With the recent push on social games, the place of casual games has been put into question. Are casual games the hot thing anymore, or is social gaming the key to playability and profitability? Undoubtedly, we’re finding a space to merge the popularity of Massively Multiplayer Online games with the simplicity and ease of casual games through apps and sites such as Facebook. This month’s issue of the IGDA Perspectives Newsletter focuses on this dynamic shift but also on the tried and true practices of casual games development.

We would like to thank this month’s contributors, in order of appearance: Erin Robinson, Thomas H. Buscaglia, Jeff Spock, Tom Rassweiler, Jim Charne, Dave Rohrl, Liz Canacari, Jason Della Rocca, Nils Holger Henning, and Alla Khramtsova.

As always, the IGDA Perspectives Newsletter is made by IGDA members for IGDA members.

We’re also pleased to unveil the HTML, PDF, and TXT versions of the newsletter.

If you have any questions or comments, or even suggestions for themes, please reach us at newsletter@igda.org.

Beth Aileen Lameman
Editor-in-Chief
I recently had the joy of releasing my first commercial game, Puzzle Bots. It’s an old-school adventure game about robots who like to go on adventures when their human inventors aren’t looking. Here was my process:

1) Start designing game
2) Hold breath for two years
3) Profit

The game was funded by Dave Gilbert of Wadjet Eye Games, who suggested I make a higher-quality version of my freeware game Nanobots. I didn’t realize it at the time, but Puzzle Bots was an exercise in merging two different genres: casual and adventure. To keep all the fun of puzzle-solving but make the game accessible to everyone, I divided the game into 16 levels of increasing difficulty. After each level there’s a short cutscene that shows how your robots have unwittingly caused chaos throughout their robot factory. As a result the narrative and gameplay are inseparable, and there’s a lighthearted story that plays out over the course of the game.

Working with a team that was entirely remote posed a set of interesting challenges. Most of the people who worked on the game I hadn’t met in real life, which meant I got very good at explaining myself through emails and silly diagrams. Our overhead was incredibly cheap, but keeping tabs on half a dozen invisible strangers was a bit of a marathon.

There were also some pretty earth-shaking personal setbacks. Both my home and office were broken into in the same two month period (I lost all my video games and consoles, save for my precious laptop). And I’ll also attest to the feeling of isolation that can set in if you’re not vigilant about hanging out with other human beings.

There was also the significant problem of how to put in a good work day. I spent a few months working from home (bad idea), then a few months scouting out the coffee shops in my city (better idea), before finally renting office space with
some fellow self-employed tech geeks (totally ninja idea).

Now that we've shipped the game, I can safely say that shipping a game is awesome. I read every single review I could find, and they've been overwhelmingly positive. My favorite came from Gaming Daily UK: “Perhaps I've been playing too many FPSs recently, or it may be the general aura of seriousness surrounding so many PC titles, but it's so good to experience a game that's genuinely funny and unafraid to display a little joie de vivre.”

Today the game is on numerous casual games portals, including Oberon Media and Big Fish Games. In the two months since the game's release, we've recouped over half our budget from Dave's site alone. Puzzle Bots was chosen as an IndieCade showcase game at E3, where none other than LeVar Burton stopped by to check it out (When I told my mom she was like, “Wow! That man was on Reading Rainbow!”).

Since the game's release, several companies have approached me about design positions, which is just about the highest compliment I could get for my work. Looks like I'll get to keep designing games. And as the robots might say, “Beep yes.”
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Jason Gregory
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Chapter Spotlight: Seattle
Tom Buscaglia, Chapter Coordinator

The (re)launch of the Seattle Pro Chapter has been going full bore. We have assembled a crack steering committee and are moving forward with the chapter formalization process.

Our first event was, appropriately enough, on April 1 with a little tomfoolery from long time IGDA supporter Chris Taylor of Gas Powered Games. Chris was as entertaining and insightful as ever. He discussed his open development of Kings and Castles. GPG has opened up the development process with weekly video blogs about the making of their game—an interesting and entertaining approach to building buzz. (www.kingsandcastles.com)

If you have not seen these videos yet, check them ... they’re a real hoot!

Our next event was the IGDA Blow Out party held in conjunction with the LOGIN Conference in May. The event was open to IGDA Members, Women in Games International as well as all LOGIN Conference attendees. We had a nice sponsored event which was very well attended and a lot of fun!

The Chapter also participated in the IGDA Games for Health Game Jam. It was an opportunity for professionals and students to participate in a game design marathon, co-sponsored by First Lady Michelle Obama’s Apps for Healthy Kids initiative, the Robert Woods Johnson Foundation, the IGDA and the USDA.

The Art Institute of Seattle hosted the event along with other game jams that took place around the country during the same weekend.

We have more events in the planning stages including a party in conjunction with Casual Connect in July and more meetings with interesting topics.

If you are already an IGDA member and would like to be added to our mail list go here: http://eepurl.com/CNdX

Non members are also welcome to subscribe by going here: http://eepurl.com/CNgN

want to write for the igda newsletter?

NEXT MONTH’S THEME IS: game education Email ideas, articles & press releases to newsletter@igda.org
“Casual games” is a fairly ambiguous label. I have yet to see a definition of it that is a) clear b) concise and c) agreed upon. “Casual” can refer to platform, difficulty, genre, target demographic, and a host of other things. For the purpose of discussing game story and game writing, however, I choose a definition of casual game meaning: “games that are played in sessions of relatively short duration.”

Casual games often have additional limitations, such as the requirement that they adapt to the size of a handheld screen (personally I like to avoid endless paging through texts of dialog à la Advance Wars) or that they appeal to a very wide range of ages.

These different factors also mean that stories for casual games can vary enormously in length and complexity. I have had to work up a light story layer on a game targeted at little girls who like horses, as well create hours of story for the five campaigns of a tactical RPG—both on DS.

Putting all of these various constraints together, the challenges of writing for casual games can be summed up as:

- creating stories and characters that appeal across many different demographic sectors and that can survive across many gameplay sessions that are relatively short,
- cutting story elements into the smallest possible discrete units, and
- telling a story with minimal reliance on atmosphere and environment (audio effects, graphics, speech, etc.)

So how does one tell a story with these limitations? In my experience there are two things that a writer can rely upon to help:

1. Human beings are hardwired to consume story.
2. Mom and Dad start brainwashing us; reading us stories before we can even talk.
3. We’re used to consuming stories in formats as brief as TV commercials, jokes, and even newspaper comics (go ahead -- pick out a few Calvin and Hobbes and see how many of them adhere to a minimalist version of Freytag’s pyramid).
4. Human beings want story to the point where we invent it ourselves when it isn’t overt.
5. The structure of situation - inciting incident - rising tension - climax - resolution is so ingrained in us that all a writer need do is suggest it; the human brain fills in the blanks.
6. We even imagine what happens in the ‘gutter’ between panels of comic strips; nobody needs to tell us that.

“keep things brief & simple; the mind of the player will fill in the rest.”

In short a lot of story can be suggested, rather than explicitly told. This works well in the case of casual games, which are characterized by brief story moments and minimal storytelling tools (text, graphics and maybe some sound all fit into a small amount of memory).

I have a small bag of tricks that have been useful to me to help deliver story in the relatively confined format of a casual game:

1. Think of the story as if it were being told in a comic book--clear images, simple text. It’s amazing what you can convey with a decent 2D panel and two lines of dialog.
2. Don’t be afraid to rely on standard plots and plot structures. Three act, four act, or Hero’s Journey structures are great to lead a player by the nose precisely in the direction that she’s expecting to go: Play around a bit in a tutorial level (situation) which ends with a change in the player’s world (inciting incident); run for a while on increasingly difficult levels while the plot stakes get ratcheted up (rising tension); kill the final boss (climax).
3. Use archetypes and stereotypes for your characters. It’s a little embarrassing to write this as a writer who tries to do things seriously, but quite frankly it greatly simplifies the player’s understanding of who the people are and what is going on. Multi-faceted characters are a lot harder to show than, “Oh, another Indiana Jones clone.”
4. Make sure that the story is relevant to the gameplay. If you have a teddy bear running around collecting purple flowers, the story should not be about what you receive from the old hermit when you give him fifty flowers. The flowers should be the story, because if you stop for a week after collecting flower thirty-eight it’ll require some effort to remember why you’re doing it, where the freaking hermit is, and why you’re supposed to care about the piece of loot he gives you.
5. Players and plot twists are like spoiled kids and candy—they tend to scream and get red in the face if you don’t give them some. So put them in there but keep them simple: A friend betrays; an enemy turns into a good guy. You necessarily have a limited cast of characters to use, so there aren’t too many options.

There are certainly other tips and shortcuts from other writers cleverer than I am, but hopefully this provides a starting point and some basic ideas. The fundamental rule is to keep things brief and simple; the mind of the player will fill in the rest.

Jeff has been a full-time game writer for five years after spending far too much time in the IT industry. Casual credits include the Alexandra Liederman series (DS), Clash of Heroes (DS), the My Horse & Me series (DS, Wii, PS2, Xbox), and Heroes Kingdoms (Web).

Jeff currently lives in the south of France.

www.jeffspock.com

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Jeff Spock

Short Games, Long Stories

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Casual Games in Social Space

Tom Rassweiler

With the potential of garnering tens of millions of monthly active users in a short period of time, social games are in the spotlight and every game company is trying to figure out how to capitalize on this new market. However, every platform has its own benefits and challenges and understanding those will help with the transition.

As an established casual game developer with over 300 titles, Arkadium has been trying to adapt some existing successful casual content into the social space. A couple months ago we partnered with Mob Science to release one of our hit casual games Mahjongg Dimensions as a Facebook game. And as of mid March we surpassed the 1 million monthly active users mark and continue to grow.

While this has been a great success so far, recent articles have questioned the ability of casual games to be successful on Facebook. The idea of retrofitting a game to become social is not seen as the right path to follow; however, I have no doubt that casual games will have a vibrant future within social spaces.

Some recent data from PopCap implies that the demographics of social and casual gamers are, in fact, quite similar. Fifty-five percent are women. The average age of gamers is 43 and forty-five percent of players are over the age of 50. Sixty-five percent play one or more times a day. As a designer of casual games, I feel at home with this data. This seems like the casual game market of the last several years, mostly female, older than core gamers.

Social networks offer a huge pre-registered user base which is hard to build with a standalone casual games site. Arkadium has been supporting a game site called Great Day Games for several years now. It has many great community features including avatars, leaderboards, trophies, game rating, and sweepstakes, and from watching the leaderboards and forums, people really like these features. However, only a small fraction of the total user base is registered. The vast majority never chose to register and therefore can’t be tracked in our database. Facebook solves this because every user who allows the application auto-registers to the game with significantly more information than we would get normally.

Facebook also offers very easy sharing and viral mechanics. Instead of having to fill out each friend’s email address for a “challenge a friend” event, Facebook provides a one click solution. There are extremely easy ways to invite friends, challenge and taunt and boast achievements on your wall. Almost all games have a score at the end which provides a very simple hook for this.

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Dear AJ – Sorry to hear about your reorganization layoff. These days it seems like there is more and more of that going on.

One frequently overlooked issue in small start-ups is ownership of the resulting IP. I am talking about game IP, tech IP, documentation IP, and even the name of your new studio or planned-for company.

Copyright attaches to any original work of authorship from the moment it is first fixed in any tangible form. That means that game ideas discussed over beers are not automatically protected (there is a long string of Hollywood cases going to the question of when someone should be paid for ideas), but as soon as something is committed to writing, graphics, animation, or code, there is a copyright in that work owned by the author.

In a company, where there are employees, it is pretty well settled law that tangible work product developed on company time, using company equipment, that relates to a person’s job responsibilities, is the property of the company as a work-made-for-hire.

But where there is no company, only a group of people working together, perhaps in anticipation of organizing into a company if the work can be sold, or a development contract entered into, ownership becomes less certain.

Companies deal with a related issue every time a subcontractor or consultant is hired. In order for ownership of work product to be captured, it is necessary for the subcontractor or consultant to sign a contract that provides for the transfer in writing. Without such a document, the subcontractor or consultant would retain ownership of his or her work.

Frequently, in the United States and other countries that recognize the concept of "work-made-for-hire," that writing is in the form of a contract that states ownership flows to the company, and the company is considered the owner and author of the work for copyright purposes. Otherwise, ownership of the work can be transferred in writing by assignment. "Assignment" is a legal term for the act of transferring all rights in an item to another person or entity. Payment for the services constitutes sufficient "consideration" for the transfer.

Without such a writing, the creator of the work maintains his or her interest as copyright owner. At best, the hiring entity may get only a non-exclusive license to use the work in the game.

In a small group or team environment, there may not be a problem so long as everyone continues to agree on the direction of the project, and the collaborators continue to get along with one another. If one person has a falling out, or withdraws from the project with hard feelings, without some clearly defined rights to his or her contribution, it may be difficult to sign a dev deal. This is because game publishers are highly focused on acquiring (or at least clearing) clear, unencumbered, uncontested IP rights. There is too much at stake for rights to be put into question.

The time to discuss this issue is before work starts on the design, demo, or game. It may be too early to set up an LLC or corporation (with its related start-up and maintenance costs – including minimum taxes if the entity does business in California), but the participants can outline their respective rights and obligations in a collaboration agreement. This does require participants to consider and address issues that may be difficult – and not in keeping with the optimistic, heady spirit of the start-up.

It is best for a lawyer to handle this. A lawyer can lead the discussion and help the participants come to decisions. But the lawyer must be clear he or she is not representing any individual member(s) of the group, and should recommend that any (Continued on page 18)
**SIG Spotlight: Casual Games**

**Interview with Dave Rohrl**

**What is the focus of the Casual Games SIG?**
The Casual Games SIG is focused on educating the greater game development and investment communities around the casual games market. Historically the SIG has focused on internet-delivered casual games like browser-based games and PC downloadable. The SIG has recently begun to cover issues around social games and has occasionally explored casual games on mobile platforms.

**What are the SIG's current initiatives and activities?**
The SIG has recently reset its lineup of initiatives, shifting focus from a few large publications (including a quarterly newsletter and biannual white paper) to a more lightweight set of online information initiatives. Our first SIG podcast was recently recorded and should be online shortly. We're starting up a series of post-mortems for popular casual games that will be posted on the IGDA site. And we have an open mailing list that's been a great vehicle for discussion and sharing over the years. We're dying to get more great, community-sponsored informational and advocacy initiatives going. Please send your ideas to the mailing list!

**How does the SIG feel about the future of social games?**
The SIG itself doesn't have an official view on this question, but it is notable that many of our members now make their living partially or entirely from social games.

**What are your hopes for the SIG in the future?**
When the SIG was founded back in 2004 or so, many of the members were among the earliest developers of casual games. We were banding together to let the rest of the industry know that we were here—that casual games were worthwhile, even important, games and very much worth paying attention to. Now that the rest of the industry has figured out these lessons and casual games have become a multibillion dollar global market with a professional trade association, dedicated print publications, news and review sites, and stacks of high-priced research reports, I see the SIG transforming into the leading vector for free developer-to-developer sharing of learnings, best practices, and information around issues important to the industry. The SIG's unique advantage is that it is run by developers for developers; there are no outside business interests to placate.

Is there anything the greater IGDA chapter community should know about the Casual Games SIG? The Casual Games SIG has been expanding its focus to cover not only PC downloadable games, but also social games, free-to-play games, and mobile games for the casual audience. It has a rich history of interesting discussion around both business and creative issues. And it's open not only to casual game veterans but also those who just want to learn more.

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Registration is now open for the 4th annual IGDA Leadership Forum, which focuses on advancing the state of art in game production and management

* Affordable leadership training for you and your team
* Customizable for all levels of management
* Presented by a not-for-profit organization dedicated to professional development
* Network with like-minded professionals
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Interview with Liz Cancari

Elizabeth “Liz” Canacari, Founder and Project Goddess at Ideomen, has over 10 years experience in the development of online and entertainment applications from both the development and management sides of the table.

Ideomen is a recent start-up. How long have you been planning the launch and what is your background?
Planning the launch of Ideomen was more stumbling into it, rather than something that was planned to the detail. It was a business that was planned, but its launch came sooner with some small contracts that came in and from there it has been bringing in constant contract work with our focus on research and development of our internal projects. I guess you could say this is the official launch of the business though we’ve been around for more than a year.

My background started in the IT business back when public broadband was still a twinkle in everyone’s eye. I moved from basic IT to web development when it was at its peak during the Dot-Com era where I worked for a start-up that was delving into medical simulations using one of the first Mo-Cap systems and 3-D scanners. Those first Mo-Cap systems were so amazing and it was a leap in development of the simulations.

From that inspiration, I moved into learning programming, then Game Development at Full Sail University and then I moved onto working for other start-ups and small studios where I was seeing work outsourced for exorbitant prices that would come back shoddy. I knew talent and know how teams need to communicate to be successful whether they are in-house or virtual. That was the push for me to create Ideomen.

Where does Ideomen fit in casual games development?
In the grand scope of things, Ideomen is based in Casual Game development. We began by creating some unpublished flash games and our current business is porting casual games from web to mobile devices.

The mobile platform in and of itself lends to casual development, pocket-sized, on-the-go and market-spanning. Casual games are similar even in their web form. It’s a great forum, both mobile and web, for an independent developer to begin on and development times for small casual games make for quick turn-around.

What is your most successful project so far and what did you learn from it?
We are currently working on our first market-ready products for web and mobile. Up until recently we have only made prototypes for our own IPs; however, we have an upcoming networked game that should be great for a niche market and possibly even interest the overall casual market. When it’s released I would love to give you a post-mortem on it.

What were some of the challenges so far and what have been the highlights?
The biggest challenge has been getting out into the industry as a developer, an independent studio that will port to mobile platforms while bootstrapping the business. As with any starting company, getting people to notice your work and the business is one of the most difficult situations, especially when you are working off the money that you can pull together personally. The highlights have been getting great contacts through academic affiliations, IGDA and GDC. This has been the saving grace in not having a budget for marketing. That and it’s amazing to speak to industry peers that have been in the same position with their companies and to get advice or referrals.

How many people are on your staff and how many are game developers?
We currently have three people dedicated to current external contracts, six developers/testers/design folks currently working on internal projects so about 12 employees and contractors on staff.

What makes your studio different from any other?
Instead of taking a small piece of the development and churning it out with very little input or output regarding its design and development, we can take a project and assist in the design, develop and test it from concept to release. We focus on not only making the vision a reality, but want to make it a more successful product overall. We care about how well the game will be accepted in the market rather than just getting the code out the door as fast as possible.

What can you tell me about the projects you are working on?
Unfortunately, if I tell ya, I have to kill ya. And I wish that weren’t the truth, but we are under strict NDAs for our external contracts and our internal projects are not at the stage of development to announce or provide details on.

What’s the best part of your job?
In seeing a concept become a reality; starting from note on a napkin to a fully working project. There is nothing better than seeing that game come to life and become something that others enjoy playing.

What regular challenges do you face?
From the start, I knew I was going to have to be the sole provider for the start up funds for Ideomen. I was able to gather some funds from friends and family for hardware and when the first projects started coming in that helped to expand the business further. The first few projects helped and one of our challenges even from the beginning was to build Ideomen from the ground up without any outside interests taking a piece. It is a slow, difficult journey, but completely worth it.
What made you decide to get into the game industry?
Being an integral part of entertainment, giving people something to enjoy that makes them happy. Specifically for games it was because my father always got me new games, electronics, devices, etc. that gave me a deep interest in science and anything digital. I joined the IGDA in 2002 as a general programming student, before I was sure it was the industry I wanted to be in and fell in love with it after getting involved in some SIGs.

What do you see as the future of the game industry?
As we have more and more challenges in life, more natural disasters, etc. people will need more of an escape. Games are a more interactive entertainment that draws people further away from reality for a short time to give them a break. As I see it now, online, mobile and motion controlled games will become even bigger markets. The online and mobile games are great for the casual, one-off games that provide a very short break with play times at a few minutes instead of a few hours. And the increasing popularity of smart phones that emulate better versions of current handhelds makes them a viable game platform because so many gamers and non-gamers carry them.

Motion control has not only proven itself with the Wii being as popular as it is, but it is bringing sports and social physical activities into the home where everyone in the family can play. I have seen the shift in many families that have started to play together more which then gets them exercising which is such a hot button right now. It’s an amazing societal shift. I think if done right, Natal and Move will just make this even more popular, though I still love my PC and regular controllers.

If you were going to give some advice to someone who wanted to start their own studio, what would you say to them?
Persistence, patience and surrounding yourself with people that want to build the business instead of tear it down. Having an eye for talent and an eye for the skills you lack is an amazing talent and takes a hard self-evaluation, but will allow you to find and draw in those people that you actually need in your studio. If I wasn’t able to see where I needed help in my studio I wouldn’t have the talent I do and Ideomen wouldn’t be as successful as it is right now.

Why is it important to be part of the greater game development community and how does IGDA help you connect?
The most important thing to consistently learn from fellow members of the industry. This includes finding out about the newest shading technology or the current Quality of Life and legal issues. As an industry, games have been growing exponentially and keeping in touch or up on the topics within all sectors of the industry, from artists to programmers, is essential. This is where the IGDA helps me to connect and keep up to date through the SIGs, Forums and Chapter meetings. I haven’t found another association or group like it that provides the structure that covers the gamut of industry issues and topics.
Casually Canadian: Studios of the Great White North Invade Seattle

By Jason Della Rocca

A delegation of Canadians is heading to Seattle to attend Casual Connect (July 20-22), the premier conference for the exploding casual games sector. With the support of the Canadian government, a wide range of Canadian companies are gearing up for the big show. Some, like Sarah Thomson, the head of business development at premium smartphone game developer IUGO Mobile, will be there to serve as a speaker in the conference program, sharing their hard won insights. Others will be there to foster new business.

Jamie Richards, the director for 'small' games studio Alien Concepts was at Casual Connect last year, and notes the quality of interactions, specifically how he "was delighted at the amount of success [he] had in initiating distribution relationships with all the big players." DHX Interactive, with a focus on family friendly content coming from the animation and TV world is heading to Seattle with similar hopes of developing new partnerships and exposing their original IP to a larger audience.

Despite the advances in doing business virtually, industry veterans like Scott Simpson, CEO of casual/social/mobile studio Playbrains, reinforces the value of "advancing pitches through face-to-face meetings which are always better than phone calls and email pitches." Simpson was at E3 in Los Angeles last month in pitch mode, and sees the trip to Seattle as the ideal chance to do follow-ups.

Similarly, Yummy Interactive sees Casual Connect as one of its most productive activities of the year, leveraging the event to nurture long-standing publisher relationships and recruit new partners for its broadband games distribution and DRM services.

In addition to the business dealings, "it is very important to stay current with the latest market trends, successful companies and their games, and operational experiences and strategic tips shared by speakers during the conference sessions," implores Felix Maldifassi of core/casual studio Teravision Games, now on his third consecutive Casual Connect.

All together, the opportunity to learn from others and do business with partners from around the globe is a critical element of Canada's success. Despite having a growing domestic games business estimated in the CAD$2+ billion range, the majority of Canadian studios are net exporters, relying on foreign sales for a good chunk of revenues.

Ranked third in the world for game production, behind the USA and Japan, Canada is constantly pushing to maintain its reputation as a great place to make games. "There is an incredible wealth of development talent from coast to coast in Canada," notes Chris Dykstra of monetization specialist Playboost, further recognizing how "the AAA gaming hubs in Vancouver and Montreal provide a strong catalyst for gaming throughout the country."

Of course, Canada is known for supporting its game industry, both at the federal and provincial levels, via tax incentives, funding programs, training support, etc. Weighing in on the value of this support, Ryan Creighton, the president of kid/tween game specialist Untold Entertainment, boldly states that Canada "is a unique place to develop casual games, because our venture capital infrastructure is not as robust as our American neighbors, by and large, and our provincial and federal governments step in to fill the gap."

Hamed Abbasi, managing director of Vast Studios, reinforces the value of the one-two punch of talent and government support: "Toronto is our main base of operations as it offers an enormous pool of talent as well as great support from the government." Both are critical factors enabling Vast to create its AAA casual games.

HINTING at something a little more intangible, Pure Energy Games' CEO, Stuart Riffl e comments that "there’s a real enthusiasm in our development community." As a developer of advanced games for connected consoles, he needs that enthusiasm to push the envelope forward. This is a sentiment echoed by Nathan Vella, whose Capybara Games studio is known for creating stylish casual games: "The vibrant, supportive and obscenely talented community of independent developers provides both the inspiration and camaraderie that is so important to developing unique games."

Back to pragmatics, Olivier Jasmin of high-end mobile/casual specialist Fugitive Interactive recognizes the great commercial potential for casual game studios in Canada. In particular, as an opportunity that is "more accessible for smaller studios that do not have the resources and the budget to develop big AAA titles."

No doubt, music to the ears of J. Joly, who leads dimeRocker, a company providing a self-publishing solution that enables developers to deploy and monetize games across the web.

Joly sums it up best: "The barrier to entry to get innovative casual games to market and making money has never been better for Canadian developers."
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In less than a decade, browser games pioneer Bigpoint quickly amassed a global network of over 130 million players. We have deep expertise in building and publishing action-focused titles, such as the recently announced Battlestar Galactica Online and The Mummy Online. On the other side of the spectrum, social-oriented games have simply not been a priority for us. Historically, our most successful titles – such as Dark Orbit and Seafight, which drop players into fast-paced, massively multiplayer online battles that are completely free-to-play and accessible through any web browser – have been our primary revenue drivers. Bigpoint monetizes its games by offering players the opportunity to buy in-game upgrades. Our core demographic has always been overwhelmingly male, aged 14-40. With over 50 games published in 30+ languages, creating compelling content for the traditional, male-dominated gaming market has worked well and has allowed us to grow as a company.

However, with the explosion in popularity of social gaming, we knew we had to take a serious look at the market and product potentials. In January of this year, Bigpoint’s initial experiment with social gaming began. Almost immediately, our first in-house developed title – Farmerama – quickly demonstrated the benefit of adding social games to our portfolio. Without question, Farmerama became a breakout hit. Not only has the game attracted new users at record pace, it also unlocked an entirely new demographic for Bigpoint, the elusive female gamer, aged 25-45.

The success of Farmerama illustrated that we could diversify our portfolio without cannibalizing users from our other games, a business requirement for all new projects. Even more importantly, we found that social games can be successful outside of Facebook. From an investment perspective, Farmerama is also one of the least expensive games we’ve built. It continues to perform very well; growing its community of users, and monetizing better than our initial estimates predicted. The game’s fresh approach to the classic harvesting-style game has kept players engaged.

In addition to producing compelling, original content, the key to our success in the casual space is due in large part to Bigpoint’s extensive distribution network; a diversified system of media partners, game portals, and websites that deliver our games directly to consumers no matter where they are. This model runs counter to the industry norm of relying on a single distribution platform, like Facebook for instance, and allows us greater flexibility to reach emerging markets.

Farmerama’s success has been well received by the European market. In fact, it was recently named the best online game of the year by LARA. Based on this success, Bigpoint is now looking into further development with internationalization in mind.
On July 1st, INTENIUM hosted the first official meetup of players of the MMO Casual Game Alamandi. Staged in a cozy bar in the heart of Hamburg, the Alamandi team used the opportunity to get direct feedback from the users and give insights to upcoming features and games.

Alamandi is the first multiplayer online world custom designed for female players. It is a whole world to explore, combining well known casual game mechanics with online and social features such as chat, build-your-own-house, avatar customization, buddy lists, gifts and more. Players explore the island of Alamandi by travelling in a hot-air balloon; each town on the island is equipped with a different mini-game. The mini-games range from Casual Games favorites - such as Match-3 - to popular board games and last about 2-5 minutes per round. In Alamandi, users no longer have to play on their own but can compete with other players and challenge their friends. In regards to competing and challenging we should point out that users are very focussed on fairness. They love to play together, not against each other, and sometimes even help their opponents to win the next round if they won the first.

The world of Alamandi is growing continually and input by users is always welcome, after all they are the ones who bring the world of Alamandi to life.

Although Alamandi lost its Beta status only in April, it already has a strong fan base and players are not shy to voice their opinions. Giving feedback is very easy: From the beginning of the game, each player is friends with "the Alamandi angel" - writing a message to the angel means writing to the support team. The angel avatar makes players feel in good hands and like they have a guardian angel that cares about every single one of them.

It was especially astonishing to hear how many friendships and even romances have already emerged from the world of Alamandi. Users talked about visiting their new friends in other parts of Germany and people agreed on how much they are connected: It is not only the games in Alamandi that help to escape everyday life but also the growing community, where worries and problems are openly shared.

The meetup was a great success: The Alamandi team got lots of input for Alamandi and possible future games - and users found new friends and had a little insight into the world of game development. More user meetups will certainly follow in the future.

Screenshots from Alamandi
Finally, one of the most supportive elements of Facebook is the players’ trust in the platform itself. While not entirely true, there is an assumption made by players that games on Facebook are either developed by or vouched for by the social network. As a result, players are much more willing to provide their user information, feedback, and have less friction to paying for products (especially with the future introduction of Facebook Credits currency).

Of course, along with the huge advantages of transforming existing casual games for social platforms, there are always some challenges. Monetization is one of the most commonly discussed.

Social game players expect everything for free. However this is no different from web gamers in general. It is hard to convince players to directly pay for a casual web game no matter how much time and effort developers put in. One way explored to get around this is to link your successful game to a paid downloadable or iPhone version. This works because download and iPhone games are expected to have a cost associated with it. Bejeweled Blitz makes this work well, and we are having success with a Mahjongg Dimensions Deluxe download. On top of this, there is no reason to exclude micro transactions, but working meaningful ones into an existing casual game can be difficult.

Managing the community becomes another new challenge. The idea of a social game as a service means that players expect social games to be constantly evolving and growing to match the needs of the users. They expect to be responded to immediately when they ask questions on the fan page or request new features. This is very new water for any online casual game developer and even more different from the casual downloadable market. There is no easy solution to this problem except to organize your team as if you are developing a service instead of a product. Assume that the launch day is just day one of the real work. Refusing to engage with users will not succeed.

The future is bright for casual games on social platforms like Facebook. Adapting games correctly is important, but developers and designers shouldn’t be afraid of converting a successful casual game to a Facebook application. And while that doesn’t mean that all of the games will be huge successes, there are many intrinsic advantages to games on Facebook that should not be overlooked.

(Continued from Casual Games in Social Space on page 8)

person who feels it is helpful should have his or her own lawyer review the outcome of the discussion and any resulting documents.

If cost is an issue – even an informal agreement that covers rights to the individual contributions may save headaches down the line.

Such a document could, for example, permit the transfer of rights to any future entity in which a majority of the original participants are involved; or in which the leader of the team and two other members are involved (be creative here – use your own circumstances to put together the scenario). Departing members should be credited for their contributions, maybe given some sort of compensation if the project goes forward, and maybe some very small royalty participation based on the nature of their early stage contribution. The idea is to provide for transfer of all rights into a subsequently organized entity, lay out how the group would handle the contingency of leaving members, while holding onto the IP rights needed to move the project forward. A short form copyright assignment to an unnamed entity could be signed by each member as part of this process.

A second area where there should be agreement is if the team comes up with a name for their future company. A trademark has enormous value in the games business. “Bungie,” “Naughty Dog,” “Infinity Ward” and many others are known to game players everywhere. The collaboration agreement should also provide for control of any name that the team might adopt; control that would continue until an LLC or other entity was organized that would adopt the name.

All IP rights would likely be transferred into the entity when it is formed. This transfer could represent the value that each team member contributes for his or her member interest (in an LLC) or stock (in a corporation). And once the entity is formed, and the proper paperwork is executed, all those interests in the work product and company name/trademark should be safely controlled by the new entity.

It is highly recommended to consult with an experienced games industry or IP lawyer on these issues. They are easily handled early-on in the process. But if left unintended, and the team suffers from departing members and a falling out of relationships, these can become agonizingly difficult to resolve. In a worst case scenario, issue like these could tank a project and company.

Jim Charne practices law in Santa Monica, CA (www.charnedlaw.com) where he represents developers, designers, composers and other clients in the games industry. Jim has been a frequent speaker at GDC and Practicing Law Institute games industry programs, is active in IGDA from whom he received an “MVP” Award at GDC 2006, and is a member of the Advisory Board of G.A.N.G. Jim served as President of the Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences from 1998 to 2001.

Is there language in your contract that has you scratching your head? Found something confusing or worse? Send it to “Famous Last Words” for developer-oriented analysis.

Famous Last Words is intended for general educational and entertainment purposes and is not legal advice. Every situation and circumstance is unique. Anyone entering into a software-related contract should have an experienced lawyer who can provide counsel throughout the process.

(Continued from Famous Last Words: Ownership of IP in Casual Games Start-Ups on page 9)
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July 20-22
Casual Connect Seattle 2010
Casual Games Association Events are the premiere events for the casual games industry with over 3,000 professionals attending Casual Connect Events each year. seattle.casualconnect.org

July 20-22
Social Media and Social Technologies: Changing Personal and Civic Conversations
Stanford’s Media X project is launching its 2010-11 research theme, 21st Century Conversations, at the 2010 Wallenberg Summer Institute at Stanford University. http://mediax.stanford.edu/WSI/index.html

August 16-18
GDC Europe
The Game Developers Conference Europe is the premier pan-European developer event bringing together developers and business professionals across the continent and worldwide. It’s the international hub for wheeling and dealing in the game industry, featuring visionary keynotes, international speakers and media, and over 40 exhibitors and sponsors. www.gdceurope.com

August 18-21
2010 IEEE Conference on Computational Intelligence and Games
Games have proven to be an ideal domain for the study of computational intelligence as not only are they fun to play and interesting to observe, but they provide competitive and dynamic environments that model many real-world problems. Additionally, methods from computational intelligence promise to have a big impact on game development, assisting designers and developers and enabling new types of computer games. The 2010 IEEE Conference on Computational Intelligence and Games brings together leading researchers and practitioners from academia and industry to discuss recent advances and explore future directions in this quickly moving field. http://game.itu.dk/cig2010/

August 20
2010 2K BotPrize Contest
The aim of the contest is to see if a computer game playing bot can play like a human. In the contest, bots try to convince human players that they are also actually human players. Eleven international teams have entered for this year’s contest. www.botprize.org

September 3-5
PAX Prime
Since its inception 2004, PAX has grown to be the largest gaming festival in North America. PAX Prime is held annually on or before Labor Day weekend in Seattle. www.paxsite.com

September 15-17
Fun and Games Conference
Fun and Games 2010 is a single-track, 2-day conference where academics and practitioners can interact together in a playful event that marries the best of academic writing with the most innovative user experiences. The conference invites original contributions from designers, developers and researchers in computer games, experience design and ‘fun’. http://fng2010.org

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