Managing Interactive Media

Industry Interviews

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Asad is Head of QA in Kuju Entertainment. This is a leading video games company with five studios in the UK. It produces for all the main formats including Playstation and xbox. It has survived the tough competition in the market to remain one of the few UK success stories. Asad started in the industry as a temporary tester nine years ago and has progressed through the various QA roles, into his present position at the company.

What is the top insight you have now about working in interactive projects that you've got from your experience and would like to pass on to the next generation of Interactive Media Project Workers?

The most important for me has been how difficult it is to get and keep experienced people. Recruitment is hard as there's a skills shortage and fierce competition. So to get into this part of the industry, get some experience in the sector. This may mean doing work experience or summer work – even unpaid – but any specific games sector experience stands out in CV's when you're recruiting.

What do you see as the wider context of interactive electronic media and the way things are heading for your sector's area – e.g. rise of iTV, citizen journalism, podcast etc.?

In the games sector, this would have to be seen in terms of the convergence between the film and games models of production. This has been happening now for maybe four to five years and will continue as video becomes used more as mainstream in interactivity. The film sector used a lot of out-sourcing for production and we're following that by having a core team of around twenty to twenty-five people but then up to a hundred people actually working on a project. You're seeing more TV snatches around such as in YouTube and more opportunities will come for people from a film or TV background to move into the sector.

3. Getting and retaining business can be time consuming and sometimes costly. Do you have a view on any or all of A) pitch/tender process, B) Preferred supplier lists, C) ongoing/return business D) attracting business through the door, E) Internal clients

These need to be put in the context of the games sector as it is a bit different.

A) Pitches are a mixture of creativity & business planning – thinking out of the box helps – so you need to have your best minds on the task.

B) There are preferred supplier lists for the games sector and we're always trying to move up the chain to work with better and better publishers/suppliers.

C) Return business is always very important. You're only as good as your last game and return business is linked to that.

D) Attracting new business through the door is linked to A,B and C. The industry is very dynamic so we have to be prepared to try out extras around games like mobile and the Sky box. The ability and willingness to diversify is important.

E) Sometimes internal clients can make the job harder in fact. They may have become entrenched in their approaches to the games sector – a bit closed minded perhaps. They need to keep evolving in the fast changing sector. You don't want to work with dinosaurs.

Getting projects off the ground is often problematic for a variety of reasons. Do you have any insights into defining and planning the stages of a project?

You have to plan the complete project including pre-production into your offer even if you don't win the project. 70% of the methodology is the same for the next game you'll do – lead times, hiring, training, licences, ordering equipment and so on. These don't change over projects.

If there's a problem getting a project off the ground then the client has been wrong hiring you! Something has gone wrong with their due diligence. OK, that's a bit harsh. But unless the problem wasn't for an external reason that's out of your hands -licensing for example - then it's true because extensive pre-production has been built in to the plan to cover contingencies. If the client has done their pre-project assessment, then the troubles for the initial phase should be ironed out. However, it is still a risk-riddled business.

What - from your experience - are the ways that stakeholders exert influence in interactive media projects?

They exert influence every day: they are all over the project like a rash! Everything needs to be done to the project plan but there has to be flexibility built in to accommodate the changes made by the customer. Every publisher is different. You get to know what extra time is needed in the plan to soak up the expected number of changes from the respective publisher. If the extra doesn't get used for changes it can always be used to better the product.

Working out the cost of proposed new projects – any advice?

Try to include everything. Get a lead person from each section – code, art, design and QA - to review the costs and planned budget. Representatives of the whole team should comment on the viability of the budget. Finally a decent yardstick is always the actual cost of the last project versus its original budget.

Defining the quality level of projects – any advice?

Make sure Quality is put into each stage not just the last part of production. Quality needs to be in the pitch/experiment stage, the process and methodology to win the project, in the pre-production, throughout production, and in bug fixing.

We work with extremely demanding and high profile international publishing partners known for their quality in the games industry so we take Quality very seriously. Their quality expectations are high, but ours should be higher. You have to have quality planned into all sections of your plan to make a good product.

You need to define the quality expectations upfront and use extensive focus groups both internal and external to trial and test the product. Then your QA department needs to be an objective service, not affected by the internal politics of the company in order to give constructive feedback on each stage. Very often Studio heads have said an independent QA dept is the most valuable asset to them regarding the quality of the product. They value our section being separate from the "Yes-men" project managers and producers.

What have been the top two difficulties that occurred in developing projects from your knowledge and what is the best way to address these?

- ◆ Delays in the project.
- ◆ Delays in payment.

Each project is different but you need to make sure that there's good contingency built in to cover unexpected delays. Have a fire-fighter mentality towards delays – when they occur, you need to put the fire out. In our case some projects have a four day week and others work to 10-15% contingency as a rule of thumb.

How should companies take account of the users of interactive products and how should they influence design?

In the games sector a company has complete freedom as the players react to what we offer them. Certainly the games have to be accessible for them, have strong visual appeal and increasingly, they need to appeal to females and well as males. Previously games have been very male dominated and the industry is now trying to encourage more female players. So we do look at products and users to see what we can learn from previous design mistakes. With next generation consoles now like the Wii it completely changes the ball game, which is very exciting for us as creative people.

How much and what type of testing of the product should take place before release?

Oh! 100% always! A good test helps the code and integration, art and art integration, design and design integration. You need to use formal test plans and scripts, and use a good team. We do qualitative testing at the beginning and quantitative testing for the last three months.

What are the most important legal aspects to cover for interactive media products?

I haven't too much experience in this aspect really. From my point of view intellectual property and the laws concerning that are important. QA checks should cover IP and legal aspects. We do assurance checks for brand logos for example. In one of our products there was a man using a mobile phone and the designer had used a recognisable type. We checked if he had the right to do this and he didn't so it was changed to a generic mobile phone. It's important to have good communication with the publisher/ producer as they may have deals with other parties that can affect what you use.

Any tips or advice about finding out about the users of interactive products/sites and how to go about collecting and analysing these?

There are sites that cover marketing information from the games point of view like Gamasutra.com. We try to be aware of the trends in the sector.

Interactive teams have special characteristics that make them a challenge to manage. What advice would you give from your knowledge and experience about teams and making their management smoother?

Make sure that everyone is happy - and that's easier said than done. You have to know the strengths, weaknesses and special characteristics of each one of them. Every person is different so good communication from the top to the bottom – even to temporary testers – is essential.

There needs to be a free flow of information and we use our intranet for people both on-site and off-site to help with this. The team needs as much notice of unfolding events as possible. That makes the work easier and keeps them happier.