

# Hustle and Flow

The Intangibles of Running a Game Company

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Much has been said about the tangible, concrete problems of starting and running a game development studio. In addition to the thorny questions of legal company structures and managing finances, there are equally important but less tangible issues that game development entrepreneurs must face. How do you keep your employees creatively engaged with their work? What kind of company culture results in successful games? These hard-to-define but essential-for-success intangibles often make the difference between a company that merely limps along and one that thrives and shines, both inside and out.

In this article, we will try to make these intangible issues as tangible as possible by referencing our own experience with Gamelab, a successful 7-year-old independent game development company. Two important but intangible principles that exemplify our approach to engaging our staff and fostering creativity are:

- Make Everyone an Author
- Design a Company Culture of Research and Play

These two key issues are intangible because each one involves all of a company's departments and functions, and also because each one touches the daily experience of everyone on staff. They are part of the internal processes which keep the company running on a daily basis. In our experience, the truly successful companies, the ones at which we all wish we were working, are the companies that get these intangibles right.

Before we dive in, one caveat: Do not be fooled by the simplicity of the advice we offer. As with many aspects of starting and running a business, these complex questions have many correct answers and our solutions may not be right for you. We are not advocating that every company should be managed the way we run Gamelab. But we hope there is something you can glean from our approach that can be useful for your own endeavors.

## **Make Everyone an Author**

If there is one overriding directive that infuses everything we do at Gamelab, it is the idea that everyone who works at the company is an author—that our staff should feel as if they are the ones contributing ideas, working through problems, and creating great games. It is crucial that all of your employees feel a sense of responsibility and authorship over what they do. If you can instill this key sensibility into your team, many of your other problems will begin to be solved as you find that your staff will solve them for you.

What exactly do we mean by a sense of authorship? Consider its opposite. If people do not have this feeling about their work, they will feel like a wage slave (even if they are well paid), clocking in at the start of each workday to tick off to-do boxes and complete tasks for someone else. It seems that most negative work situations stem from the fact that people feel like they are doing someone else's work. In such environments, it does not matter to employees how polished a game is or even whether it gets finished. Projects will tend to go over schedule and end up with lackluster results—or (worse yet) crash and burn.

On the other hand, when staff have a genuine feeling of authorship over what they do, then they are not merely workers anymore: They become collaborators. They take the extra time to diagnose obstacles within the overall development process. They will listen to critical feedback on their own work and offer thoughtful comments to others. They will care very much about the quality of the final product and about the company as a whole.

Productivity will increase if employees are creatively engaged—which requires more than mere financial incentives. Some companies use reward systems like bonuses or stock options in order to create a sense

of ownership (or even genuine legal ownership) among its employees. These approaches can work to a certain extent, but purely financial incentives can only go so far. Money without any genuine authorship becomes an empty gesture, a lure to keep talent from running off to another company. Make no mistake: financial incentives are important, but they are not enough. From our experience, the intangible benefits of an authorship-focused company generally outweigh any possible tangible financial gains. This may not be true in every industry, but it certainly is true of a creative field like game development.

So how do you impart authorship to your staff? The secret is that authority and responsibility cannot be faked. You cannot pretend to offer authorship, while still actually structuring your company as if most of the staff are minions that can't be trusted without extensive oversight and approvals. In order for them to feel authority and responsibility, they actually have to be given real authority and responsibility over what they do.

What does this mean in practice? At Gamelab, we do not have a single individual that plays the role of "creative director" or "vision leader" on any given project. If you are assigned to do character design on a game, then you are the one doing the character design. General decisions are made through team consensus, but there is no manager reviewing each of your designs, telling you that they do or do not measure up. You are given ultimate authority on the tasks assigned to you to solve.

In the real world, it may be tricky to pull this off. In an environment without trust and communication among project team members. The danger is that staff become territorial and hoard their own authority while scoffing at others' attempts to tell them what to do. On the other hand, if you can keep trust and communication healthy, then the opposite happens: Team members become desperate for feedback from everyone else, and there is idea exchange and feedback across all members and disciplines.

Giving authority to your staff does not mean that you cannot have internal hierarchies and structures. At Gamelab, the art director still supervises and directs the visual designers on a project, conceptually directing each individual designer through research and initial design explorations. But every visual designer is ultimately given the autonomy to solve the problems that he or she is assigned. And they are in large part responsible for making sure that their individual work is fitting into the team's larger evolving vision for the game as a whole.

One result of this approach is that staff are always challenged to solve tasks in new ways. The experience of constant challenge is a key part of feeling like an author. If your team starts solving design and development problems in the same ways over and over, the spark will go out of their work. They will feel like zombies on an assembly line showing up each day to do someone else's drudgery. People feel like authors when they are given the creative freedom to solve problems in new ways—whether they are full-time employees or project-based freelancers. And a company full of motivated innovators will produce much better work than a company full of zombie assistants.

Creating challenges for your staff takes some strategizing—and a willingness to explore new creative territory. For example, at Gamelab our goal is to always try and come up with new kinds of audio and visual aesthetics, new sorts of game-play, and new directions for content on every project. For example, every downloadable game has certain interface elements in common (like an options screen, a main menu, etc.). On any given title, we try and express the game's narrative on these screens, finding different approaches each time. While at many game companies these common parts of games are all implemented in the same cookie-cutter style, our visual staff likes the challenge of having to actually design the interface themselves. That is why we hired them, right? It can be quite challenging to do this on every project, but it definitely motivates our talent. And it gives our games variety as well.

Relative to a more traditional, authoritarian approach, giving your staff a genuine sense of authorship by giving them real responsibility can feel scary. You and your senior staff probably know better how to solve many of the problems that come up and, in the short term, it is easier simply to tell people what to do. But if you treat the rank-and-file as mere order-takers, everyone will end up unhappy. Your supervisors will be overworked as they micromanage everything that happens under them, without the time to address their

own tasks. The rest of your company will lose interest in the big picture as employees simply do what they think their manager wishes without considering the game or the company as a whole.

Democratizing authorship has to come from the top down. Are you setting a good example for your staff? Do your processes instill the trust and communication that team authorship requires? Are the people at your company given the freedom to solve tasks in the ways they see fit? To make everyone an author requires constant vigilance against the natural tendency to control everything that happens at your company. But making sure it happens is absolutely essential to success.

### **Design a Company Culture of Research and Play**

For us, company culture very simply means the daily experience of the staff, both individually and collectively. The lived culture of a company should embody the values and philosophy of the company as a whole. Company culture is a prime example of a business intangible: it is difficult to perceive and to define, but it permeates everything at a game company and is essential to the success of the organization.

The culture of a company is both a cause and effect of everything the company does. If your group's culture is on the right track, then good work and healthy processes will thrive at your business and the culture will both reflect and positively impact the continued success of what you do. If there are problems with your company culture, these troubles are very likely symptoms of deeper problems, and the unhealthy culture can easily compound into yet more problems.

Our main point about company culture is that you must be conscious and intentional about it: You need to actively design the culture of your organization. Too often, the culture of a game company simply arises by default, as the business founders are too busy keeping things rolling financially to worry about the daily experiences of everyone on staff. But apathy or inattention will likely result in a lackluster organization. It takes experimentation and collaboration with your staff to figure out the kind of company culture that is appropriate for you and how to best achieve it.

One rule is to create the company you would want to work for. Small efforts go a long way. At Gamelab, we have the best benefits packages for our staff that we can afford. We emphasize flexible hours to accommodate people's differing work patterns and needs. We consult with our staff on the computers, furniture, software, and supplies they need. And you always get a cupcake with a candle on your birthday. These simple gestures can make the difference between a company that feels like a place where you would love to work and one that is just another paycheck generator.

Beyond these straightforward policies, we have a more particular focus for Gamelab's company culture: research. Our goal is to have a company experience in which research is integrated into the daily activities of the people at our company. We take "research"—in the broadest sense of the word—to mean finding connections between the company and the world outside. Research can be project-specific or quite general. It can include teaching, reading, playing, discussing or traveling. And it should be fun.

Why is research important for a game company? Because game companies create culture—pop culture. Too often, game developers come from the insular and somewhat geeky world of hardcore gaming. But to create innovative games, the people making your games need to be inspired by art, entertainment, design, and other forms of ideas and culture outside of the narrow confines of the gamer lifestyle. By encouraging research, you increase the solution space from which your staff can draw as they tackle problems in their everyday work.

The culture of research we try to inculcate at Gamelab stems from very specific company activities and policies. A few are highlighted below:

#### **Research Library**

Every month, each Gamelab staff member can spend \$50 on purchasing something for the Gamelab library. Purchases include books, videos, music, board games, magazine subscriptions,

posters, toys, and, of course, videogames. As the library grows, it comes to reflect the interests of the staff, even as it becomes a richer and richer resource for people to browse as they take a five-minute break from work.

### **Getting Academic**

We actively encourage our staff to teach, lecture and publish in game-related areas. Gamelabbers teach at New York University and Parsons School of Design. They speak at conferences from the Game Developers Conference and E3 to DiGRA and SIGGRAPH. And they publish articles, books, and essays. These activities serve a number of purposes: Relationships with the universities help us find new talent; speaking and publishing helps create PR buzz for the company; and the research required to put a class together or write an article certainly enriches the knowledge base at Gamelab.

### **Do More Together**

For a game company, almost any field trip or activity is genuinely relevant research. The Gamelab soccer team learns about real-world game-play and social interaction every summer. Visual designers have put together sculpt-with-clay evenings and comic book projects. Staff members organize anime movie nights and paper game events for Gamelabbers and their friends. All of these events serve as bonding experiences for our team, in addition to their research benefits. We empower the staff to organize activities, funding and facilitating them whenever we can.

### **Be Unique**

Beyond these more typical activities, we try to invent research opportunities that dovetail with the company culture. Every year at the Game Developers Conference, Gamelab creates a social game for thousands of attendees that serves as game design experimentation and guerrilla PR. A staff interest in community youth led to the Gamelab TEEN program, an ongoing mentorship program for high school students to learn about game design. These activities have concrete research benefits for the Gamelab staffers that are involved with them, even as they create great hooks for media coverage of our company.

### **Outside the Bounds**

Committing to a culture of research means supporting your staff's endeavors outside your company. Gamelabbers have organized and taken part in circus theater productions, street game festivals, robot art exhibitions, original graphic novels, cosplay extravaganzas—you name it. We make every attempt to support and celebrate this work, even mentioning it in company press releases and bios. Your employees' lives should not be circumscribed by their work. The more interesting culture they consume and create outside of your company, the better games they will make for you.

### **Play Games!**

In addition to all of these extra-curricular research activities, the key research that your staff undertakes is actually playing games. Everyone at your company should play games: old games and new games, games on digital platforms and games made out of paper, games that are your direct competition and games that have nothing to do with your company's business. Work tasks always take precedence over this kind of play research but at Gamelab, employees generally end up spending several hours a week just playing. This kind of activity serves many purposes for us, including competitive market analysis, technological research, and general design inspiration.

Any office is a nexus for the exchange of ideas, and at Gamelab we encourage staff to share the insights from their informal play research. A section of our intranet is reserved for posting links and thoughts about new games and game sites—and for posting pointers to strange internet culture. Furthermore, the open physical layout of our office lets us see what is happening on each others' screens, reducing the potential stigma of "playing at work" and encouraging discussions about games even as they are being played. The two of us make sure to join in these discussions

and play games as well, so that everyone can see that there is nothing wrong playing and working at the same time.

So design your company culture. Our exact policies and activities might not be right for you. But however you decide to create your company culture, do so intentionally. You design experiences for game players. Design the experience of your company employees too.

### **The Final Word: Design For Play**

As intangible as these intangibles are, they do not arise out of nothing. The attitudes and approaches we describe here are the result of very concrete policies and procedures. Less important than designing one specific approach over another specific approach is being sure to design these intangibles in the first place.

Any game is defined by its rules: those mathematical guidelines that tell you when to roll the dice and move your piece, when to draw a card and place a bet, how to level up your character and go fight more monsters. Rules taken by themselves can be dry and formal. But for a player, rules ultimately do not matter. What really matters is the play that the rules make possible. As much as rules are logical and rigid, the experience of play at its best is spontaneous, creative, and unpredictable. Games are made up out of rules. But they exist to create play.

Defining and designing how your company operates is a lot like creating a game. The policies you define, the tools you purchase, the way you lay out the workspace—these are the rules. The experience of your staff, and the products that emerge out of the functioning of your company are the play that come out of the rules you establish. The rules are important, but less so than what emerges out of them.

In any business field, there are a handful of leaders and dozens or hundreds—or even thousands—of imitators. And in a creative industry, being a leader means constant invention. The only way to assume that leadership and produce that sort of invention is to create an environment in which your company can start doing things and making things you could never have predicted in advance. We all know that the best games result in play patterns, game strategies, and fan cultures that none of us game developers could ever have predicted beforehand. And similarly, the best game companies also surprise us with the games that come out of them, games that shock us with never-before-seen game-play and graphics or incredibly elegant improvements on existing genres of play.

But great games like these can only emerge from a process of rules that was so well designed it surprised its creators. So design your company's intangibles. But design them for play, for results that you cannot yourself imagine. Otherwise, you have taken the play out of work. And playing at work is why we all got started in the game business in the first place, right?

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## **Possible Call-outs**

A great game is not the result of a great idea. A great game is the result of a great process.