designers, coders, entrepreneurs, and community managers, some of whom come from large corporate entities, all the way to one-man shops; many of the interviewees having had worked professionally in more than one role.

The format of the interview was to outline the problem premise and present a production model to use as a springboard for ideas. The ideas will be worked back into a more robust model reflecting consensus

opinion of best practices about when and how design is integrated into a development pipeline, from first concept to post-release content generation; also including many routes to the trash can along the way.

Refer to the diagram, Design in the Indy Business Cycle (attached).

1. **Concept, Design (including Monetization Models); Prototype.** Developers have no shortage of ideas to bring to market. Deciding on which model to advance is an art form in and of itself, and is the discussion of an earlier Project Horseshoe report (<http://www.projecthorseshoe.com/ph06/ph06r5.htm>). This process assumes a prototype has been created to any degree that allows evaluation.
2. **Is It Fun?** This gate is for the designer and immediate team themselves, who sense whether or not the spark originally identified has the potential as envisioned. The designer and team can make quick independent assessments as to whether or not further development is required.
3. **Calculate Cost per Content.** A game's development cost is the total of the non-recurring expenses (NRE) and recurring expenses (RE). The NRE includes the engine, preliminary design, and other aspects that occur only once, whereas the RE include the costs for unique content. Note that some games have high NRE and low RE, and others are the other way around. Scalable games will have an important RE to identify early on in the process.
4. **Reconcile Cost per Content to Monetization.** Having determined in step 1 what the monetization possibilities are, determine early on whether or not the generation of the content required to fulfill the game will yield positive cash results.
5. **Adaptive Design.** If the cost of content is too high, the designer has the opportunity to redefine the scope of the product. Perhaps building it in 2D instead of 3D; use of a different art direction; simplification of other mechanics; and so on. 5A. **Player, Audience, and Community Feedback.** Players are individuals to whom the game can be shown; Audience is its intended market; and Community refers to the bidirectional flow of information between the Audience and Developer. It is important to connect with the game's community even at this early stage.
6. **Release Vertical Slice.** As the developers can fill in the blanks of a game prototype, the community at large needs more depth and detail. The Vertical Slice is the chance for a larger group of people to evaluate the design to see if they experience it in the way the developers did in Step 2.
7. **Is It Fun?** Once again the team has the opportunity to evaluate whether or not the game is meeting its creative goals. This is the most important gate, as the next stage involves committing significant funds for production to release. The determination can be made whether or not the cost to correct any shortcomings are worth revisiting the design and creation of a new Vertical Slice.
8. **Production.** With positive feedback on a Vertical Slice, financial stakeholders should have the confidence that the final product's ROA will be achieved.
9. **Release.** The product is released to its full audience. In years past, this would end the product development cycle, and any feedback would be used to inform a second, perhaps multi-year product development cycle. But in the age of digital distribution, Release can mean a much less significant portion of the entire vision of the product.
10. Additional feedback determines whether or not the product as released requires additional shifts in production cost control, or ideal.
11. Whether or not the product is hitting its financial goals, and additional content can be developed and released as envisioned.

Given this model, the participants of the white paper added detail and consideration to each step.

1. Though this model bypasses the importance of the evaluation of ideas at this step, a number of important concessions need to be recognized here.

The fact that the game idea is a product of passion of the designer, team, and other stakeholders is a given.

One is the concept of “Idea, Promise, Offer, Specification, Product”. The Idea is the game concept itself. The Promise is a brief summary of what the Idea provides to the player, such as “The game that has the most kinds of destructive firepower ever.” The Offer is the price that the game will cost, in any monetization model, that answers whether or not, for the Offer, the players will purchase the Promise. The Specification is the game design, and includes the minimum specification for fulfilling the promise, and is an indication of the development cost. If the Idea, Promise, Offer, and Specification all align, development of the Product can continue.

Looking at monetization at this point is also crucial. Establish minimum and maximum figures, and determine whether or not the Specification can be fulfilled at the minimum monetization.

Make sure the designer recognizes that part of their job is to keep production costs down.

It can be important to involve the community at this point; if not presenting the concept, then at least ‘reading the tea leaves’

2. The initial designer review of the first prototype has a number of important considerations.

Involve industry connections and peers, and REALLY listen to what they have to say. Two ways this was expressed: “Get outside your head and listen to what you hear.” And, “Don’t fall in love with the idea of the idea.”

Also consider the opportunity cost at this point. Will committing resources to this product interfere with other ideas and opportunities? “Singles and doubles get you nowhere. Build only triples or home runs.”

Use a very deliberate model for making decisions, such as the Boyd OODA military model: “Observe, Orient, Decide, and Act”.

3. In steps 3, 4, and 5, be sure to include RE’s, NRE’s, and marketing costs. Community involvement also has associated costs.

Also, beware of the “content treadmill”. Some games require costly content for expansion, while others can get by on tweaks of rule sets and production of iconography.

4. See above.

5. See above. Also, valuable information can be gained by reaching out to the audience and community.

5A. Create fake ads for the game and measure response; create surveys and review results.

Players enjoy being connected to the development process from an early stage, and become tremendous advocates for your product once released. Capitalize your relationship with your community early on.

6. The size and scope of the vertical slice can vary tremendously, to smaller private offerings to full scale public releases.

6A. The information obtained at this time is the most important, as it is the determining factor as to whether or not to commit full financial resources to the production.

Look for two different types of analytics: qualitative and quantitative. Regarding the former, “It’s nice to hear what they are saying”, but regarding the latter, “It’s important to know what they are doing.”

Qualitative information is noisy and highly interpretable, so take it with a grain of salt.

7. The decision of whether or not to continue to iterate the design, move it into production, or abandon it all together is the most crucial step, and is why building up to it with all of the previous moves is so important.

The single most important metric at this point is retention: in day 1 and week 1.

Also be mindful of any production window considerations at this point, whether or not the game can be concluded based on other important events.

8. The production of the game is of course just as critical as the design and green light process; the purposes of this study, we leave it to others to discuss the most robust production methodologies.
9. The release of the game also involves many aspects beyond the scope of the game. And ultimately, beyond any considerations given to previous steps, only when a game is released will it be certain that the financial model is viable. But as discussed before, the release of the game is but one step in an iterative process whereby the games’ reception and monetization are evaluated, and the decision to continue to make design decisions at steps 10 and 11 now become the fun part of the development process.

