

"Don't even think about getting involved with the industry without reading this first." - Chris Kramer, Sr. Director of Communications, Capcom USA

THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE

VIDEOGAME MARKETING AND PR

Foreword by Trip Hawkins
Founder of Electronic Arts, 3DO and Digital Chocolate



Top the Charts • Make Headlines • Earn Better Reviews

SCOTT STEINBERG

VIDEOGAME MARKETING AND PR

Vol. 1: Playing to Win

Written by Scott Steinberg

VIDEOGAME MARKETING AND PR

Vol. 1: Playing to Win

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FOREWORD

In the game industry, the talk is always technology, technology, technology. But an equally daunting and increasingly important task is the successful marketing and promotion of videogames. Consider that more than 300 incompatible game platforms have come to market in the last 30 years and yet you cannot name even 30 of them. And that there are over 2,000 new games created every year across all media, but how many are hits?

After I founded Electronic Arts, I had a clipping on my wall for several years from an article about the television industry's 10 most important lessons. Most of them applied to how I thought about games, but my favorite was the last one: "And never forget: All hits are flukes." If that is true, how can we justify massive investments in new games? And if it is not true, how do we prove it? To a large degree, that is what this book is all about. Maybe it isn't just, "serendipity meets creativity." Maybe there is a systematic way to think about customers, market segments, platforms, gameplay, design and marketing. And maybe developing this discipline can help companies avoid wasting time and money and give the public better games to play.

People have a tendency to think things have always been the way they are now. They think technologies are just now mature, that the tastes of the public are established, and that industry value chains and business models are set in stone. But with an expanded time horizon we can see that this is hardly the case. It was only 30 years ago that George Lucas convinced the experienced movie people in Hollywood that they should let him keep merchandising rights, which they would have only used for



movie posters. One outgrowth of that has been a spectacular line of *Star Wars* videogames, the likes of which Fox could not have conceived. Likewise, Atari invented and dominated videogames 25 years ago, but within a few years had imploded, to be replaced on the landscape by upstarts like Electronic Arts.

Nintendo invented the software license fee subsidy less than 25 years ago, succeeding despite great skepticism. The company's 98% market share for the 8-bit generation was dramatically reduced by Sony and Microsoft within a decade, even though the latter two firms had only failed in their prior gaming platform efforts. *Pokémon* broke new ground in merchandising and consumption levels only a decade ago. And only a few years before today, companies like PopCap pioneered the free trial model for casual games on the Web and we saw other new business models such as *Neopets* reaching audiences of more than 20 million players. Most recently, Digital Chocolate has used innovative new games to reach more than 20 million players on their mobile phones.

These 10 companies and properties share a common thread – they all came into the game industry surrounded by titans in established paradigms. In hindsight, we may be tempted to take their success for granted, but it was not so in the beginning, when either nobody cared or nobody thought they could compete. While they faced big competitive challenges, all were able to use innovative business models to succeed that have more to do with marketing than they do with technology. And, in each case, the rules of the game changed as a result, and quite rapidly. They are not the only 10 companies to have achieved this, but what this simple illustration shows is that the only constant is change. And marketing and promotion are a major part of this dynamic landscape. Maybe technology is not what we need to be talking about, especially today.

From *Pong* as a starting point, the game industry has been an arms race of sorts – always striving for faster frame rates or richer graphics. The stunning increase in research and development costs that has resulted from this trend make relevant marketing efforts even more mission-critical to understand and perform. One result of this is an overreliance on the licensing of proven brands to reduce risk, which has often led to a different kind of failure due to still other marketing flaws.

Today, we live in a global industry where Antarctica may be the only place lacking a game development company. This creates yet another marketing necessity for an understanding of global cultures and languages in the search for effective global brands. At one time, the game industry was focused solely on America, Japan and the United Kingdom. Nowadays, there are more than 2 billion game platforms – mostly mobile phones – in use *outside* of those countries. And with potential audiences of this magnitude, we need to change how we think about why people are playing in the first place.

This is where Scott Steinberg and *Videogame Marketing and PR* come in. Between a thorough shakedown of the taxonomy, case studies, history, and personal anecdotes and quotes, *Videogame Marketing and PR* ably covers the ground... and can help anyone improve their game.

Trip Hawkins

Founder of Electronic Arts, 3DO and Digital Chocolate

“I have found that I always learn more from my mistakes than from my successes. If you aren’t making some mistakes, you aren’t taking enough chances.”

— John Sculley, Former CEO, Apple

AUTHOR’S NOTE

While reading this manuscript, please be aware: The following advice and commentary is based on personal experience and insight gleaned over a decade-long career as both an insider within and objective reporter operating outside the interactive entertainment business. Where appropriate, thoughts and observations have also been provided by many of the industry’s most accomplished and storied names.

Outlaid within is everything you need to master the basic mindset needed to successfully make, market and promote any computer/videogame. However, please note that – as with any commercial effort – the strategies and messaging behind every marketing and PR campaign must be custom-tailored to the individual product, service or company being highlighted. In addition, much of the material featured herein won’t be found in any textbook, analyst report, publicly-released research, scientific findings and/or annual market white papers.

It’s my personal opinion that experience remains the best teacher. If you really want to know what it takes to market and sell a successful product, hit the streets (or, better yet, the Internet) and start trying today.

Remember: The lessons learned attempting to build demand for any product, whether simply by constructing a web page, circulating a press release or just getting the word out via message boards and online news-groups are invaluable. As in every professional scenario, whether you succeed or fall short of meeting your immediate goals is unimportant in the grand scheme of things – merely that you learn from each effort.

Therefore, win or lose, no marketing or PR effort can ever be considered a failure. All are essential steps on your path to succeeding not just

**“A good ad should be like a good sermon:
It must not only comfort the afflicted, it
must also afflict the comfortable.”**

— Bernice Bowles Fitz-Gibbon, Advertising Pioneer

in the field of digital diversions, but also, more importantly, the game of life.

Consider this just a starting point – we’ll dig even deeper into specific strategies and tactics designed to ensure that you enjoy a long and healthy career marketing and promoting games in the next volume of the interactive entertainment industry’s premier ongoing series for business professionals. Look for ***Videogame Marketing and PR: Vol 2. – The Essentials*** in stores or online at www.sellmorevideogames.com shortly.

“That’s something we want to do... we have to just get to the point where we say ‘yeah, we’re doing it.’”

— Todd Hollenshead, CEO, id Software

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To every videogame company unwilling to take a chance on a wide-eyed college student. To every magazine, newspaper and website editor who couldn’t be bothered to return an e-mail or phone call. To the publicists, software manufacturers and executives who failed to support a small, but hungry independent. To those who saw closed doors, where I saw only open.

Where there’s a will, there’s a way. Where there’s a way, there’s an opportunity. Where there’s opportunity, there lies the beginnings of a true-life education more priceless than gold. Our character is forged in the crucible of everyday hardships; I owe everything I know about drive and success – and by default the basic principles of PR, marketing and business – to these people.

But, more importantly: To my wife Karyn, for always being a true friend, trusted companion and earnest believer. To my parents, Karen and Richard, for never doubting, or questioning where all those quarters went. To my sisters, Jamie and Lisa, for their constant cheer, unwavering support and heartfelt dedication. To Kris Ramac, for teaching me the value of being able to sell yourself. And, of course, to the hundreds of colleagues, thousands of readers and millions of gaming fans worldwide, who’ve made everything possible. You always were, and continue to be, a genuine inspiration.

The secret to success is easy. Take it from me and Nike: Anything you want in life – just do it.

*Dedicated to Paul Scigliano (1/19/74 – 1/16/07)
“USA’s Finest”*

**“My name is Reggie. I’m about kickin’ ass,
I’m about taking names, and we’re about
makin’ games.”**

— Reggie Fils-Aime, President/COO, Nintendo of America

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“The field [of gaming] is incredibly competitive. It’s unusual: You don’t see film score composers hacking off or ragging each other on blogs like people do in our business.”

— Joseph Olin, President, The Academy of Interactive Arts & Sciences

INTRODUCTION

Welcome, dear reader – and thank you, Joseph; I couldn’t have put it better myself.

If there’s one thing that should be immediately apparent about the \$13.5 billion-dollar computer and videogame industry, it’s this: The stakes are incredibly high, and none of us can hope to fully understand it in a single lifetime.

Once upon a time, the biz was a simple cottage sector consisting of products made by lone hobbyists out of their garage who built, sold and distributed titles single-handedly. (Some of the earliest ones came bundled in Ziploc bags.) But over the past three decades, it has virtually exploded, extending the medium’s appeal and reach across a smorgasbord of seemingly opposing, yet all strangely-related, audiences and age groups.

From hardcore enthusiasts to casual players, professionals, artists, social commentators, politicians and even heads of state, everyone’s now gotten in the game, so to speak. None of whom, naturally, is willing to accept anything we, as game makers and promoters, say anymore at face value.

The trick then going forward isn’t recognizing the increasing importance of videogame marketing and PR to our industry’s health and well-being. Or, for that matter, underscoring the need for volumes such as this, which explore the theories behind and offer strategies for mastering it. Rather, it’s learning how to speak to such a diverse selection of rightfully demanding interest groups, all of whom ultimately have an impact on our creative liberties, as well as the bottom line.

The demand for countless manuscripts outlining and exploring these

“Why pick on gaming? It’s the most PR-stupid industry of them all. I’m having fun fighting these clowns. With enemies like this, who needs friends?”

— Jack Thompson, Anti-Game Crusader and Attorney

subjects will soon be at-hand; it is, arguably, here already.

What follows at present, though, is simply an assorted collection of essays, how-to’s, interviews and insights designed to get those of us at the forefront of the movement thinking. While reading this anthology, I wholeheartedly encourage you to take notes, research the ideas presented here more in-depth, ask questions of colleagues and explore any flights of fantasy the volume leads you down.

Merely consider it my rather long-winded way of saying simply this: When marketing and promoting videogames, the messaging and medium must always be crafted to the target audience. In addition, one’s approach must continuously evolve to keep up with the market’s ever-shifting dynamics.

To wit, what has worked for me won’t necessarily work for you, your company, or your products today, let alone a year from now – only you know best.

As in any aspect of business or society, I merely suggest that precedent serve as a teacher, or a loose set of guidelines, upon which to base ongoing conjecture. The key takeaway being that there are no fixed rules when it comes to marketing videogames, or any other creative product. Making them up as you go along and daring to be different is how firms of all sizes will succeed in the coming months, as the boundaries between advertising, editorial and community outreach begin to slowly dissolve.

Never forget, though: Thanks to the rise of online portals, instant messaging and interconnected handheld devices, you’ve got more power to reach, and therefore influence, more consumers than ever. Of course, today’s buyer is also smarter, savvier and more discerning than ever.

So don’t be afraid to ask questions, or even cry foul if you see something in here you fail to agree with. There’s no one right answer to any

“More people play videogames than watch movies, read books, listen to music and watch TV combined. We’re doing everything we can to have the industry come of age.”

— Denis Dyack, President, Silicon Knights

dilemma you, in your personal or professional career, will ever face.

To better yourself and your perspective in the immediate, get out in the community, listen to today’s industry leaders and make your own voice heard.

Take part in organizations like MI6, the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), Entertainment Consumers Association (ECA) and the Association of Electronic Interactive Marketers.

Read up on related websites, books and blogs including Gamasutra.com, MCVUK.com, GamePolitics.com, Next-Gen.biz, GameDaily.com, *The Videogame Style Guide* and *The Indie Developer’s Guide to Selling Games*.

Just having the discussion, period, is a major step forward for the business of digital diversions. Not to mention the first, most important milestone we as game publicists and marketers, as well as culturally-aware individuals, can take on the way to revolutionizing our beloved medium.

Scott Steinberg

www.scottsteinberg.com

January 31st, 2007

“John Romero’s About To Make You His Bitch”

— Advertisement for *Daikatana*, 1997

PERFECTING YOUR PRESENTATION

I don’t care if you’re an intern or senior VP of a Fortune 500 company.

With the average game player now 33 years old and boasting 12 years of experience behind the joystick, the most basic and unspoken rule of videogame marketing and PR bears restating: Know your audience. The easiest way to do so? Be a part of it.

Or, to quote many an R&B singer: “You can’t fake the funk.”

Highly literate, insatiably demanding and extremely well-educated, gamers can spot a phony at roughly the same distance *Halo’s* Master Chief can execute precision headshots. The bottom line: If you’re not a gamer yourself, perhaps it’s time you rethought you career aspirations.

As a married man, proud homeowner and small business operator, I’m well aware: Between the constant demands of family and work, there’s little time left during the average week for marathon sessions of *Super Monkey Ball: Banana Blitz* or *Gears of War*. But the days have long past when one can hope to speak to enthusiast/lifestyle press, key influencers (you know, the fans who shout loudest on online hubs and newsgroups) or even passing admirers without sharing the same pop culture vocabulary or general context.

The sheer proliferation of websites, fanzines and online, print and broadcast news outlets dedicated to analyzing and critiquing games has all but ground the hype game to a halt. Certainly, you can play the media machine to some degree with slick ad spots, glowing previews, carefully-tailored demos and hefty advance promotional opportunities. But to succeed these days, products need sustained buzz; the kind that rapidly fades

“Be lifestyle to make lifestyle... I just came up with that!”

— Bing Gordon, Chief Creative Officer, Electronic Arts

when it’s discovered by fans on launch day that your so-called “best game ev4r” is really just an expensive coaster.

Worse, even the most staid of corporations is feeling the backlash of dwindling public confidence, as Sony discovered to its chagrin following PlayStation 3’s launch. Certainly, the console looks and plays great, and met with initial enthusiasm from the marketplace. However, based on wildly self-indulgent executive commentary and mixed product messaging, consumers were erroneously led to believe it was the second coming, and responded with a tidal wave of scorn that struck mere weeks after the system’s debut.

Frankly, I pity those who’d scooped up dozens of the machines, hoping to sell \$599 SRP 60GB units for \$2500-plus on eBay, when they soon learned to their horror early in 2007 that retailers like Best Buy and Circuit City were sitting on stockpiles of the system they couldn’t give away.

Let’s not forget the case of Bethesda Softworks either. The firm became the butt of many industry jokes in 2006 when it entered into the growing field of microtransactions (bite-sized online game content purchases, i.e. additional cars or weapons, delivered via digital download) by deciding to charge players for useless *Oblivion* add-ons like horse armor.

Mind you, there’s an easy solution for not falling prey to similar traps. It’s simple: Putting yourself in the customer’s shoes, and viewing things not as you, the marketer or public relations representative would, but rather your audience.

As a manager, you wouldn’t suffer an employee who knew nothing about the industry in which they’re employed.

Likewise, as a sports fan, you probably wouldn’t be able to sustain a conversation about ‘football’ with someone who thought its biggest star

“The company’s latest game is huge, and features tons of monsters, spells and characters. You’ll never see another RGP <sic> like it.”

— Anonymous PR Rep

PERFECTING YOUR PRESENTATION

was David Beckham.

The upshot: Today’s marketers need to connect with game fans in a way that’s both constructive and meaningful.

I’m not saying you have to be a champion-level *Command & Conquer* player, or even know the difference between one of *Dungeons & Dragons*’ infamous basilisks or beholders. Just make sure you play every game you’re pushing and get to know its creators, whom you’ll be representing, as much as humanly possible given time and practical constraints.

Not only will it mean being more conversant in your stable of products, better able to communicate the talking points behind them and better equipped to respond more quickly and effectively to any questions or requests asked of you. It also strengthens the bond between co-workers and shows game creators you care, increasing the chances they’ll be more receptive to any thoughts you have on marketing or promoting any given title, as well as drafting its core messaging.

What’s more, when it comes time to write box copy, solicit print or online placements, compose game trailers and plot a full-fledged advertising or PR campaign, you’ll have a better sense of direction. This will enable you to work faster and more effectively, proving an asset to both yourself and associates. And, predictably, act as a boon to any projects on which you collaborate by improving their overall quality.

As an added bonus, it’ll also sharpen your business skills, make you a more valuable company asset and set you apart from those for whom game marketing and PR is a day job, versus a true passion.

Added bonus: It also makes mixing and mingling with those from different game industry walks of life easier, and provides you with greater context from which to draw. Ensuring that, should opposing colleagues or warring departments ever enter into a disagreement, you’ll have a better

“I swear to you, I really thought Chicken of the Sea was actually chicken. That’s how I really think.”

— Jessica Simpson, Musician

PERFECTING YOUR PRESENTATION

understanding of how to resolve issues. And, of course, possess the basic foundation required to learn virtually any new gaming business-related discipline.

Of paramount importance, however, you’ll know exactly where, and how, to focus your energies when planning a videogame marketing or PR rollout. Believe it or not, veteran journalists and consumers can tell at a glance just how much tender loving care has been placed into any production.

By showing that you’re not just a paid spokesman for, but also a true believer in your product, you’ll prompt infinitely more goodwill and brand recognition. Plus, to be frank, know how to squeeze blood from a proverbial stone when insufficient resources or manpower are provided for assigned ventures.

Take it from those of us who’ve successfully self-published titles out of home offices or back bedrooms to the tune of 1000% (no misprint) returns. Or have scored placements in hundreds of international publications on budgets that wouldn’t cover the cost of a single week’s vending machine stocks at most corporations.

Even the most under-funded and ill-supported marketer or PR grunt can make miracles happen when they put their mind to it.

“The idea of having a game based on reality is compelling right off the bat... everyone has some experience with the subject.”

— Will Wright, Creator, *The Sims*

MASTERING MESSAGING

Want to know how to improve sales, increase media hits, raise consumer awareness, draw a huge crowd and enjoy instant buzz before a game even goes into production?

Speaking as a marketer, PR maven, journalist, acquisitions executive (the guy responsible for scouting and signing new games), realist and videogame fan, I have only one simple answer: Find a way to get your message across in literally one second flat.

The quickest and often cheapest way to do so: Tune any product's theme, and the pitch surrounding it, to a concept consumers can recognize at a glance. As Will Wright himself is kind enough to point out, if a title or sales approach is based on a real-world activity or topic we all encounter daily, its appeal is essentially evergreen and its reach endless.

Why?

From an early age, normal modern-day human growth, development and socialization processes ensure we all understand certain subjects of interest. For example: Food, fashion, music, shopping, photography, dancing, art, literature, pets, romance, family, film, etc.

To the average citizen, gene-splicing underwater mutants; bug-eyed aliens with squeaky voices and frizzy topknots; half-naked vampire nymphs dressed in skintight leather suits; and hordes of missile-spewing zombie robots, meh... Not so much.

So I never quite get why an industry that swears it's broadening its horizons insists on playing to the same youthful, hyper-aggressive demographic.

Snarling orcs, rampaging dinosaurs, hordes of space marines locked-n-

“What do you do for recreation?”

“Oh, the usual. I bowl. Drive around. The occasional acid flashback.”

— Julianne Moore/Jeff Bridges, Actors, *The Big Lebowski*

loaded... Today’s range of electronic games is as thought-provoking as it is vibrant: Assuming, that is, we’re intent on keeping the industry’s appeal limited to 18-35 year-old males.

Catering to each new generation of enthusiastic young men’s vices – e.g. fantasy, science-fiction, anything involving pistols and/or buxom, shuriken-slinging ninjas – is certainly understandable. Design houses the world over are largely staffed by these individuals. (According to a 2005 survey by the International Game Developers Association, male developers outnumber female by a ratio of 9:1.)

The problem is, as casual gaming – a \$1 billion industry by 2008, says Jupiter Research – has quickly proven, there’s an equally viable market out there amongst more diverse end-users. For example, RealNetworks’ 70%-strong audience of women aged 40 and up.

Frankly, I don’t even believe in the term “casual gaming;” I prefer “massive screw-up,” referring to our own inability as an industry since the late ‘90s to recognize and give the people what it is they really want.

A short-sighted take on the marketplace, you say?

To some degree: Certainly. One glance at the latest NPD charts reveals silicon-powered pets, sports simulations and family friendly movie spin-offs comfortably ensconced alongside the latest real-time strategy opus and role-playing epic.

But in my day job and Embassy Multimedia Consultants’ ongoing role as both a provider of marketing/PR expertise, copywriting/advertising input and financial/product acquisitions advice, we routinely run across a recurring trend amongst titles which cross our desk. Thematically, they’re indistinguishable from the umpteen thousands published previously over the last several decades.

Forget gender disparities; the real issue is connecting with consumers.

“We try not to create games that have too much information or too many obscure technical facts. We want people to be able to play the game and understand it as quickly as possible.

— Sid Meier, Creator, *Civilization*

MASTERING MESSAGING

As software manufacturers, we should all view gaming as a serious business. The broader a product’s reach, the better its marketability – and your chances of getting signed, scoring that cover story in a major newsstand publication, crushing the competition or cutting a lucrative import/export deal.

So ask yourself: What’s more likely to make an impact on interactive entertainment’s ever-widening demographic? Another dungeon hack or mutant-blasting first-person shooter, or a title featuring familiar concepts like playing the piano, running a chic restaurant or even petting a virtual puppy?

The fact that Capcom’s critically-acclaimed *Okami* sunk its developer Clover Studios, while the number of firms making pony-raising simulators is growing daily, should be telling. It’s not like anyone who grew up a young male in America since, oh, 1960, should be hard-pressed to comprehend why *Guitar Hero II* is a bona fide smash either.

Say it to yourself in the mirror each morning, as many times as it takes to sink in. If you want to physically or metaphorically sell your product into the widest possible channels, aim the messaging at the broadest possible audience.

I’m not saying it’s wrong to specifically focus your energies on promoting a product designed for a niche audience, e.g. one of Atlus’ role-playing outings or CDV’s hardcore wargames, to a smaller target group via key websites or carefully-managed mailings. I call that a focused strategy. But have the foresight to recognize when a title with cross-platform, -gender and -genre appeal could find placement with nontraditional demographics.

Developers: When in doubt, remember – The simpler the concept, the better. The less effort needed by shoppers to comprehend a game’s premise

“We’ve decided that mass-market is the evolution of our business. My goal is to help designers evolve: It’s like being a fashion [guru]. These people don’t cut every dress, but they do influence the entire line.”

— Bruno Bonnell, Chairman/Chief Creative Officer, Atari

in the average 2-3 seconds it has to make an impression, the more likely it’ll sell. And, of course, the better the odds you’ll appeal to more people and exponentially increase chances of attracting buyers’ attention. Not all cultures consider nuking zombies quaint; across the world though, people can connect on subjects as simple as sports or vacationing.

Marketers – do whatever it takes to help products make sense for the consumer in a cultural context. Look at where there’s a good fit in related channels (e.g. DVDs, movies, books or magazines) and build banner placements, viral initiatives, advertorial and co-promotional ops around them. Focus on campaigns designed to raise awareness amongst everyone whose interests might overlap with the initial target audience. Most importantly, take the initiative early on, and tell developers when they’re skewing too far conceptually into realms of the obscure or arcane.

And last, but not least for all you PR reps...

Make the effort to pitch to lifestyle-oriented outlets with an interest in the subject matter (e.g. proposing an R/C racing game to *Playthings* or *Model Cars*, not just *PSM* or *Game Informer*). Look for fun, tangential ways to promote product – say, through a hilarious celebrity tie-in or thematic link, i.e. building a band from scratch, sure to appeal to indie rock mags – in publications you wouldn’t normally. And, for what it’s worth, never, ever attempt to sell an editor on a story without having first read the periodical, knowing exactly where it would fit into the book/how or personalizing the idea specifically for them. When it comes to public relations, sorry to say: One size does not fit all.

The upshot: People don’t like change – they tend to go with what they know. If a 75 year-old grandmother of three walks into Wal-Mart and has to choose between *Crysis* or *Madden NFL 08*, which one do you think she’s picking?

So whatever your gaming product or vocation, concentrate on perfecting your elevator pitch. If someone stops you at work on the ride up to the 10th floor and asks you to explain your game in 20 seconds or less, can you? If the answer is no, perhaps you need to reconsider.

Don't take it from me, though – just ask Will. He hasn't just pumped out a constant spate of hits since 1989's *SimCity*. At last count, *The Sims* series (a virtual dollhouse full of little computer people simulating social relationships and everyday life) has hit 54 million units sold, and is still going strong...

“Studies show that people are three times more likely to believe an article from a reporter than an ad. While ads will help you know when a game is coming out and what features it has, PR gets a consumer to put down hard-earned money for it.”

— David Tractenberg, President, Traction PR

“To open a shop is easy; to keep it open is an art.”

— Chinese Proverb

INVEST FOR SUCCESS

From star-studded galas to boundary-redefining blockbusters and veritable armies of slack-jawed enthusiasts who’ll queue up for weeks on end just to cop the latest and greatest new set-top device, there’s plenty to adore about the videogame industry.

But ever since I was a sprightly little lad, barely old enough to comprehend, let alone appreciate, the intricacies of an Intellivision controller, there’s been one thing about the business that’s continued to mesmerize and awe me. Specifically, its ability to steadily and enthusiastically flush huge sums of cash down the toilet on a range of eye-opening ventures almost as harebrained as they are bizarre...

Case in point: The critically-adored, but ultimately fruitless commercial disaster billed as *Psychonauts*.

Never mind Microsoft’s decision to drop the title from its slate of scheduled products in the middle of development and subsequent transfer of ownership to fellow publisher Majesco. The real reason the 2005 title – a favorite with reviewers and hardcore enthusiasts – bombed had nothing to do with development setbacks or physical content. (The finished results were actually quite impressive, as even a quick glance at GameRankings.com confirms.) Nor can blame be laid in good conscience at the feet of consumers, who were bombarded on all fronts with praise by industry insiders and watchdogs alike.

Instead, the true issue in play here was simply that people just couldn’t wrap their heads around the concept. The result: Majesco’s sudden, ‘unexpected’ reversal of fiscal year expectations, with an anticipated \$16-18 million in net profit instead becoming a similar amount in expected net loss.

“We’re employing a ‘fewer, bigger, better strategy’... We want to make compelling products with great gameplay that are culturally relevant for today’s videogame consumer.”

— David Zucker, CEO, Midway

No massive leaps of logic are needed here to instantly quantify the issue here – just simple common sense. To wit: As you may have noticed, any trip to the software store offers buyers hundreds of possible game selections, most promising straightforward themes and easily-interpreted value propositions. This being the case, it goes without saying that it’s a huge mistake to foist something on consumers which requires they willingly educate themselves to any degree just to understand a product’s basic selling points. (In this case, getting to enjoy the pleasures of watching creepy psychic children tool around each others’ subconscious and a bizarre, Tim Burton-esque summer camp.)

As game marketers, our job is to make the decision-making process easier. Not expect a family, or even open-minded teenager, shopping at Target to choose what is essentially a glorified art school project over, say, *Nintendogs* or *Diner Dash*. Stop and think about it for a second. Hmm, which to pick: Cute puppies or weird kids who doddle about the insides’ of their buddies’ ids? You do the math.

I personally love designer Tim Schaefer’s entire catalogue, which includes classic adventures like *Grim Fandango* and *Full Throttle*. Frankly, it’s among the best in the biz. But to draw a simple parallel, the reason his titles so often tank is the same reason Emmy-winning primetime favorites like “Arrested Development” constantly fizzle and “The Real World” is 18 seasons old and still salaciously chugging along.

The point of this long-winded monologue being merely that successful game marketing and promotion starts with sound investing: The games you choose to acquire and fiscally back basically control your destiny. Not to mention that looking objectively at any commercial scenario is the only way to succeed in the gaming biz, or any other financial context.

The soundest advice I or any other business consultant can give: Don’t

“We go to school to learn to work hard for money. I create products that teach people how to have money work hard for them.”

— Robert Kiyosaki, Author, *Rich Dad, Poor Dad*

take the plunge on any venture without first doing your homework, and always be conservative with budgets and estimates. Keeping costs low and expectations realistic is the quickest path to profitability, no matter the endeavor.

In addition, recognize that, as with any creative enterprise, intangibles are plentiful. Analyst findings, research reports and/or NPD data won't always spell out the complete story in terms of forecasting sales and judging a videogame's ultimate potential. But breeze any anticipated cash outlays, prospective revenue streams, marketing/PR plans, expected sell-through figures and launch strategies by a varied and sizable cross-section of internal/external experts – all hailing from different disciplines, no less – and chances are, you'll have already tipped the odds of success in your favor. And for heaven's sake, make sure you source second opinions on everything as well... For every expert who comes offering what seems to be a swell-sounding solution, there's another two out there with equally valid dissenting arguments.

Nonetheless, as a provider of financial advice for dozens of publishers, development studios, hedge funds and private investment groups worldwide, there's one question we at Embassy Multimedia Consultants constantly find ourselves asked when it comes to capital outlay. That being: “How to achieve maximum profit and publicity without courting potential disaster?” The answer is easy – put your belief in facts instead of faith, and be smart enough to know when your vision's blinding you to basic market realities.

Why bring this up now in particular? Simple... Because the dawn of next-generation systems (e.g. PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360), coupled with the explosive growth of massively-multiplayer online (MMO) outings, means that production costs, and thus, risks, are higher than ever.



“Like almost everyone who uses e-mail, I receive a ton of spam every day. Much of it offers to help me get out of debt or rich quick. It would be funny if it weren’t so exciting.”

— Bill Gates, Founder, Microsoft

With the help of savvy individuals such as Wideload Games CEO Alex Seropian, Eidos CTO Julien Merceron and Vicious Cycle president Eric Peterson, I conducted an informal survey at the beginning of 2007 to take a closer look at this phenomenon. Findings are as follows:

- PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 software development costs are presently three to four times greater than those associated with developing for previous systems, averaging \$12-18 million for a lone SKU, or single-platform videogame title.
- Team sizes have grown by a similar order of magnitude. A single, solitary game suddenly requires the efforts of anywhere from 30-40, or even 100+, people to create.
- It now takes, in general, 24-36 months to produce any given product.
- Anyone claiming that they know what it takes to steadily produce best-selling game products is at best misguided, at worst an outright liar. Even the most able-bodied, experienced crews are subject to the vagaries of this especially fickle marketplace.

It should be a wake-up call in the aftermath of Namco Bandai Holdings Inc. president Takeo Takasu’s unexpected revelation that the firm, Japan’s second-biggest game maker, must sell a minimum 500,000 copies of any PlayStation 3 title merely to earn a single cent on it. To further put things in perspective, art assets for just one PS3 game can additionally cost roughly \$8.6 million to produce... More than twice the price of those associated with outings for Nintendo’s Wii.

Even more strikingly, according to NPD, Sony’s system has sold only 687,300 units by year-end 2006. And yet, stunningly, most CEOs don’t seem to be quaking in their cigar-scented Calvin Kleins at the thought of developing for the machine, at least in the immediate. I may be no accountant, but it doesn’t take a CPA to see that the numbers just don’t add up.

“Go for a business that any idiot can run – because sooner or later, any idiot is probably going to run it.”

— Peter Lynch, Author, *One Up on Wall Street*

In essence, although it's great to hear the computer and videogame industry is presently topping \$13.5 billion in sales, game marketers and promoters have to learn to read between the lines. More important than such grandstanding is that we pay larger attention to actual market realities than attention-grabbing headlines such as this.

For example: Consider Sony's successive promise that it will ship 6 million units of the PS3 worldwide by March 2007. Astute readers will note that “ship” does not mean “sell,” and “worldwide” is quite a different kettle of fish than “across North America.”

To put it bluntly, as a businessman, if asked to put my money where my mouth was given the circumstances, I'd rather avoid the situation entirely. Within the given context, it's highly probable you'd make greater returns on investment shipping catchy titles aimed at mainstream audiences for older systems such as the PlayStation 2, instead of writing the machine off prematurely and rushing to hop on the next-gen bandwagon.

With the console the second highest-selling system of Q4 '06 (NPD reports 1.4 million machines purchased, bringing total unit sales to 37.1 million), it would seem there's bound to be a lot of fans still hungry for new adventures. What's more, in this particular case, development costs are a fraction of those for PS3/360 product. So you decide which sounds fiscally smarter: A rapidly-constructible, cost-conscious game aimed a large target demographic, or insanely pricey one with a seemingly endless development cycle and lower potential sell-through numbers and/or profit margins?

Keeping this in mind, I've put together a few basic strategies developers, publishers and financiers from any background can all use to make sounder financial choices. Follow these simple, self-explanatory tips and

“We’re asking for a large financial commitment on the part of the consumer, and we have a very big responsibility to entertain and fulfill them.”

— David Jaffe, Creator, *God of War*

INVEST FOR SUCCESS

you’re all but guaranteed to enjoy greater ROI while simultaneously lessening chances of putting your proverbial tush on the line:

DEVELOPERS

- Maintaining an emergency fund is crucial. This should be equal to six months’ worth of expenses and payroll minimum, or, better still, an entire year’s overhead. Stability’s essential, especially when you consider the need to bridge the inevitable gaps between initial funding, ongoing milestone and back-end royalty payments.
- Reduce fixed staffing costs as much as possible; outsourcing tasks to external contractors and using virtual office setups can be much cheaper, and in many cases just as effective, as keeping a full stable of highly-paid talent on-hand.
- Amortize employees’ time and output across several game projects, and learn to hire additional talent and let contractors go based on the vagaries of cyclical demand. You’re paying for professionals’ time – not for them to lounge around and surf for porn because there’s a sudden work shortage.
- When publishing first-run projects, lead with SKUs on the biggest-selling platforms with the most mainstream appeal. That way, you can rapidly show proof-of-concept and more quickly convince sponsors to pony up the cash required for further efforts. I recommend the Nintendo DS, Wii and PC myself.
- When in doubt as to a product’s potential reception, test the waters with controlled software releases. Conversions and enhanced special editions of existing games offer a great way to do so. This way, you can tinker around and see how audiences respond to various topics, genres and



“The person who gives thought about [it] most will be the winner in the next-gen war.”

— Hideo Kojima, Creator, *Metal Gear* series

INVEST FOR SUCCESS

marketing/PR approaches. Once you know you’re onto something, that’s when to break out the checkbook.

- Value-add wherever possible: It’s crucial to always build something extra – new stages, weapons, levels, whatever... – into ports of previously released titles. By doing so, you give them an extended shelf life and additional marketability/PR reach.

- Keep your ambitions in check, unless you’re ready and willing to self-fund your own titles. The honest truth is that publishers would rather spring for smaller, more concise games than \$30 million epics with lengthy production cycles. Less time and money up-front equals less risk equals a faster path to profitability equals happier shareholders...

- As much as you fancy yourself a jack of all trades, concentrate on becoming a specialist instead. Before branching out into new topics or genres, master a single subject such as fighting games or real-time strategy outings. As a result, people will begin to look at you as an ‘expert’ in the field. While it may not prove spiritually satisfying, it will increase your chances of finding steady work – and give you free reign to charge more for assignments. The kicker: All those millions you squirrel away making Disney-licensed platform-hopping romps can eventually be channeled into making the RTS of your dreams. And may eventually ensure you retain greater financial and creative control, freeing you from outside publisher interference.

- Always ask questions. From publishing partners to journalists and consulting firms, plenty of folks are happy to give an opinion. Remember: Impartial, outside views from project outsiders are often the clearest. Worse comes to worst, you can always ignore them – but, as a rule of thumb, you’ll gain at least some new insight into any given situa-

“Setting an example is not the main means of influencing others; it is the only means.”

— Albert Einstein, Inventor

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tion from the exchange.

- Utilize in-game ads, co-promotional opportunities and alternate revenue sources (e.g. corporate sponsorships and microtransactions) to subsidize projects whenever possible. You’re not selling out; as anyone who’s ever faced cash flow shortages or flirted with bankruptcy can explain, you’re simply employing sound business practices.

PUBLISHERS

- Focus on purchasing finished products – importing existing titles from foreign territories or buying near-complete outings from independent studios is cheaper than funding AAA titles from the concept phase onward. You can always recast products in a new light or under a unique name, creating original IP and trademarks which you own as needed to support them.
- Only partner with experienced development studios who have a track record for success, unless a fledgling outfit’s got tangible assets and technology to back their design document. And in any case, always demand a working prototype before signing on the dotted line. To be blunt: If someone’s asking you to gamble millions on them, they need to justify the investment – and had certainly better work hard for it.
- Pick up the phone and call an expert if you’re worried over any possible roadblocks: Companies like Embassy Multimedia Consultants are here to help. Let’s be honest... If you’re going to wager a small South American nation’s GNP on a title and don’t know how to properly make/promote it or how well it’ll ultimately be received by media and consumers, it only makes sense to spend a fraction of these costs up-front to find out. I’ve got only one word for you: “Insurance.”

“If you don’t do it excellently, don’t do it at all. Because if it’s not excellent, it won’t be profitable or fun, and if you’re not in business for fun or profit, what the hell are you doing there?”

— Robert Townsend, Film Director

- Take the time to properly assess situations and always play the role of devil’s advocate – if anything can go wrong, it will when it comes to game development. Budget and plan accordingly, leaving generous allowances for processes like feature revamping and post-production. Skeptics prosper – especially those who don’t take long shots, say, on expecting a turn-based strategy game developer, no matter how talented, to turn out a winning bowling simulation on their first attempt.

- Ignore exclusivity; unless heavily subsidized by platform manufacturers, concentrate on pushing titles on systems with the highest sell-through figures. To earn maximum returns and ensure optimal product exposure, you have to market to the widest possible audience. Ports offer an easy solution if you’re still determined to publish for a specific machine later on down the road.

- Survive transition periods by sticking with what you know – unproven commodities should be considered just that, and looked at with according trepidation. For instance, many thought to weather the advent of next-generation consoles by leaning on Sony’s PSP, courtesy of the system’s relatively cut-rate production costs. But with only 6.7 million sold through year-end 2006, most featured titles collecting dust on the shelf and the DS suddenly a public darling, well... Methinks elder platforms like the PC or PS2 would’ve treated these folks much better.

- Know where every dollar is being spent. Some developers will ask for \$500,000 to complete a project, others \$10 million – both with the same end results. Boardroom presentations mean nothing; always visit prospective partners, scrutinize proposed budgets, and employ active management in the form of remote or on-site producers to ensure your money’s being wisely employed.

- If pressed, always pick licensed or branded product over original IP –

“I rarely think the market is right. Non-dividend stocks aren’t much more than baseball cards. They are worth what you can convince someone to pay for it.”

— Mark Cuban, Entrepreneur

INVEST FOR SUCCESS

consumers stick with what they know. And remember: “Convergence” may imply cinematic storylines and better brand integration, but it doesn’t necessarily require Hollywood-level budgets. Never try to force a licensed tie-in or celebrity appearance, and unless the deal’s a no-brainer, always try to favor back-end royalty points over giant up-front payouts.

- Do the requisite research needed to explore every theoretical revenue stream, no matter how small it seems... A trickle may suddenly turn into a river or a so-called bountiful reservoir soon dry up. There’s nothing worse than throwing away cash through a lack of basic due diligence or handing an overseas partner millions on a silver platter just because you didn’t have time to sit down and fully quantify the opportunity.

- Last, but not least, use what I call the ‘common sense approach.’ Explain the rationale behind any given course of action you’re dubious about from a simple game purchase to a fancy marketing or PR plan to a friend or fellow professional outside the industry. You may be shocked at how many holes in your strategy they spot.

FINANCIERS

- Put your chips on firms who hold multiple, proven brands they can leverage across a wide range of mediums and machines. Increasing development costs/times and declining consumer confidence in original IP makes them a safer bet than wide-eyed upstarts.

- As when buying mutual funds, choose companies with a well-balanced portfolio – specifically, the kind that includes a wide range of proven casual, licensed and original product spread throughout a variety of platforms. Ones with big, all-star back catalogues such as Activision, THQ and Ubisoft are even better.

“Our favorite holding period is forever.”

— Warren Buffett, Billionaire

- Unless you’re a gambler, take a pass on firms whose fortunes rise or fall based on the success of a lone platform – in gaming, it pays to be an agnostic.
- Look for companies with stable revenue generators, e.g. massively multiplayer games such as Vivendi’s *World of Warcraft*, now being enjoyed by 8 million paying monthly subscribers. They’re cost-effective to maintain and provide a solid fiscal anchor for any firm, even in the harshest industry climes.
- Favor ventures that make a point of exploring new ways to monetize their properties. To he who masters community development, product placement, in-game advertising and tomorrow’s other increasingly innovative techniques of subsidizing growing development costs will eventually go the spoils...
- Lean towards companies who possess top development talent and focus on what they know. The easy way to do so: Seek out those that own noted production studios, have found ways to convert certain brands (e.g. Activision’s *Tony Hawk* series) into ongoing annuities and then cautiously leverage these properties in intelligent ways.
- Keep your ear to the ground – it pays to follow the space. As Eidos’ recent turnaround shows, any company can potentially bounce back from a lengthy slump. And the outfits generating the most cash and seeing the greatest success these days? They’re often the small ones you only hear mentioned in passing.
- Stop speculating. Research firms’ financial performance before buying in, get a feel for executives’ style and set clear-cut conditions for exit and entry from their associated financial dealings that you’ll be able to objectively follow through on.
- Having trouble making sense of the industry? Rather than rely on



The Wall Street Journal for insight, find a consultant that you trust: Someone inside or outside your firm whose knowledge of the business extends beyond simple facts and figures. Seek their council as needed, but don't forget: Make sure they speak from the combined perspective of a gamer, executive and marketing/PR professional – not any one.

- Insiders suggest favoring firms getting away from developing and publishing for console systems, due to the prohibitive costs and growing risks associated with doing so. But no one's truly devised a better mouse-trap yet when it comes to alternate distribution methods such as digital delivery. Meaning that in any space besides MMO titles, until the numbers justify it (3-5 years hence), I'd settle for picking those with a built-in following and large, yet highly-focused range of products.

“Every dollar I spend is a vote.”

— Billie Joe Armstrong, Singer, Green Day

“The caterpillar does all the work, but the butterfly gets all the publicity.”

— George Carlin, Comedian

PUBLIC RELATIONS 101

Surely you’ve heard the saying by now: “There is no such thing as bad press.” Ask the experts though, and they’ll likely disagree.

But, on the bright side, planning well-received company and product rollouts doesn’t necessarily have to be an expensive proposition. All you need are passionate people with decent product familiarity, an eye for what makes headlines, a solid network of industry contacts and time to properly plan and execute a focused public relations campaign.

I went to Dean Bender, co-founder of Los Angeles- and New York-based agency Bender/Helper Impact (one of the biggest names in gaming PR) to get the scoop straight from the horse’s mouth. Here, the media-savvy guru breaks down everything you need to know to get started into ten simple tips that firms of all sizes and even lone individuals can follow to improve efficacy and capture more media attention.

Heed the following advice, and you’ll be adopting an approach that’s worked wonders for dozens of developers and publishers from Disney Interactive Studios to Codemasters, Gameloft, Konami, Square-Enix and Take 2 Interactive:

- **Map out all activity in advance.**

“First things first – you have to have a projected release date for a particular game, whether it’s 6, 9 or even 18 months away. At that point, the PR person really needs to be able to develop a strategic timeline concerning how news or information will be parceled out from now through that date. Because today, more than ever before, amongst enthusiasts, there’s an increasing interest in knowing how a game is progressing.”

“The public is the only critic whose opinion is worth anything at all.”

— Mark Twain, Author

- **Develop a menu of media outlets and determine your dissemination strategy for each.**

“When you’re talking about games, you’re really talking about two-tier public relations.

One tier is maximizing the exposure and buzz capacity with enthusiast media outlets. Targets can range anywhere from print publications to online publications to blogs to podcasts to anything that’s a buzz generator. That’s how, additionally, you want to be able to set the tone for your campaign.

Now, as the campaign evolves, you also have to look at a calendar and say, ‘OK, I’m working with the monthlies at this particular point in time so that a story breaks at a certain period.’ Maybe it coincides with the date that the sales guys are first starting to talk to retailers about the product... whatever helps influence sales and public opinion.

Whenever that date is (let’s say it’s five months out), well... from then on to as close to three days from street date is really when the avalanche of buzz happens. Basically, buzz builds on an incline during this period, and momentum continues to drive that buzz on through ship. Two weeks prior to street date, that’s when you have all your consumer media (broadcast, online, print, radio... everything you’ve hoped for) break.

Where games differ from the movie business is that traditionally, people aren’t as passionate about what’s happening pre-production and post-production. But in games, buzz has to mount all the way through.”

- **Maintain a high level of visibility and awareness throughout all stages of game development.**

“There are several methods PR practitioners use to accomplish this.

“Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some hire public relations officers.”

— Daniel J. Boorstin, Author/Historian

Everything from e-mail blasts to screenshots to meeting with developers to press junkets... whatever is going to keep fans updated on the progress of your title.”

• **Decide what your selling tools are for the game.**

“You’ve got to be able to quickly break down your advantages in terms of any title. This means looking at everything from gameplay to art to voice talent to development talent. You have to look at each noteworthy attribute of the game and develop a separate mini-campaign for each.

So if you’ve got fantastic art, a PR person has to be able to maximize the appeal of that art. That means everything from working exclusively with publications to being able to showcase the art on the cover of the magazine or internal pages. It may mean working with a popular online site to let people get a first look at this art. You have to be able to spread the wealth around with other outlets as well, and not let one outlet monopolize everything.

Alternately, with voice talent, if you’ve got a recognizable character or personality from another medium – a movie star, TV star, whoever – PR needs to work with the legal department to make sure that there’s contractual accessibility to that talent for PR purposes. You don’t know how many times that sort of thing is overlooked during negotiations. We always seem to be brought in when it’s too late to go back and change it. One of the stipulations in that contract needs to be that we get one day of interviews, a satellite media tour, whatever it may be... PR has to maximize the accessibility and availability of talent. And in all likelihood, that talent needs to be used close to street date for sake of attracting consumer press, versus enthusiast.”

“No one ever said on their deathbed, ‘Gee, I wish I had spent more time alone with my computer.’”

— Danielle Bunten Berry, Legendary Game Designer

- **Deal with consumer and enthusiast press differently.**

“In the case of gaming enthusiast press, you’re dealing with a much more sophisticated audience.

So PR firms really have the opportunity to open the kimono a bit more and allow them to get early looks, early builds and demo the game at different stages. Wherever possible, the PR person should take advantage of the knowledge of the enthusiast press. It’s important for enthusiast media to feel vested in part of the game’s development and success. The enthusiast press is a very important advocacy group for your game. You really need to introduce them to and familiarize them with the guts of the game if you really want them to praise it every which way they can.

Once it gets down to the consumer press, the dynamics change a great deal. They either don’t have the bandwidth or the interest to really dig as deep into games as the enthusiast press. So it’s really much more of a top-level, top-tier relationship you have with the consumer press. Their audience is not quite as sophisticated, so you have to go in with a different set of tactics which is really lighter – and by that I mean not too heavily involved with the dynamic of game development. They’re more interested in actual gameplay.”

- **Remember that respect and honesty are crucial when it comes to relationships between media and public relations representatives.**

“The relationship is mutually important for both sides of the equation. It goes without saying that there should be respect on either end as well as forthrightness – anything less, and you’re going to compromise the relationship. And it’s really hard, if not impossible, to try to win it back.

On the PR person’s side, you need to be proactive and reactive. Being reactive is sometimes better than proactive, because you never know when

“The ‘Hot Coffee’ modification is the work of a determined group of hackers who have gone to significant trouble to alter scenes in the official version of the game.”

— Official Statement, Rockstar Games

a member of the media will require something. And when they do, you have to be responsive and able to take care of their needs. As for the proactive part, that’s what separates a good person from a not-so-good one. You have to think in a sixth-sense way as to how to initiate specific strategies and tactics with the media. The media person, in all likelihood, will respond positively, because you’re looking out for their best interests.

Now, a PR person shouldn’t do it in a standard way – you need to be able to customize your tactics to different outlets. It shows respect for the journalist, and that you’ve taken the time to understand what their publication’s all about, know their deadlines and what they’re looking for. And when you come to them with an appropriate pitch, you’ll be much more successful. If you just go ahead with the same blanket pitch across the board, after a while, you begin to sound like a telemarketer, not a public relations professional.

On the other side of the coin, the press needs to recognize that, ultimately, we need each other. For a media person, without the resources the PR rep can provide, they’d have an empty story. And for a PR person who doesn’t have the cooperation of a media member, they’d have no results. It’s a mutually beneficial relationship, and should be approached in the spirit of cooperation and equality, with no one side more important than the other.”

- **Don’t fall into the usual traps.**

“One typical pitfall I often see is for PR to hold back information that journalists already know about. You have to be very up-front and forthright with members of the press. There might be times, though, when media hear about something they shouldn’t, but there are ways that a PR person can work with that journalist. So maybe there’s a mutual under-

“Everything you do or say is public relations.”

— Unknown

standing you can reach. Perhaps the PR person can't delve too deep into the subject. But you can come back with something that'll help that journalist with some other element of the story.

Another issue I see is when PR people show favoritism to certain media – playing various journalists against others. It's a level playing field out there: All members of the press deserve the same treatment.

There's also times where games might not preview or review well. Judgment on the part of the PR person is critical at these junctures. You have to be honest with your producers and developers and let them know when something's not ready to be shown. It's a mistake to succumb to pressure and let a game out prematurely – it can become the death knell for that project.”

• **Never, ever tell members of the media they're wrong, or get into an argument with a journalist.**

“Be understanding. If you have a problem with a review, call the journalist. Tell them that you're fully aware why they have a problem with the game, and ask from a PR point of view if there are any issues, gameplay-wise, that you can go back and tell the publisher they should be aware of. Or just ask for a deeper explanation, understanding that there isn't always space in an article to tell the whole story without insinuating they've failed to prove their point. Explain there's still plenty of good information to be gained at this point in time that can help the company throughout the review process, and you're just trying to make use of it.

It should always be phrased as a positive – I don't stand for PR people who try to browbeat journalists. Discussions like this should always be turned towards a positive slant, wherever you can. It goes against my principles to browbeat anyone over anything. Let me give you a quick

“For a successful technology, reality must take precedence over public relations, for nature cannot be fooled.”

— Richard P. Feynman, Physicist

example.

Last week, a publication wrote that one of our clients was fired from working on a popular intellectual property. This was totally untrue – our client had parted ways amicably with the property’s handlers. We got the publication to change the headline in the online version, but the print edition made it out in original form into the public’s hands. This caused credibility issues for the client, who was trying to sign new business deals.

So I called the head editor. I said, ‘I’m not here to yell or scream at you. What’s happened is that our client’s credibility is at stake. I’d like to propose a solution.’ Instead of getting incensed, I simply told the publication I’d like them to do a story on the client and its business, and give it the same space they did the original piece. They agreed to do this with no problem, and the entire exchange was done in a very softspoken way, very matter-of-factly. As this just goes to prove, it’s always possible to be diplomatic.”

• **Know when to keep PR in-house or choose an agency.**

“It’s going to sound a little one-sided, but I think it’s always in companies’ best interest to use an external agency. We’re much more objective about our approach than somebody who sits in an office and during the course of any given day is constantly being fed the company line. Sometimes you lose that objectivity working internally.

Really the best of both worlds, though, is to have an internal person who works with an external agency and acts as a facilitator – someone to work with, bounce ideas off of and strategize alongside. If it’s in the budget, I highly recommend this approach, especially since you can just hire a mid- or high-level person internally to do the job as funding dic-

“The role of PR needs to constantly evolve right along with the [games] industry. It’s kind of like the old saying ‘a rolling stone gathers no moss’ — well nobody wants to hire a moss-covered stone to handle their PR.”

— Alex Josef, CEO, Pacific Media Partners

tates. And the external PR firm, based on the budget the client has, can then make a determination as to its approach for the overall plan.

At the end of the day, if there’s budget for both, great! Otherwise, the amount of internal development can act as a barometer of sorts to help you make this decision. If a lot of development takes place internally, it’s a good sign the PR person needs to be internal. If the publisher’s mostly working with outside developers, then you don’t really need someone internal, and can work with an outside agency as well.”

• **Stay on top of your game.**

“First and foremost, there has to be a formal communications system established between any game company and its PR agency. And from an internal standpoint, executives need to make sure there’s a good procedure in place to keep themselves well privy to any proposed projects and tactics or updates from the PR department, whether it’s in-house or out.

As an individual, the key to being the best game industry public relations representative you can is initiative. Don’t be passive — from a client’s perspective, the truest sign of a good agency or rep is if they’re looking out for your best interests. You want to know: Is this individual passionate or motivated about my business?

Individuals and agencies should both naturally have talent and experience. But you can’t teach enthusiasm. That’s the first thing I look for — someone who’s passionate about the products they represent. I also need to be able to see what you’ve done for similar products... Let me see some case studies, your CV. If you really want to test somebody or a possible agency’s merit, come up with hypothetical situations — say a crisis or bad review arises — and ask how they’d respond to it.

The best gaming PR reps, like the best PR reps in any industry, have



to be intelligent enough to think on their toes and deal with any issue that comes up. Because any situation you can plan for, it's probably going to happen... And you *will* have to respond to it."

"Seventy percent of success in life is showing up."

— Woody Allen, Filmmaker

“Wii may mean [urination] in America. But we wanted a name that would make sense worldwide – and one that wouldn’t sound like a traditional videogame system. If people who don’t play them identified the product’s name with a videogame system, what incentive is there for them to try it?”

— Shigeru Miyamoto, Creator, *Mario* and *Zelda*

GOING GLOBAL

“Sweet – we’re a hit in Luxembourg!”

Ah, yes... There’s nothing quite like a colleague’s gentle ribbing (generally accompanied by a rump-shaking jig) to remind you that no matter the field’s progression to date, how far the videogame industry has yet to come.

In other words, what might signal death in another medium – one-hit musical wonders, we’re looking at you – can instead herald the dawn of emerging opportunities in a still-maturing business such as interactive entertainment.

To wit: The key word in the quote above isn’t Luxembourg. It’s *hit*. Others see a country whose population is roughly .0016% that of America’s. I see instead a potential, still-growing audience (roughly 474,413 proud citizens at last count) from which a small, independent development house or publishing studio could eventually derive a relatively healthy income.

A point which simply goes to illustrate a problem all-too common to our industry: Corporate myopia. In an era of increasing globalization, I’ll be neither the first nor the last to say it. Maintaining a strict focus on domestic markets is tantamount to committing commercial suicide.

Surviving transition years, riding out market lows, building a groundswell of support for your product or brand... All problems whose solution, primarily, lies simply within controlling costs, establishing fresh distribution channels and revenue streams, learning to work with new sales partners and finding original ways to speak to increasingly diverse audiences.

“Clearly, if what you see in games right now, even in the best games, is all we’re capable of doing, then I’m getting out of the business. There’s so much more we can do.”

— Warren Spector, Game Designer, *Deus Ex*

GOING GLOBAL

So why limit yourself?

As TV-star-cum-singer-turned-living-parody David Hasselhoff discovered after going platinum in Germany, while his *Magic Collection* CD sits currently ranked #396,645 on Amazon.com, there’s a viable market just waiting to be tapped overseas. And, of course, a massive talent pool that can provide you the edge necessary to come out ahead as gaming transitions into a medium on par with film and literature in the popular mind-set.

Don’t believe me? Check the facts.

Grand Theft Auto was developed in Scotland. Two of the most talked about first-person shooters in recent years – Vivendi’s *TimeShift* and THQ’s *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl* – come from Russia and Eastern Europe. Midway touted *Rise & Fall*’s overseas performance as one of the high points of a past financial quarter. Microsoft’s \$375 million purchase of UK-based Rare in 2002 was joined in 2006 by its acquisition of equally esteemed British firm Lionhead. And RedOctane’s Indian division is already garnering praise for its work on the first title based on a Bollywood film.

Mind you, merely importing/exporting ideas, products and resources between continents is no guarantee of success. As I’ve learned the hard way and continue to stress, every problem facing game marketers and promoters demands a unique, custom-tailored solution. Nor would I or my associates at Embassy Multimedia Multimedia presume to tell you how to run your business – just present a few new ways of looking at it.

To preface, I’m neither an accountant, analyst, educator, programming whiz nor design guru. What’s more, success in this field comes as a result of hard work and collaboration between talented individuals on both sides of the publishing and retail divides. Question everything, and take all

“Advertising is fundamentally persuasion, and persuasion happens to be not a science, but an art.”

— William Bernbach, Advertising Hall of Fame

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advice with a grain of salt: Only you truly know what strategies make most sense for your organization.

But as a former product acquisitions executive and CEO, I am someone who’s made a living identifying market voids, spotting rising talent and shopping product to/sourcing it from the four corners of the world. And an everyday guy who took a game – *Heavyweight Thunder* – produced out of a proverbial garage, and saw it marketed via online/retail outlets in more than a dozen individual territories. The net result: Over 75,000 pieces sold, 95% of revenues derived from markets outside the U.S., and a product that achieved profitability before it even shipped.

Based solely on real-world experience and hands-on feedback, the following are a few thoughts any savvy executive or marketer looking at globalizing their operations would do well to consider:

- **Focus on familiar concepts, brands**

Every territory has its own social norms, mores, and – most importantly – pop culture framework. And, as touched on before, it’s essential to acknowledge and exploit this fact.

Developers: Why build a game that speaks to a single audience when you can instead create a concept that’s marketable across the world in its entirety? Publishers: What’s the point of hamstringing sales potential, adding layers of complexity and packaging titles in such a way that they’re only suitable for sale in one nation instead of 50?

Once again: Across countries, political/geographic boundaries and cultures, we all understand certain topics. Music, animals, sports, raising a family... Keep game premises rooted in real-world frames of reference whenever possible. Even when speaking to various sub-cultures or niche markets (i.e. flight simulation fans or turn-based wargame enthusiasts) it’s

“To say nothing, especially when speaking, is half the art of diplomacy.”

— Will Durant, Historian and Philosopher

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possible to tweak titles so they’re more instantly comprehensible.

As the casual market has so effectively proven, all demographics – women, seniors, even those who can’t tell a pachyderm from a PlayStation 3 – are potential game buyers. It’s merely a question of whether it’s possible for them to interpret your sales pitch and how they do so. (Again, try showing an average twenty-something female *BloodRayne* and *Bejeweled* and see which one she chooses.)

Likewise, some branding choices will make sense in certain parts of the world, while they’re likely to be met with blank stares in others. Whatever happens, before signing on the dotted line, do your homework: Talk to overseas partners, research various territories’ temperaments online and, where applicable, conduct focus group testing. Otherwise, you could get stuck with a *New Coke* – or, worse, *Pocari Sweat Extreme Powerlifting*.

• Don’t make when you can buy

The temptation’s always there when you’re a publicly-traded company and millions of dollars and mountains of shareholder goodwill are at stake to develop, make and market your own annual hit-driven franchises and original IP.

Fine – that’s your prerogative. But rising costs of next-generation PC and console development (anyone got a spare \$10-20 million?), shifting distribution channels and a constantly changing marketplace make any investment of this size, even sequels, a risky proposition. If you’re going to go all out, before green-lighting internal development or contracting with a domestically-located production house, first see if there’s a similarly-themed product floating around overseas.

Dozens of titles debut on each continent every week. Why build from scratch when you can simply buy one (or built-in content and

“Genius is 1% inspiration; 99% perspiration.”

— Thomas Alva Edison, Inventor

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software/graphics engines) and adapt to suit your needs? Often, differences in cost-of-living and overhead expenses realized by shopping abroad can skew in your favor. Better yet, you’ll frequently pick up a product on which work has already commenced, helping mitigate some of the uncertainty which can plague any new development. Often, such games are from proven producers who’ve built up a small domestic following as well. With luck, you could stumble upon not only the right developer to produce a title from a pure cost standpoint, but one who’s experienced enough to pull the project off successfully.

The greatest find of all, though? When you or an associate happen upon a finished game that can simply be repackaged and turned around in a matter of weeks. Assuming you acquire rights to re-brand the program, who’s to say you can’t ultimately create a license that your company owns all copyright and title to anyway? And should ties ever needed to be severed with the original game’s developer, well... You can simply hire a new studio and continue producing products under the same flagship banner.

Better still, marketing and promotional assets already exist for such properties – you can plunder what you need from the existing treasure trove at-hand, then add to or subtract from it as necessary, and with greater expedience.

• Build games with localization in mind

Holy crap – you haven’t lived until you’ve had to take a title from its native English and translate into 27 different languages, each of which uses wholly different graphic characters.

Marketing and promoting a game in dozens of territories is mandatory at this point: Why sell to one target market when you can reap the rewards of servicing 35? And no one – be they local consumers, reviewers or

“We must face the fact that the United States is neither omnipotent nor omniscient; that we are only 6 percent of the world’s population; that we cannot impose our will upon the other 94 percent of mankind; that we cannot right every wrong or reverse every adversity; and that therefore there cannot be an American solution to every world problem.”

— John F. Kennedy, 35th U.S. President

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sales/distribution partners – wants to see a quick hack job done on a game just to bring it to market. Or, for that matter, find themselves offended by an offhand remark that, while innocent enough in German, means “Your mother smells like wet dolphin droppings” in Portuguese.

So this next point cannot be stressed enough: Take the time up-front to ensure that your technology is capable of being adapted to suit various markets. It’ll save associates countless headaches down the road, lessen the trauma of having to redo speech systems and movie sequences and provide time during which you can double-check for potential points of cultural contention. Oh, and just a suggestion: Consider actually having a speaker of each native tongue have a quick peek at the title before plopping it out at retail or spending millions on advertising and PR campaigns.

“All your base are belong to us,” indeed.

• Invest in each territory separately

News flash: The international marketplace is important – massively so.

It’s not uncommon to see as much as half a developer or publisher’s sales come from foreign sectors. UbiSoft alone claims 51% of total revenue in the first quarter of fiscal year 2006/2007 was derived from outside North America. I’m guessing mobile game powerhouse Gameloft didn’t simultaneously launch *Lumines Mobile* in 75 different countries simply for comedy value either.

That said, here’s a thought: Take the time to devote funds to and plan and execute a proper individualized marketing, PR and distribution campaign in each of, if not solely your biggest, overseas markets. Tailor each country’s particular brand of messaging separately as well. It’s not that you *can’t* do this, or haven’t well in the past. It’s just that given the typical daily

“We have two kinds of licenses: Ones that make money, and ones that help move [intellectual property] forward.”

— Henk Rogers, Founder, The Tetris Company

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executive routine, most don't have the time to see what's going on in the world right outside their office, let alone thousands of miles away.

The solution: Make the world, not just Belgium, Canada or Finland, let alone New Jersey, a priority. Assign staff to tackle to this problem. Keep tabs on how ventures are progressing and source feedback from journalists, brand leads and retailers. Learn to interpret what makes each territory different, how to best communicate with its populace and whether there's a particular market niche you can fill.

Seek synergy wherever possible; there's no sense being the puzzle game champion in Russia and real-time strategy king in Korea. But, of course, a one-size-fits-all approach isn't always suitable.

Learn to maximize efficiency, while maintaining enough flexibility – and self-awareness – to step back and swap strategies on a dime when things aren't working.

The world is prone to changing in the blink of an eye. To keep up with it, you have to be willing to expend the time and money necessary to be capable of doing so too.

• **Treat subsidiaries and partners with mutual respect**

Between the Internet's global reach, gamers' vocal/close-knit nature and the many talented associates continuously working in every conceivable time zone to promote your products, the whole world conspires to ensure your success. Shame on you, I say, if you're not trying harder to take advantage of these tools.

Unresponsive sales reps, territorial disputes, a general conception amongst company internals that if it doesn't fall within a set purview, it's not your problem... These are but a few of the problems that plague any global undertaking. If your company's international subsidiaries can't even

“There is no ‘I’ in ‘Team.’”

— Unknown

GOING GLOBAL

communicate with one another – say, to get Italy the screenshots it needs from America to put together boxes and ship on time – what’s the point in trying? Futility leads to aggravation, aggravation apathy, and apathy eventual complacency and burnout.

Free exchange of help and information is crucial when operating on a global scale. Appoint key, motivated decision-makers to oversee such operations and interface with international relations. If the undertaking doesn’t make sense from a day-to-day cost standpoint, start thinking about the benefits to be recognized from implementing various economies of scale. At worst, it always pays to help build buzz by facilitating an extra foreign interview or ad placement, and of, course, generate associated brand goodwill. At best, you’ll be able to spot developing opportunities and burgeoning trends before they explode onto the collective consciousness. All three of you in Cleveland who actually saw Crazy Frog coming, please raise your hand.

“When I want your opinion, I’ll give it to you.”

— Samuel Goldwyn, Founder, MGM

WORLD DOMINATION

OK, so you’ve realized the value of thinking globally when it comes to searching for, building and branding videogame product. Plus, that is, crafting a spiritually consistent, yet territory-individualized marketing and PR campaign across the greater part of the free world.

Now, how to make the most of your efforts?

Easy – the following tips will provide you with general guidelines on getting as much bang for the buck as possible. As well as, while we’re at it, avoiding some of the common pitfalls videogame marketers and public relations reps often encounter when taking their act overseas.

- **Manage expectations**

Your bullfighting simulator did 15,000 units in Spain? Fantastic! Now the bad news: It’s more likely to move 15, period, in Manhattan.

While exporting games can certainly be a lucrative venture, and you should always be chasing new opportunities, part of being a savvy businessman means knowing where hubris ends and practicality begins. Too many times I’ve seen developers come in asking for promises, sales commitments, advances and promotional support that’s way out of line with the market realities governing the product they’re trying to flog.

Keeping tabs on an emerging market and making sure you don’t get screwed is one thing. Grossly overestimating your product’s worth a whole other kettle of fish entirely. It should go without saying: A product is only worth as much as people are willing to pay for it. And

“You can’t shake hands with a clenched fist.”

— Indira Gandhi, Indian Prime Minister

WORLD DOMINATION

you need to do the homework necessary to know when asking a partner to cough up \$2 million for TV advertising for a curling simulation is wishful thinking, to put it mildly.

Success in one territory doesn’t automatically guarantee victory in another arena either. I don’t care if you’ve moved half a million units in Scandinavia. If you can’t communicate effectively with local retailers, produce packaging that speaks to the right audience or conduct a proper PR campaign in overseas markets, you can forget about cashing out internationally. Simply securing distribution isn’t enough either – don’t put product on shelves if you can’t back it up promotionally. Taking heavy-handed tactics with potential partners, assuming that you can always go it alone, is an unwise strategy as well.

Never sell yourself short. But also never do as other companies I’ve seen and, sadly, keep your product from ever reaching eager buyers’ hands by succumbing to greed or arrogance.

• Take foreign correspondents’ advice to heart

A long time ago, a little retail chain – you might know them as Wal-Mart – asked for a deer hunting game. That innocent request, scoffed at by many, soon went on to become a multimillion-dollar sensation that ushered in an entire era of budget-priced, casual diversions.

The lesson to be learned: Keep your ear to the street. If an associate overseas tells you an opportunity is being missed to market to a particular demographic, invest the time to perform a cursory investigation at the very least. Likewise, should they inform you a particular form of messaging – ads, boxes, sell sheets, even general branding – is confusing, indecipherable or in ill-taste, also look into it. It’s further worth putting in the occasional query or research necessary to understand



“Seek, and ye shall find.”

— Matthew 7:7

WORLD DOMINATION

how you’re being perceived by the public in each particular country. You may be a hometown hero, but reviled in the eyes of the rest of the world.

Nobody can read the pulse of a foreign market like those who constitute it. A wise leader learns to trust and respect his advisors’ council.

• When searching, cast a wide net

Don’t be fooled by stereotypes; people are capable of amazing feats of talent and ingenuity the world over. Cars made in Korea were once the laughingstock of the automotive industry – I now proudly drive a Hyundai.

Eastern Europe, South America, China, India... Constantly be looking to developing territories for the hottest new opportunities in gaming to acquire and promote. Certain areas of the world may not sport sophisticated development communities today, but they will eventually, and only a fool would miss the chance to be at the forefront of these movements.

When shopping for product or seeking foreign partners, it pays to be an agnostic: Good people are good people, and cash spends just as well or poorly in any given market. (It all depends how you utilize your resources.)

Hunt far and wide for anything and everything – you never know when you’ll stumble across a lucky or once-in-a-lifetime find, especially from a marketing, PR or even sales standpoint.

• Choose overseas partners carefully

Be careful who you work with – not all companies are as scrupulous or committed to the high ethical standards you pride yourself

“There’s an old saying in Tennessee – I know it’s in Texas, probably in Tennessee – that says, fool me once, shame on – shame on you. Fool me – you can’t get fooled again.”

— George W. Bush, US President

WORLD DOMINATION

upon. Once again, take it from personal experience. The way things read on paper isn’t always how they turn out, and suing someone halfway across the globe isn’t always as feasible as you might think.

Make a point of researching any potential partner in-depth before cutting a deal, and try to secure as much in hard equity as possible upfront. The more stable and trustworthy your choice of associates, the less you stand to lose should anything go awry. Go with your gut when in doubt; if a particular deal or distributor sounds too good to be true, it probably is. That’s not to say you shouldn’t take chances along the way: Some of the best deals I’ve negotiated have been made via sudden, surprise acquaintances.

Always take a good look at any given field and those operating within it before jumping in, however. Remember: Potential associates are going to be the public face and voice of your brand in the given territory. You need to understand where partners sit legally and financially, how they’re perceived by the customer, and what influence they really command in the marketplace before signing on the dotted line.

• Start exploring the possibilities today

Given the above information, there’s no reason you can’t begin making immediate overtures towards globalization.

Even if all you do is build a website, start researching overseas distributors online or run a cursory scan of foreign game magazines looking for potential product or places to plug your own exports, it’s a step in the right direction. Checking out some of the many international gaming trade events such as E3, the Tokyo Game Show, Germany’s GCDC and France’s Game Connection is advised too.

After all, the biggest reason most companies don’t succeed outside

of their immediate borders? They, like many of us, simply forget that while we shortsightedly slave over PC desktops, Xbox 360 development kits and “market-revolutionizing” sales presentations, there’s a whole entire world going on around us out there.

“I can speculate, or I can say that the way things worked out were almost perfect. This is what I should have been doing all along.”

— Chris Taylor, Founder, Gas Powered Games

“Every day is an interview.”

— Unknown

PERFORMANCE PACKAGING

To the average consumer, shopping for a piece of videogame software is a lot like dating: First impressions are everything.

Studies suggest it takes anywhere from 2-3 seconds for a given product to make an impact on buyers. Web-only properties can do so in as little as 50 milliseconds, an infinitesimal fraction as much time.

With countless observers' purchasing decisions made within similar windows, the implications for marketers are profound. In short, while you can't judge a book (let alone PlayStation 3/Xbox 360 title) by its cover, how potential suitors look, dress and comport themselves is nearly as important as each package's actual contents.

No surprise there. Presenting digital diversions in such a way as to make them more commercially appealing is, naturally, the name of the game. (See: Tradeshow appearances, PR campaigns, online/print/TV advertising...) But comb the aisles at local retailers or browse online storefronts, and you'll be surprised at the seeming lack of effort and imagination placed into branding most titles with their own singular, attention-getting identity.

You've poured multiple years, thousands of man-hours and millions of dollars into your latest bar-raising, industry-revolutionizing project. Here are just a few simple, straightforward suggestions for helping it better look the part.

- **Keep it simple, silly**

Graphical assets shouldn't just be first-rate. They should also immediately get key messaging across and appeal to a broad demographic. Niche

“I wanted control over the merchandising... the actual packaging of the product. The only way to exercise it on all those levels was to start my own label.”

— Helen Reddy, Singer/Actress

PERFORMANCE PACKAGING

buyers may appreciate them, but nix the machinegun-touting genies and screens full of statistics: Focus instead on the core theme which makes your title tick. Is it baseball, fantasy role-playing, racecar driving? Lead with pictures/symbols – a batter swinging, wizard casting or high-end auto burning rubber – that convey the point in a way all ages and interest groups can understand.

• Dress for success

Unreadable text, fuzzy/indistinct characters, screenshots so small they're nearly invisible... deadlines or no, never let half-baked layouts out the door. A few hi-res renders, action-packed images and fun, freeware fonts are all it takes to jazz up the homeliest box. Short on assets? Ask developers for artwork, have fans submit images or commission professional illustrations. You wouldn't attend a wedding in a stained undershirt and sweatpants. Don't disrespect consumers by dressing down for an equally-important occasion – your game's grand unveiling – either.

• Less talk, more action

No one likes a chatterbox. Say what you mean clearly and succinctly, lest gaming enthusiasts (hardly known for their attention span to begin with) be instantly intimidated at a glance. Keep game descriptions under 150 words when penning general copy and bullet-point features wherever possible. (No excuses either; mobile gaming providers work with 150 *characters* or less.) As a rule, let screenshots tell the tale. Handy tip: Using an empty or static environmental photo is a sure way to induce viewer apathy.



“Microscopic Space Fleet”

— Label on empty bag bundled inside 1984 Infocom game *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*

PERFORMANCE PACKAGING

• Dare to be different

Unique sales points (USPs) are one-of-a-kind features your product offers others don’t; stressing them, the best way to entice consumers or retailers who’d otherwise straddle the fence. At \$20-\$60/game, most players can’t afford to be collectors, or prospective distribution partners inventory speculators. Customizable units, options for battling hundreds of opponents online, guest appearances by Kirstie Alley... Make a point of expressing why your first-person shooter or real-time strategy title’s different than, say, the other 60,000 also currently clogging store shelves.

• Keep everything on the record

Critics’ opinions matter... Whenever possible, include them on the box. (Movie studios use preview screenings to source advertising quotes – you can too.) Nonetheless, do so judiciously. Don’t misquote: “Might be game of the year...” doesn’t mean *is*. Avoiding overdoing it: Except when touting an award-winning title’s critical reception, use three snippets max. And don’t underestimate consumers; unless from a professional source, e.g. *Computer Games*, avoid overusing enthusiast/fansite outlet-specific commentary. A sentence mention in *Newsweek* still beats an A+ from *ElectronicArmpit.com*.

• Pack it in

Consumers love stretching every dollar further – help them do so by including cost-effective pack-ins. DVDs present just one compelling model: On-disc bonus content like making-of videos, director commentary and art galleries make welcome additions to any interactive outing. Alternately, consider featuring e-books. Costs to add PDF files to a CD/DVD are negligible, while you can still showcase titles’ cover artwork

“As a rule, mega-corporations aren’t good at making creative decisions.”

— Steve Meretzky, Game Designer

PERFORMANCE PACKAGING

and retail price freely on game packaging. (“Free \$14.99 value with purchase!”) Don’t be afraid to think outside the box.

• Put some feeling into it

Emotional responses can be a strong sales trigger – exploit them via clever visual cues. Hocking an adaptation of a best-selling fantasy novel? Package it like a storybook, complete with gilded gatefold cover. Shilling a mystery or sci-fi adventure? Take a lesson from ‘80s publishing pioneer Infocom, who included faux newspapers and kitschy toys with several popular titles to help create atmosphere. Comic book spoofs with period-style art, safecracking games featuring dial-shaped cover inserts... Use your imagination to spark the viewer’s.

• Mind your Ps and Qs

No exceptions: When presenting either yourself or your products in a professional setting, poor grammar and spelling are simply inexcusable. Such errors aren’t just tacky; they instantly shatter suspension of disbelief, ripping the reader right out of whatever mental picture you’ve been painting. Take time to proofread everything twice and always run copy by at least two associates to elicit feedback. There’s nothing like exploring the gloomy, run-down corridors of a “haunted mouse” to send a shiver up one’s spine...

• Give buyers some incentive

Offering consumers incentives – i.e. buy one, get one free promotions or discounts for purchasing multiple products – is another handy way to increase sell-in. Consider rewarding shoppers with a range of added bonuses from frequent buyer programs to free online map/unit down-

“Chaos and order are not enemies – only opposites.”

— Richard “Lord British” Garriott, Creator, *Ultima*

PERFORMANCE PACKAGING

loads, access to regular content updates or the chance to join exclusive beta-test programs or user communities. Such extras needn’t cost you a thing, and in many cases can even help enhance promotional or marketing research efforts pro bono.

- **Randomize value-adds**

Especially poignant for online game providers: Think about presenting several variations on specific giveaways (e.g. different character skins, pets, weapons or vehicle decals) that consumers can randomly earn with each purchase. That way, every user who downloads an expansion pack or virtual playing card supplement can, potentially, receive entirely different content from another, giving them a personal connection to the title. Such simple tricks also help promote discussion, prompt item swaps/interaction between players and otherwise garner additional fan and media attention.

“Buy Low, Sell High.”

— Business 101

CONTROLLING COSTS

Warning: The videogame industry is officially under siege.

Not by parents, politicians or the mainstream media either. The biz’s truest, and most insidious, enemy? Our own inability to keep rapidly ballooning budgets from spiraling out of control.

In November 2005, researcher Screen Digest predicted that within the next-generation gaming era, a scant 80 titles a year would succeed. Here we sit years later, and given current spending levels, one can’t help wondering – were estimates actually too conservative?

The average costs of developing a “AAA” console/PC product now hover between \$10-20 million. The number of independent software houses capable of assuming that kind of debt, let alone handling a project of this scope, is shrinking daily. And so it happens that treasured studios like Troika (*Vampire – Bloodlines*), Stainless Steel (*Rise & Fall*), Cyan Worlds (*Myst*) and Lionhead (*The Movies*) disband, barely cheat death or become victims of corporate consolidation.

Ask the pros and they’ll tell you. Risks are higher than ever, barriers to market entry insurmountable and the odds against original titles triumphing shock-inducing. The glory days of garage development just a fading dream too.

The net result: Fewer games put into production, less offerings that push the envelope, and enthusiasts who feel robbed of hard-won goodwill and harder-earned dollars. Not to mention release schedules bursting with cut-rate sequels and Z-grade fare spat out in faint hopes of recouping a few cents on every development dollar.

In other words, insiders are convinced that nowadays, it takes money

“The safe way to double your money is to fold it over once and put it in your pocket.”

— Frank McKinney Hubbard, Humorist

CONTROLLING COSTS

to make money – lots of it. And that if you don’t have access to eight-figure capital or bankable talent, well... You can take that puzzle-solving/turn-based strategy hybrid and shove it.

Only *Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved* – produced in record time by a largely one-man team, sold for \$5 via Xbox Live Arcade, and downloaded a whopping 200,000+ times – tends to refute this theory. Ditto for my own self-published boxing sim *Heavyweight Thunder*, built in a proverbial back bedroom, which sold 75,000 units worldwide. Let’s not forget rising trends like mobile gaming either, with average monthly industry revenues nearly doubling over just 2006 alone, says analyst group Telephia.

To wit, a little secret that begs sharing. While some decision-makers are loath to admit it, it’s entirely possible that it’s our own poor business practices (not player apathy or unpredictable transition cycles) that are suffocating the market.

Hence the reason buzzwords like “convergence” seem so unsettling. Name-brand actors are unnecessarily expensive; costly scripts from best-selling authors seldom a true product enhancement.

As an everyday working stiff with typical family and professional responsibilities, I’m not one for 50-hour epics either. Seeing as most game players are now grown adults with similar scheduling dilemmas, wouldn’t most be better served by shorter, punchier – and cheaper-produced/priced – titles with greater impact?

Nor does episodic content seem like a compelling solution, especially in the wake of Ritual Entertainment’s buyout and shift to mainstream-oriented content. Rather than bite-sized chunks of a larger epic, how about studios try taming their ambitions and crafting smaller, sharper, more complete standalone games that offer real incentive for fans’ continued interest? (See: Sony’s *God of War II*.)

“It’s nice to have a game that sells a million copies.”

— John Carmack, Co-Founder, id Software

CONTROLLING COSTS

The likeliest explanation for recent shortcomings: We, as both game makers and marketers, simply haven’t figured out how to best speak to consumers.

It’s a lesson best taught by so-called casual games, as mentioned in earlier chapters. The fact we even lump these titles – user-friendly amusements suitable for all ages, genders and skill levels – into their own category says everything. Touting catchy themes, intuitive play mechanics and instantly-gratifying action, the only thing separating them from most traditional retail offerings is their approachability.

Distributor RealNetworks says 70% of its purchases come directly from females aged 40+, an audience most titles can only dream of. Given typical videogame themes – sci-fi, fantasy, war – it’s understandable.

Smartly built – think teams of 3-5 people working 6 months on sub-\$100,000 budgets – and even more cleverly marketed, 5,000 copies sold of a casual game can be considered a hit. Compare that with the 100,000-1 million required for standard PC/console games (which attract a largely 18-35 year old male following) and the implications are chilling.

Simply put: These titles aren’t a fluke. They’re the type of cost-effective outings publishers desperate to grow the gaming market should’ve been making all along.

That’s not to say playing to a niche audience isn’t possible. Wargame manufacturers such as Shrapnel and Battlefront thrive online. Adventure games and RPGs are sleeping giants too. (Just look at the success of *Oblivion*.)

Nor can those of us who aren’t responsible to legions of cash-hungry shareholders rightfully cast stones. But here are a few thoughts worth bearing in mind by those eyeing a potential industry takeover nonetheless.

Developers: Build titles that speak to the widest possible audience. (No

“I wasn’t satisfied just to earn a good living. I was looking to make a statement.”

— Donald Trump, Billionaire

CONTROLLING COSTS

mutant monkey cyborg simulators and undersea strip-mining tycoons, please.) Keep ambitions within reason. Why overextend yourself on a single project when a series of smaller, more cost-efficient games could eventually fund a chart-topping smash?

Publishers: Use celebrity appearances sparingly, package games for maximum reach, extensively research potential licensing ops before committing and spend cash on value-added content (e.g. custom soundtrack mixes by superstar DJs) only where appropriate. Confine marketing and PR costs to no more than 10-15% of projected sales returns – and project conservatively. Critically assess development partners (some are highly overrated) and try to green-light games with lower overhead/broader appeal. Funnel cost-savings into additional, more forward-thinking titles.

And to you, dear reader: Keep an open mind. Be a gaming evangelist, not a jaded naysayer. As a young industry, we’re all still learning through experimentation. Just because things sometimes go awry, doesn’t mean they can’t be put straight again. (We see you, *Tomb Raider*.)

The upshot: Money still talks. But with a little more care and foresight, there’s no reason everyone – designers, executives, even your average PlayStation 3 owner – can’t have a meaningful, more constructive dialogue.

“Daring ideas are like chessmen moved forward. They may be beaten, but they may start a winning game.”

— Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Author and Poet

SEEKING EXPERT ADVICE

Oftentimes, the cheapest and most effective way to get maximum bang for your marketing and PR buck is to hire an experienced consultant.

Individual experts and boutique outfits like Embassy Multimedia Consultants offer cost-effective, productive and most importantly tangible ways to see exponential returns on your initial investment.

Not only is it fiscally smarter and more reliable than leaning on a huge Hollywood agency. Or, for that matter, trusting opinions from internal staffers, generally too personally or politically invested in most ventures to be able to provide objective criticism. (Ask yourself: Do you really have the heart to tell your boss his/her multimillion-dollar pet project stinks like week-old diapers?)

It's also the best way to guarantee you receive high-quality, personalized service from the industry's most experienced and dedicated professionals. Many of whom, of course, have personally faced similar situations as the ones you find yourself confronting on a day-to-day basis.

Following are answers to the most common questions we find ourselves asked from prospective clients.

Q: What do game consultants do?

A: I like to think of us as the voice of reason in a sea of mixed messages. Some consultants specialize in game design, programming and graphics. We're the guys you call when you want to make your title more commercially viable and improve its chances of success in domestic and global markets.

It's a common misconception that great games are born that way.

“Common sense is genius dressed in its working clothes.”

— Ralph Waldo Emerson, Poet

SEEKING EXPERT ADVICE

Chart-topping titles are the result of hard work and effort on both sides of the development and publishing divide. The truth is the odds are 10,000 to 1 that you’ll produce a hit. We aim to increase those chances exponentially.

Remember – a large corporation isn’t transparent from top to bottom. It’s composed of a separate series of entities, or given departments, if you will. Before a game reaches the marketplace, it has to pass through design, development, post-production, marketing, public relations and retail/sales groups. Each of which has its own ideas about what that title should be. Ask any one of the 100-plus people who may contribute to a given project, and they’ll offer 100 different visions of what that title is, no matter that they’re operating off a single design document.

Worse, in a politically-charged environment, lines of communication are, by necessity, shuttered. How many marketers would dare to go toe-to-toe in the boardroom with their seniors? How many game designers have the clout to stand up to the research and analysis department (armed as they are with facts, figures and NPD data) and prove, in front of executives, that they just know a concept won’t work based on intangibles like “feel” and “gut reaction?” What’s more, after spending two years of their lives on any given title, developers tend to develop tunnel vision, which prompts a resistance to change and inherent defensiveness about any product.

As for independent outfits, they often suffer from the opposite problem. They’ve created something that’s innovative and fun to play, but can’t figure out how to market a title featuring vampire strippers which only thrive in sub-zero conditions to the average blue-collar family from Topeka. And when a guy in a suit asks them to change the title/concept just a little bit so that it might resonate better with the target audience, it’s

“Help me help you.”

— Tom Cruise, Actor, *Jerry Maguire*

SEEKING EXPERT ADVICE

easy to see why the request might be met with hostility and suspicion.

An experienced consultant offers new ways of looking at any given problem, suggests answers designed to elicit tangible results and helps guide the client toward potential solutions of their own choosing.

Companies like Embassy Multimedia Consultants can prevent misguided investors from dumping millions into projects based solely on brand projections and analysis reports. We assist developers when it comes to positioning products so that games which might otherwise go unrecognized receive their fair share of attention. We offer objective feedback, designed to shape titles in the early or latter stages of development, so that they're more palatable to a casual or hardcore gaming audience. And we do our best to prevent the best laid marketing and PR plans from going awry by injecting a healthy dose of reality into any given situation.

Q. Is the consulting market growing? Why?

A: Yes, certainly. Rising development and publishing costs are pushing the overhead on game production into the stratosphere. (We're talking anywhere from \$10-30 million per title.) At the same time, this growth is being fueled by gaming's transformation into a mass market form of entertainment, a trend which has largely evolved over only the last 5-10 years.

Meaning that hordes of individuals – executives, Hollywood studio reps, investors, venture capitalists – who have either no direct background in gaming, or only the knowledge analysts and market researchers provide, are suddenly washing up on industry shores daily. While I'd never downplay the value of hard data (and you should thoroughly research any field before jumping headfirst into it), we all know: The best, most successful titles come from inspired individuals, not faceless corporate cloning labs.

“If you think education is expensive, try ignorance.”

— Derek Bok, President, Harvard University

SEEKING EXPERT ADVICE

Alas, these people control the fate of the industry, and have millions upon millions to spend, yet they often don't comprehend some of the same basic fundamentals the average FPS player grasps. It's no fault of their own; without an enthusiast's background, it's hard to think like one. They rely on their advisors' council, as an experienced leader should.

But sometimes, you need someone who's been out in the trenches and understands how developers, publishers, retailers, consumers and even indie studios think to bring clarity to the situation. It's one thing to say you want to transform a hit toy or movie into an award-winning, mega-successful videogame. Actually understanding what it takes to select the right developer, come up with the correct concept for the title, how to spin it so it stands out from the competition and achieve maximum retail penetration, another entirely.

Embassy Multimedia Consultants isn't made up of academics. We're hands-on experts who've been out there dealing with the real-world problems executives face every day. My partners have contributed to the development, design, marketing and distribution of some of the industry's best-selling titles. I myself have acquired/shipped games all around the world on budgets so tight they wouldn't cover the average publisher's monthly travel expenses.

The market's growing at the same pace as the game industry – by leaps and bounds. And, as in any other sector, there's always a need for good people who can offer experienced perspectives on commonly encountered and newly emergent market concerns.

Q. How much impact can a consultant have on a game's development and promotion? And at what point in the product's lifecycle should they be brought in?

“Sometimes it takes an expert to point out the obvious.”

— Scott Allen, Entrepreneur

SEEKING EXPERT ADVICE

The answer depends entirely on the client. In the early stages, we can have a tremendous effect – in certain cases, we can even be the deciding voice that ultimately helps publishers determine whether or not to approve a concept, how much to spend on it and when to ship. It all depends how open the commissioning party is to feedback, how fluid their deadlines and budgets are and their willingness to work with an outside party.

Sometimes our work can be cursory: Explaining where to add a tutorial, polish up a menu screen or implement better targeting. In other instances, it can be sweeping: Defining how a marketing campaign should read, introducing radical new features where none existed before and influencing the areas of play developers focus the most attention on. In many cases, we’re brought in to evaluate products that have been submitted as potential acquisitions; those that pass the test often go on from simple concepts and early-stage prototypes to become jaw-dropping reality.

When hired late in the game development cycle, results will be less markedly visible, but no less poignant. We’re frequently responsible for the little bits of polish – snazzy dialogue, the choice to pause and access an overhead map, video sequences that you can skip instead of having to suffer through 10 times – you never consciously notice. A consultant’s best work is never seen: If you have a seamless, enjoyable play experience, than we’ve done our job properly.

That said, only a fool would purport to work magic within a title’s last 8-10 weeks of development. We offer only actionable data – points strategic partners can meaningfully act on in a given timeframe. And while that might not help turn a stinker into a hit, it can help the game potentially rise above its faults to eventually attain respectable public standing and review scores.

“‘The only unofficial consulting detective,’ he answered. ‘I am the last and highest court of appeal in detection.’”

— Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Author,
Sherlock Holmes: The Sign of the Four

SEEKING EXPERT ADVICE

Otherwise, from a marketing or PR perspective, so long as there’s time to execute actionable initiatives based on our findings, we can be of meaningful assistance at virtually any point in the project lifecycle.

Q: Where can consultants be most helpful to videogame companies?

A: In the following areas: Marketing, PR, sales, research, development, design, copywriting, promotions and advance critical feedback. Because we have no vested interest in the success of any given product, we’re able to offer honest, informed opinions. The toughest problems often have the simplest solutions, but when you’re working 14 hours a day alongside teams of dozens of equally talented individuals, it’s hard to see the trees for the forest.

We’re able to explain how and why certain concepts might not work. Which features are best abandoned and which are best pursued. What details might or might not be good to stress when presenting your game to the media to help it stand out. How games are likely to resonate with players, and what options might be tweaked to help the average geek on the street get more value from the title. And, of course, how to tie it all together neatly so that you stand the greatest chance of scoring a money-making hit.

There are no promises here – the marketplace is fickle, and anything can happen out there. But it’s not ill-founded to think of a consulting firm as insurance of a sort. If you’re going to spend \$15 million on a title, why not spend an infinitesimal fraction of the budget making sure people actually comprehend what it is you’re shopping, and how the game is being presented?

Q. Don’t your services sound a little too good to be true?

A: Let’s be on the level here.

“Doubt is the beginning, not the end, of wisdom.”

— George Iles

SEEKING EXPERT ADVICE

A consultant is not a miracle worker – they can’t magically take an abysmal game and turn it into an award-winner. A consultant is not an accountant or HR recruiter – we can recommend good people in certain instances, but we can’t solve budget crises or staffing disasters. A consultant is not a replacement for corporate leadership – we’re advisors, who work to support and bolster existing organizational infrastructures while maintaining a neutral position with all parties involved.

And a consultant, contrary to popular belief, is not someone who goes in offering ‘big solutions,’ but rather actionable, cost-effective, real-world remedies. And we’re only as effective as the people who hire us are willing, and able, to let us be.

Q. What are the biggest challenges consultants face?

A: Earning the respect of those with whom they work. Let’s face it – no one likes to call in a third-party for opinions, even in the case of simple focus group testing. To wit: You wouldn’t bother to fund and build a multimillion game if you didn’t think you knew exactly what you were doing, would you?

Often, we’re called upon when there’s a shortage of fresh ideas, a problem management’s had trouble solving or a dearth of in-house personnel. We’re also brought in as a neutral third-party to facilitate communications between disparate entities upon occasion. In other words, we tend to arrive when the house is burning down, not months before when there could’ve been a chance for fireproofing.

We’re generally hired by what I like to call a “champion,” or advocate, who understands the value of our services. This individual acts as a point of contact, spokesman and cheerleader in often hostile boardroom environments. Others with whom we interface need to be convinced of our

“Good counselors lack no clients.”

— William Shakespeare, Playwright

SEEKING EXPERT ADVICE

value. And the only way to do that is by winning them over with hard results. Of course, achieving those results isn't always easy when the people you need to rely upon for assistance are working at cross purposes.

But then, that's the challenge and the fun of any given project. And there's nothing quite like seeing the smile on a senior executives' face when he/she sees how much their product – or bottom line, go figure – has improved in the long run as a direct result of our performance.

Q. What are the ballpark costs for these services?

A: Fees are commensurate with the scope of the work, length of term and difficulty level associated with any given project. While I can't give specific figures, I can say the costs are much cheaper than suddenly finding out two weeks before ship that *GameSpy*, *OXM*, or *Games for Windows: The Official Magazine* are poised to give a so-called smash hit game a 1 1/2 out of 5 review score.

Q. Where does consulting fit into gaming's future?

A: The game industry's growing daily. Casual games, digital distribution, e-sports, blogs, in-game advertising, game video sites... It's amazing how many different directions the business is headed in. With new expansion inevitably comes new opportunities and new obstacles to be overcome. As experts who pride ourselves on staying abreast – and, in many cases, ahead – of the continuously changing marketplace, we stand ready to meet the challenge.



“My industry pisses me off.”

— Dan “Shoe” Hsu, Editor-in-Chief, *Electronic Gaming Monthly*

VIDEOGAME MARKETING 2.0

Say what you will about the interactive entertainment business, but there’s no getting around it. The dawn of a new age of videogame marketing is here, courtesy of the industry’s explosive growth, increasing mainstream awareness and various changes taking place within its very cultural fabric and physical/technological dynamics.

Happily, for those who stay ahead of the curve, it’s possible to not only survive this transition period, but also see your company and brand emerge from it stronger than ever. The only catch... It means we out here in the field have to constantly and completely reeducate ourselves, with the rules changing almost as fast as forward-thinkers from Fortune 500 executives to even bloggers and everyday Joes can dream them up.

What’s more, as we’re clearly seeing in the world of user-controlled content and Web 2.0, traditional methods of advertising and public relations are slowly, but steadily becoming increasingly archaic. Newsstand sales have been on the decline for years now. TV viewership continues to slump, most notably among the highly desirable tween, teen and twenty-something demographics. Box offices across the nation are further seeing returns that are a mere fraction of their former glory to boot.

Even the basic philosophy behind the entire industry is beginning to show fatal flaws, as illustrated by ballooning budgets, constant consolidation and a seemingly inevitable shift towards licensed property over original IP. Not to mention, that is, such a vast degree of disconnect with end-users that an entire billion-dollar so-called ‘casual games’ industry – which simply gives people accessible titles at value-minded prices – has sprung up and is quickly outstripping its progenitor.

“I just hope people realize that you can break out of the mold and do stuff that’s cool and original. Dating simulators – that’s the future...”

— Jeronimo Barrera, Producer, *The Warriors/Bully*

Nonetheless, the truth of the matter is as follows: Change is good, and has been a long time coming. It’s good for us, the professionals who pride ourselves on always finding hip, cost-effective ways to connect with the public and get our message across. And, of course, change is also good for consumers, as disenchanted and mistrustful of established sales channels, corporate culture and the existing game industry hype machine as they’ve become.

Naturally, you’ve no doubt heard about how cutting-edge firms are increasingly looking to in-game advertising and viral solutions to spread the gospel – that’s what’s making headlines. But in the interest of being proactive (and staying a step ahead of the herd), here are several further novel methods of game marketing that promotional and PR firms of all sizes and inclinations would do well to familiarize themselves with in the very near future:

- **Community Building**

You could say it was inevitable given the Internet’s capacity for fostering communication: Within today’s always-online, interconnected world, games have become no longer simply standalone propositions, but rather full-fledged interactive social experiences.

Arguably best illustrating the point is Vivendi’s MMO juggernaut *World of WarCraft*. Granted, many of its 8 million global subscribers play for the high-quality in-game content itself. By far and away though, the largest percentage of this population is simply there to meet fellow adventurers with hobbies and interests just like themselves. No surprise there: It’s precisely this human element that people gravitate so readily to, effectively broadening the title’s reach to encompass nearly anyone and generating the outing’s almost unheard of popularity in the videogame, let



“The killer apps for virtual worlds have been and will remain chatting, hanging out with friends and entertainment.”

— Raph Koster, Author, *A Theory of Fun for Game Design*

alone MMO, space. After all, almost as important as a first-rate product is the opportunity to enjoy it in the company of friends, or at least be able to sit around and swap war stories later.

In other words, even people who don't normally play fantasy heroes love the game because, despite its wizards-and-warriors theme, there's something within it to which they can all relate. Just as audiences watch reality TV shows because (at least at face value) they appear to be viewed through the same perspective as our own everyday lives, so too do they play such titles less, most times, for their actual in-game content than the overall entertainment value and camaraderie involved with doing so.

So, essentially, an experience that's completely static and one-sided – e.g. a glossy print advertisement – doesn't just feel disingenuous. It also fails to interest and excite, because the user has no way of making the process of viewing or absorbing it their own. Worse, for that matter, they've also got zero vested personal interest in the product being promoted, save seeing it as yet another way to waste one's disposable income. The point being that at times, it pays to take audiences behind the scenes, as well as place them in front of the spotlights, in essence blurring the lines between company and consumer. Help people understand the personalities and processes behind the product – not to mention how it'll provide actual value in a context they can comprehend – or so the thinking goes, and they'll develop real empathy for the initiative.

How to do so for games? By creating online portals for virtually any title where customers can socialize with fellow buyers and in-house staff; enjoy one-on-one interaction with teams; provide real-time feedback on current and future initiatives; learn more about your company's history; see everyday users like themselves engaging with the product; enjoy hands-on samples; and get to know the singular personalities behind each

“We’ve always attempted to do things differently. Our vision has taken us to unprecedented levels of success and innovation. Just keeping up with technology is not enough.”

— Kaz Hirai, President, Sony Computer Entertainment

outing. Or, while we’re at it, any working combination of these features.

Presenting shoppers with regular news updates, ongoing product demos, a constant stream of assets (including new maps, vehicles, videos, screenshots, etc.) and special fan-oriented promotions may seem demanding. But, by doing so, you’ll also continue to generate excitement over a long-term period leading up to and beyond launch and, by virtue, also produce evergreen marketing and PR hooks. The ultimate payoff being, of course, that the fan community will become your biggest brand evangelists.

One’s presence in cyberspace shouldn’t be treated as a tiny settlement on the outskirts of a vast no-man’s land, but rather the gateway to a world of wonder. Specifically, one where calling yourself a [Insert Name Here] customer means being not just another line item on an annual sales report, but rather part of one big happy family. See Hudson Entertainment’s website (www.hudsonent.com), through which the company’s been able to familiarize itself with an entirely new audience and breathe additional life into aging products. Alternately, look at how these methods have allowed NCSoft to gain additional profit and value from *City of Heroes*, while also increasing the product’s depth and appeal. Even Microsoft has, to some extent, shed its stigma as a ruthless corporate giant by using marketing vehicles like Xbox.com to turn owning an Xbox 360 into not just a specific value proposition, but an honest to goodness lifestyle.

Consumers have been conditioned for years to believe that all that videogame publishers care about is money – but that doesn’t mean you can’t change their perceptions. These days, you just have to recall: You can’t expect to simply sell someone a product and be done with them; rather, you have to treat them with the respect they deserve for making an

“Television: A medium so called because it is neither rare nor well done.”

— Ernie Kovacs, *Entertainer*

investment in your products. Sure, bridging the gap can seem expensive, at least at first – you can’t simply pay consumers lip service by offering up the odd themed desktop background or development update every two months when convenient. But foster a sense of community and a dedicated fan base will continue to support your efforts financially and preach the gospel. Compare costs versus benefits on a long-term scale, and it’s easy to justify the need for additional, dedicated manpower and resources.

• Lights, Camera, Reaction!

For those of you still concerned with getting a quarter-page mention in *Electronic Gaming Monthly* or a brief newsbyte on *IGN*, we have only the following to say: Wake up and smell the photo opportunity. Despite frequently taking a backseat to traditional online/print/broadcast media outlets in most gaming professionals’ minds, video content aggregators are presently the best go-to solution for gamers interested in learning more about upcoming titles. And they’re only expected to become even more influential in years hence.

It makes perfect sense: Engaging as the prose flowing a journalist’s pen may often be, even the most in-depth feature or cover spread can only paint a vague outline of what a game actually looks and feels like. A picture, as they say, is truly worth a thousand words: As with any visual and visceral medium, most games have to be *seen in action* to really understand what they’re all about. And with broadcast time, and therefore exposure, also limited on major TV networks, the best place to get your fill of them is on the Internet.

I’ll spare you the usual spiel about broadband’s explosive growth, YouTube’s potential for attracting viewers vs. traditional television networks and the dawn of Web 2.0. Let’s just point to the simple facts: Rather

“Video Killed the Radio Star.”

— The Buggles, Musicians

than read a 3000-word preview, it’s much easier to skim direct film feeds from a specific digital diversion courtesy of *GameTrailers.com*, *GameVideos.com* or even *MTV Overdrive*. Therefore it’s high time that developers and publishers got with the program and began putting as much effort into crafting and branding content for this audience as material for retailers and old-guard media standbys. To hire marketers, PR representatives and spokesmen who will specifically treat these outlets with the same respect as any trade partner. To realize that releasing a teaser video or trailer here and there just won’t cut it. To understand that gamers want to dig deep into upcoming products, actually experience their charms firsthand and feel that same sense of wonder demo discs and shareware copies used to provide. To actually (and here’s a thought) make fuller and more imaginative use of those snazzy new digital distribution services Microsoft, Sony and Nintendo have all been generous enough to provide.

There’s no sense stopping there, either – think about how everything from comedic spots, machinima, guided walkthroughs, holiday/event-themed shorts or even fan-made content can stoke, or preserve, interest in a current or soon-to-be-released title. Or whether all that so-called behind-the-scenes “bonus material” you’ve spent so much time compiling to offer up just once on DVD wouldn’t be better utilized in free weekly giveaways designed to keep generating headlines and interest in your product website. (Before re-bundling it on that same DVD with extra footage, of course – no need to waste good collateral.)

The best part: Gamers are fascinated by everything game-related. Even a couple garage developers fooling around at home with a camcorder, showing off what their usual day is like and they’re working on via a series

“Somebody once said to me when I was a screenwriter, ‘I love your stuff, but why don’t you write something more commercial?’ I told them, ‘if I knew what that was... I would.’”

— Ken Levine, Founder, Irrational Games

of video diaries or goofy spoofs, could potentially generate huge interest in themselves and their endeavors. What – did you miss the hilarious “Nintendo Sixty Foooouuuurr” video that appeared in that holiday BMW commercial or Games.Net’s fascinating episodic series “Creating Kaos?”

• Thinking Outside the (X)Box

Let’s have a little heart-to-heart, shall we?

Certainly, we all know... Blogs are the red-headed stepchild of the journalism world. (And oh, how they get picked on, as in Sony’s famed Kotaku blackballing fiasco.) Professional gaming, despite all the interest it’s generating, has yet to justify those \$250,000 contracts leagues have been doling out like free keychains at an auto convention. Videogame-based television – let alone the prospect of a 24-hour network devoted to the subject – isn’t especially compelling. Independent publishers’ game distribution portals, e.g. Paradox’s GamersGate.com and Stardock’s TotalGaming.Net, don’t have venture capitalists going all woozy. Oh, and casual gaming providers? We don’t really feel like supporting those with specially-targeted content branded under familiar names, even where synergy makes sense (see: franchises like *The Sims* or *Nintendogs*) just yet. But mark my words – their day is coming, and soon at that.

Cast the all-seeing crystal ball into the future, and it’s not hard to realize that sometime soon – this year, next year, 2012 – every single one of these now seemingly avant-garde concepts will be commonplace. In the near future, marketers won’t stop to wonder whether, say, dropping specially-branded bonus items into a reward-based social gaming experience like Pogo.com’s *The Poppit! Show* is a wise move. They won’t pause to think twice about registering a dedicated domain that will act as a hub where passionate fans of certain genres, i.e. adventure or strategy titles, can

“You don’t work, you don’t eat; you don’t grind, you don’t shine.”

— Mike Jones, Rapper, “Cuttin’”

congregate. (And maybe even acquiring a specific editorial provider like Just Adventure or Strategy Informer to supply daily content...) Or, while we’re at it, sponsoring the next Jonathan “Fatal1ty” Wendel, actually supporting *Joystiq* and *Destructoid* the same way they would *Game Informer* or, dare we say it, publishing an *NBA Live*-branded sports simulation on RealArcade or King.com.

The kicker being that convergence is inevitably the future – just not of the kind most companies envision, pumping millions into ill-advised Hollywood spin-offs without understanding that it’s the theme and end-product, not name-brand talent or red carpet premiers, which ultimately drive videogame sales. Instead, think learning to leverage properties in new and exciting ways across emerging mediums, fresh demographics and heretofore orphaned or undefined gaming subcultures. The key is to stop seeing videogame marketing and promotion as being deliverable in only three core ways: Online, print and television. Rather, we should be looking at it as a grid of dozens of individual dimensions, crafting both the messaging and media so as to hit as many points as possible by focusing on where the lines meet, and, most importantly, blur.

“Permanence, perseverance and persistence in spite of all obstacles, discouragement, and impossibilities: It is this that in all things distinguishes the strong soul from the weak.”

— Thomas Carlyle, Essayist

THE INSIDE WORD

You might have noticed while reading this book that I have a distinct fondness for quotes.

There’s a good reason: If you want to master the ins and outs of gaming or any other business, the only real way to do so is go straight to the source – the people who’ve spent decades shaping it.

Below, you’ll find priceless advice from several of the biggest names in the industry.

Read it. Study it. Take it to heart.

Who knows – you might even learn something...

Mark Rein

Vice President, Epic Games

Titles Worked On: *Unreal* series, *Gears of War*

“There’s no secret to succeeding in this business besides making what you love. Make sure you love to play and are passionate about any game you’re working on, and hope that there’s a ton of people out there who agree. You should always listen to the fans and other game developers, but ultimately, a successful product has to be one you enjoy. If you love it, chances are others will too.

The main thing, though, is just to be smart about what you do. Epic’s succeeded because we’re financially independent, and have spent sweat equity to develop our own intellectual property. That way, we’ve been able to self-fund titles and take games to publishers from a position where we

have ultimate creative control. Of course, that said, luck plays a huge role in any game marketing enterprise.

I would also warn you not to let other people get in the way of your ideas and to always think about products' commercial viability. As a developer, you want to make something that you adore, but also that a publisher can sell. I guess the key is to have a product that people are interested in and want to talk and learn more about, then giving them the means to do just that.

You also have to be smart about how you handle your business once you've achieved some measure of success. The most intelligent thing you can do: Reinvest in your own studio and people. A lot of the money we make at Epic goes into our employee bonus plan – we put a high value on our team. You can do well too by creating your own IP, hiring the best people and treating both with the utmost respect. That said, developers too determined to hold onto their IP or obsessed with making certain visions become reality can sometimes wind up going down with the ship...

But if there's one piece of advice I'd say game makers and marketers should take away above all else, it's this: You can't build a successful title based on someone else's expectations. There's no way to second guess what the market wants or reviewers will respond to. All you have control over is your own game. Make what you want, the way you want, and chances are, everything will fall into place."

THE INSIDE WORD

Jeff Anderson CEO, Turbine

Titles Worked On: *Asheron's Call*, *Lord of the Rings Online*

"Massively multiplayer games have to be marketed and promoted differently than solo titles – you're selling consumers a virtual world, not a single product. Community is paramount. Therefore, when you put together a marketing program, you have to find ways to incentivize certain behaviors. Remember that people will be playing your game for years, not months... it's a huge time investment.

Certainly, community development requires having all the basics: Text chat, voice chat, email... You also have to have certain basic structures in place, i.e. guilds, fellowships and kinships. But you also have to give all these elements a purpose for being (raids, events, leaderboards, etc.). We've done studies and have found that the number one people play MMOs – and I hate to admit it as a developer, given how much time we spend crafting these amazing game worlds – is other people.

Hard work and commitment are the keys to building an online blockbuster. You have to spend time out there, listen to your community and find new ways to bridge the gap between innovation and value. It's also essential to secure the biggest franchises and the best technology and to work with the best partners. And yes, that requires being willing to outlay a relatively large amount of capital.

Your first objective should always be building a high-quality game, whether an MMO or single-player title. But the fundamentals for succeeding in the online space are relatively simple: Work hard, have a good plan and execute on it. Don't forget – you only get to launch once. Sure, you're always late until you ship, but that's a temporary condition. If you ship with a bad game, it'll be labeled as such forever."

Steve Allison**Chief Marketing Officer, Midway**

Titles Worked On: *Hardball*, *Driver*, *Neverwinter Nights*

“The best advice I can give anyone trying to create a first-rate game marketing and PR campaign is to always come out of the gate with the most powerful concepts and to be extremely diligent on the front-end.

For example, we have a process at Midway that every employee can participate in, from the person who answers phones at the front desk on up to the CEO... Before we ever put titles into development, we evaluate the ideas behind them via a series of 10-man focus groups.

It's important to get a sense of how well things resonate with people, and imperative that you have a strong commercial concept before you produce them... we won't be doing any sci-fi action games starring Rutger Hauer or mech shooters anytime soon. Sure, you see these types of ideas a lot: Being creative by nature, developers have anti-commercial sensibilities. But as a marketer, you have to be able to put the proper spin on a title.

We operate in much the same way as TV networks, in terms of doing a lot of up-front research to determine concept quality, marketability and uniqueness. We go through something like 20-60 concepts a year, 2 or 3 of which might make it into production. These days, deciding whether or not to approve a game for production is a \$20 million decision – it's the only smart thing to do. This means boiling possible game projects down to a one-page elevator pitch and putting them through their paces. The most important thing is that you have some science to the process – but that, at the same time, you're also not beholden to it.

Game publishing is a hugely risky business – the stats in 2005 showed that something like only 7% of new IP succeeded, selling in excess of

500,000 units. So think of this process as what I like to call 'IP insurance' – it always

helps to get second opinions from inside and outside sources. You also need a bigger story to your games now than the titles themselves. Look at our [martial arts meets cinematic gunplay game] *Stranglehold* – if all we had was *Max Payne* on steroids and not the involvement of [acclaimed filmmaker] John Woo, where would we be? Certainly not getting coverage in the *Hollywood Reporter*...

So, in addition to my other comments, always remember that publicity is everything these days. We know that 90% of males research games on the Internet before buying them. I'd go so far as to say publicity is 2/3rd of the challenge, with marketing making up the remaining portion. That being said and all, don't go overboard on spending – 6-8% of projected sales is a good figure for your marketing and PR budget on a huge, multi-million-seller; 12-15% appropriate in general. And always make sure you set your targets based on comparable data for similar products: Services like GameSpot Trax and IGN make finding this info easy, and average about 80% accuracy levels when it comes to making projections.

Oh, and if there's one thing you should never, ever do as a marketing or PR professional, it's this – show a title before it is ready. If your concept is powerful, don't screw it by unveiling the game while it's still half-baked.”

Bruno Bonnell**Chairman/Chief Creative Officer, Atari**

Titles Worked On: *The Matrix* titles, *Test Drive* series

“We, as an industry, sell dreams. You have to respect that.

Still, I’m a firm believer in market share. And a company is a living body – nothing about it should ever be set in stone.

Let’s say you buy an Accolade or a Legend. If a studio isn’t performing up to standards, you can always change your mind, change the management, etc. Failing that, you can also incorporate people into other parts of your organization.

Shutting down an operation is a purely pragmatic decision – in many cases, a studio, as much as we’re fond of it, just may not be delivering the necessary level of quality in its products we demand. I may have been too hasty in the past in acquiring minor studios like Accolade and Gremlin. But from the point of view of learning experiences, all of these milestones were very important.

I’m a big fan of [Sun Tzu’s literary classic] *The Art of War* – it’s my secret to success. As the book teaches, one shouldn’t fight an enemy on their strengths. For example, Electronic Arts – in the sports arena, I can’t match them face to face. There are a lot of people in the videogame business you just can’t go head-to-head with in certain categories. But you can be smart, and attack in areas where they don’t expect – with the *Backyard* sports series, for instance. Don’t expect us to fight *Madden NFL* anytime soon, though.

I’m a strong believer in different corporate identities too. Say you go to a club, and you’re a good looking man, but blonde. Other good-looking men can also be at the same club who are bald or have brown hair. Some

women will prefer you; some women will prefer the other men at the club. The reason for the analogy is that business as a whole revolves around freedom of choice, and therefore it’s nothing but a competition. Never forget, everyone is a rival.

The future of interactive entertainment is clearly headed towards easier user interfaces and more accessible games. People want to play what they want, when they want.

Remember the old days of radio in the U.S.? People listened to music all day long, and programming was formatted. Then we became surrounded by music. The videogame business has been similarly insulated. Now we can download on-demand, and play outdoors. Consumers are pushing towards having much more freedom in terms of their gaming experience – that’s why mobile and online gaming is growing.

A second evolution is also going to happen in the space where games have traditionally been seen as an art form. In the past, game designers have viewed making their creations as something like producing an opera... they want to produce something epic, titles that offer 30-40 hours of in-depth (and sometimes open-ended) play. Consumers are moving towards a desire for something more complete, and more exciting. It’s as if they want to make the move from opera into pop music.

A new generation of consumers is growing that wants quick, fast-paced entertainment that’s instantly gratifying. After all, dancing along to a pop song is more fun than watching a 3-hour opera, isn’t it? The problem is that in the past, the critics in our game industry have largely been opera specialists. This is going to change going forward.”

Katie Hanson

PR Manager, Sony Online Entertainment

Titles Worked On: *EverQuest*, *Untold Legends*

“When dealing with the press and publicizing games, proper planning and strategizing are everything. You absolutely, positively have to manage the timing and release of info and assets to the media so that you create and maintain enough interest leading up to and throughout a game’s public launch. I’d start promoting no later than 3-6 months before a game’s release, and keep doing so until 2-3 months after ship.

For massively multiplayer games, you additionally have to make sure you’re constantly generating new content and new reasons to talk about your game, whether in the form of expansions, events or community happenings. Every 3 months, something new and buzzworthy should be available to assist in this regard – even if it means constantly bugging the developers until they deliver. After all, getting the right assets is often the biggest hurdle as a game publicist.

Unfortunately, even something as seemingly simple as making sure screenshots are sexy enough can often be a difficult task for us, which is why it’s crucial that game developers and publishers give the public relations department proper support. I know that PR is sometimes viewed as a nuisance that takes away from the valuable time developers and executives could be spending working on a game. But as a gaming professional, you’ve got to realize the positive support PR brings to your games. PR builds credibility – without it, advertising is largely meaningless.

The funny thing is that it’s the big companies and small companies who get it most and rely on PR most heavily. The small companies can’t afford huge ads in major publications; the big guys know how to play the

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media game. Ironically though, the mid-sized game companies that no one really talks up or chats about are the ones who generally most need it, yet put the least effort into these initiatives.

Anyways, if you really want to be successful at gaming PR, you need to remember it’s about building relationships. Journalists and public relations reps shouldn’t be at odds.

And the media needs to realize that we know how hard they’re out there working to snag scoops and get the best possible coverage, but there’s a reason we sometimes hold back... we’re just not ready or able to talk about something yet. The worst thing a journalist can do is push: It’s a real turn-off, and we generally don’t wind up offering these people exclusive info when it’s finally available.

But from a professional standpoint, PR reps also have to be able to sit and talk to media about anything – life, family, whatever – for 30 minutes, without discussing work. Empathy ultimately leads to better working relationships, and better coverage down the road.”

Rob Dyer

President, Crave Entertainment

Titles Worked On: *Tomb Raider* series, *World Champ*, *Poker*

“[Experience has shown that] it’s a mistake to trust in developers too much to tell us as game marketers and publicists what consumers want. We like to pride ourselves on being developer friendly, but you can only go so far... Ultimately, end-users have to be the ones to tell us what they want.

These days, you have to be concerned with intellectual property, moving in different directions and capitalizing on cultural trends. It pays to stay up on things like online gaming, hip-hop and even big, edgy, inspirational titles. No matter what you do though, you need real businesspeople in control of your projects – otherwise, you'll just be hemorrhaging cash.

Titles have to be consumer-driven. However, you also need to take risks – the industry needs people to push it forward. Companies need to be constantly staying a step ahead of the game.”

Geoff Mulligan

COO, Konami

Titles Worked On: *Metal Gear Solid* series, *Silent Hill* series

“How has Konami managed to stay successful in the videogame biz? Key to our success is our inherent ability to constantly innovate. We strive to give consumers a unique and entertaining experience by delivering the best possible games and most successful franchises. This is important to remember, because the defining factor for the success of any videogame company is the quality of their titles.

However, no one franchise makes us successful – giving gamers a variety of quality content across multiple platforms and appealing to a large audience is also very important. We have games that appeal to players of all ages and abilities. This philosophy has helped us maintain a position as one of the leading global publishers in the industry.

Also worth keeping in mind: Licensed and established franchises are important to our business, but unique gameplay is also a huge factor.

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Konami is not afraid of introducing new franchises and we are committed to developing and publishing games that push beyond the confines of typical diversions.

We can never rely on only one franchise. The success of Konami is inherently tied to the success of us delivering new and exciting properties to the market. A huge part of this is the talent of our development teams that have consistently produced some of the industry's most noteworthy games. When videogame companies have a good diversified library of content, everyone benefits – most importantly the consumer.

The industry will always evolve, providing new avenues for entertainment. Whether it's online, wireless or a host of other options, the end result must be a completely unique gaming experience for the consumer. While online and wireless gaming will continue to grow – building virtual communities to play and share games – the videogame business will always be driven by quality content. If the consumer is not having fun, they aren't going to pick up the game. We strive to provide experiences that keep gamers coming back for more.”

Ed Boon

Creator, *Mortal Kombat*

Titles Worked On: *Smash TV*, *Mortal Kombat* series

“One thing you should never, ever do if you want to market a hit title: Set out to copy a game that's already out.

Saying ‘let's do *Gears of War*’ in a different setting, for example, doesn't work. The whole point is that *Gears of War* is different – that's what makes

it so amazing. A game that's novel has a way better chance of monopolizing sales charts and headlines. It may sound like a smart bet to clone something popular and add a slight twist at first, but if you go that route, you're screwed to begin with.

So many companies play it safe – and I can understand that, given that game development now requires such huge investments. There's this perception that the only way you're guaranteed to succeed is by doing something that's worked before. But formulaic titles never turn out to be as big a sensation as you'd hope. You have to set out trying to do something big to accomplish something big, so to speak.

As for maintaining some sort of longevity when it comes to hitting it big in this business and staying at the top, the trick is to do something different with every new game that helps to revitalize the franchise on which it's based. I've seen a lot of game sequels where designers and marketers do the same thing over and over... they all do well at first, but sell fewer and fewer units with each successive iteration.

Developers and publishers are afraid to change. But the only way to win big is to gamble big and take risks. Novelty is important. People like to lump games into categories, e.g. another World War II shooter or fantasy role-playing game. So if you don't have a game with an immediate, original hook, it's instantly discounted.

As for when you're working with an existing property like a movie or TV show, marketing and PR need to play a huge role in your publishing plan. Programmers and artists aren't trained to promote these types of titles. However, conversely, when it comes to original IP, I'd like to think that marketing and public relations people would take the time to ask creators about their games and get to know each product.

Striking gold when it comes to achieving commercial success with

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games is elusive, though. It's honestly like winning the lottery – it's a combination of luck, hard work and timing. If there was a set formula for topping the charts, everyone would be using it."

Kenzo Tsujimoto

President and CEO, Capcom

Titles Worked On: *Resident Evil* series, *Street Fighter* series

"Our industry is very fast-moving. There's a major upheaval every 5 years so. Companies have to prepare for this. I've been doing it for 30 years now – there weren't even semiconductors when Capcom was first founded. When these changes come around, companies have to be ready. Many weren't. We were, which is why we're still around.

Our company is always looking at how to stay trendy and keep up with consumers' lifestyles. In the past, when you talked about interactive entertainment or leisure, you'd think of those crane games. Now the value these products contain doesn't always have to be physical in nature: A lot of what the consumer takes away from a game isn't tangible... it's just the satisfaction of having had fun. As this has come into play and technology has progressed, we've put an emphasis on creating complex games that entertain and excite in new ways. We're always thinking about advanced entertainment, and that's what pulls us through.

People have criticized [our approach to marketing sequel-driven franchises] at times, but the truth is games are comparable to movies. A movie is over after 2-3 hours. After that, the story gets boring. Granted, a game takes maybe 40 hours to play. But in the end, you're tired of the same basic

plot, and you want more of what it was that interested you in the first place. So we introduce similar product. Consumers know what we did the last time, and expect and enjoy more opportunities to do the same type of thing again.

The chief difference between American and Japanese game publishers: In the United States, publishers are very successful – they’re run by professional management. They focus on money, not making great games. On our side, we always operate under the assumption that there’s a high possibility of losing money, but that’s just our style. American publishers make games so everyone can play. The Japanese – especially Capcom – favor the hardcore gamer.

We’re just lucky to have some great and talented people who are making games, however. And as creative people, they like to make something new whenever possible, not do the same things over and over again. They look for new ideas, and I’ve given them a lot of freedom to operate in this regard. From now on though, I think I’ll be a little less hands-off in terms of managing this, though. I’m planning on establishing a balance in what we publish, juggling more branded titles with the innovative ones.

It’s hard to say what to expect from [game marketing and PR] in the future. For 30 years, I’ve made successes because I’m always thinking ahead. But I never would have guessed Sony would be where it is today. I can’t predict the future... I guess that’s what keeps me coming back into the office day after day. The thing to keep in mind is that whether you remake old titles or create new ones, as long as you come up with a great product, it always pays in the end.”

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Terri Perkins

Product Manager, Funcom

Titles Worked On: *Anarchy Online* series, *Dreamfall*

“As a game marketer or public relations representative, there’s simply no substitute for knowing your market, knowing your product and targeting your market accordingly.

Basically, I think anyone working with game marketing should be a gamer at heart. Gamers are a very wonderful and unique breed and they respond to other gamers. If you know your product and your consumer then you’re able to focus marketing where it should be. If your product has a wide appeal, this is naturally more challenging, but the segmentation and focus on each group is equally important.

Deciding where to concentrate one’s energy varies on the type of game and the stage of the game. If it’s a console game, then it may be that online marketing may not be as important. For an MMO, on the other hand, it isn’t so vital that you hit TV or mainstream media, at least not all over; trade shows and events are more crucial in the pre-launch stages. Print is great if you are about to launch in retail, etc. I think it requires a bit of trial in each area to find the sweet spots for an individual product and modifying your plans from there.

People seem to think the following about game marketers: That we sleep and have multigazillion-dollar budgets. Both are untrue. It’s an extremely fast-paced career with a million things that need looking after on any given day and each activity competing for resources in terms of time and money.

The most overrated thing in the biz? Huge, unfocused ad buys. The most underrated? Remembering to include marketing on design plans

early on. Game marketers are often in product-driven situations versus marketing-driven and this greatly limits their potential effectiveness. Also, remembering that marketing is not just finding ways to sell your product, but listening to the customers and modifying your strategies to meet their needs.

The best game marketers have a real passion for gaming, refuse to believe in the impossible and possess the ability to provide results that work for the gamers, the developers and the money crunchers at the same time.”

Alison Quirion

Vice President of Marketing, D3Publisher of America

Titles Worked On: Evil Dead series, Full Spectrum Warrior

“One of the most common gaffes I see game marketers make is, amusingly, forgetting their marketing objectives. Just because you think an ad concept is cool or funny, you always need to circle back to what your objectives are and make sure that the concept supports those objectives. Same goes for those great last-minute opportunities; if you are lured in by a great deal or opportunity, make sure it actually fits your goals and objectives before signing on.

Also, a common mistake is thinking that only you have the one right answer or idea. Great ideas can come from anywhere and anyone. Be open and flexible. Even if you are far down the path, if someone comes along with a better idea, then swallow your pride and go with it. The goal is to make your product as successful as possible. Games are truly a team effort, and everyone should be working towards the same goal.

As for the most common misconception about the biz, it’s that all

videogame marketing (and marketers) are evil! The truth is that marketing can help an average game sell a little more than it should or help a great game sell to even more people than it might have. I don’t think anyone can pin poor game sales solely on poor marketing. There are probably a number of reasons that those games didn’t sell. Marketers actually want the same thing that developers want, for games to succeed. Sometimes we just have different opinions on how to make that happen.

Game marketing has changed over the last several years, after all. About 7-10 years ago, it was typical to start a print campaign for a game several months in advance, way before the ship date was stable, so your 6-month teaser would turn into a 9- to 12-month teaser. By the time the game shipped, you’d be way over budget with nothing left for post-launch. Now, you can start building awareness through viral marketing, saving your media dollars for when the product hits the shelf. There are so many options now to reach consumers. While it makes the marketer’s job more difficult, it’s probably most exciting change in marketing to come in years!

In terms of the future of game marketing, I’m sure the new bullsh*t bingo words are “UGC” and “social networking.” Consumers want to create or tailor marketing messages to be meaningful to them specifically. They don’t want to just swallow the messages that advertisers are throwing out there. Marketers can stay on top of these changes by hiring people who live and participate in that new world. Remember, someone took a chance on you long ago... now’s your turn to find the best and the brightest!”

Pete Hines**VP of PR and Marketing, Bethesda Softworks**

Titles Worked On: *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Elder Scrolls: Oblivion*

“If you want to get the most bang for the buck out of videogame marketing campaigns, I think it’s really important to know your audience and what you’re trying to accomplish. Are you focusing on the brand, or are you making a game for hardcore gamers?”

Marketing videogames differs from marketing other forms of entertainment mostly because it’s really the only category where the person experiencing the product is actually controlling it. If you go to a movie, or watch a DVD or TV show or read a book, you’re not at all involved in what’s happening. Most other entertainment products are passive. So in a videogame you may have a great story and characters and visuals, but if the controls aren’t good or the interface isn’t well done, the experience for the end-user suffers.

That’s why you see certain subject matter do really well in other forms of entertainment (e.g. “Western”-themed TV shows and movies like *Tombstone*, anything with Clint Eastwood, *Deadwood*, etc.), but not do as well in videogames. Some things are harder to make “fun” to play and come across easier if you’re just watching.

For newcomers looking to break into the field, studying marketing or business would probably help. But much like any other position in this industry, it’s important that you do something to establish yourself in the biz. Write for a gaming site, beta test, make mods... Even if it’s not entirely related to what you want to do, you’ve got to get involved and show companies you’re passionate about games and know something about them. Otherwise you might as well forget it, because I guarantee somebody else

has the same background as you, but wants it more and is out there doing one or more of those things right now, and they’re going to get noticed.

Frankly, guys who grew up living and playing videogames make the best marketers and PR people. It’s pretty easy to tell the guys who play games all the time from the ones who are faking it, and I think it comes through in the quality of the campaign they put together, the sort of things they talk about with respect to their game(s), etc.

Where should a developer or publisher focus most of its marketing dollars? Opinions seem to vary on this. I’m a big believer in a mix of print and online that is largely focused on the consumer, specifically hardcore gamers. I want gamers who buy games every month. You get them interested and excited about what you’re doing and you’re in good shape. I think to do that you need to be in the books they read on a regular basis, and hit the sites where they go. And that means branching out beyond big portals/networks like IGN and GameSpot and covering sites like Penny Arcade, VE, Blue’s, Shack... places like that. Anywhere I go to get my info, I like to see ads for my stuff.

A rule of thumb to remember when preparing the campaign is that I try never to keep someone’s attention through the holidays. If I have a game coming out early in a calendar year, I try as much as possible not to do too much at the end of the previous year. People tend to focus on what they’re getting for the holidays, not what they’re going to do next year.

From a PR standpoint, I believe in being straight up with folks, even when I have to provide info that may not put one of our games in the best light. Having worked on the press side myself for a number of years, I know that if you go around talking about every game you make as the best game ever, folks will tune you out. For the most part, there are no tricks to making bad products look golden. Game journalists are not stupid and

have seen enough demos to know when they're being fed a line or it's mostly smoke and mirrors.

So what defines a great public relations rep from an average one? It's hard to put your finger on. Part of it is personality, how you treat folks, how responsive you are to requests, and so on.

I find the best public relations strategy is just being honest. Look, we all get asked questions that we can't always answer. We aren't always the source of the info, and there are cases where you can't answer the question directly because of restrictions that have been put on you. But I've found that journalists appreciate a PR person who gives them a straight answer, treats everyone fairly, and gets back to people.

Whatever the case, determining when to start media outreach depends on the game and the goals for the product. Six months before ship date is awfully short for a proper PR campaign: It's hard to get anything done properly in that much time. Closer to a year is better.

When picking outlets to focus on, I've always believed in concentrating on enthusiast publications first and foremost. Again, it may vary for some games, but the folks who play games constantly are the ones you need to be most informed about what you're doing."

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Jørgen Tharaldsen

Product Director, Funcom

Titles Worked On: *The Longest Journey, Age of Conan*

"If you want to be a better game marketer, first of all, know games [in general]. Then know your product, the assets you can potentially work with, the hooks it has and what unique selling points there are to it.

You also need to know your markets and channels around the world, and hopefully have some experience on what gives the most bang for the buck through several stages of PR. Then you need to check your release date, how long a build-up period you have when hyping it, and what your goals are for the various stages. Once you have a release date to go by it's a matter of staging the content and opportunities, and finding as many ways to get coverage as possible.

The best way to kick off, in my opinion, is to reveal the game in as many countries simultaneously as you can, with, say, a US print magazine leading the street and announcement date. This should mean that you will have extensive coverage both online and in print following the announcement. By having a kick-off like this you get the western world gaming and press communities to start chattering in multiple territories and in multiple channels at once, which is always a nice thing.

As you move through the lifecycle of the product, [keeping buzz going] is a matter of escalating these efforts without running out of steam. Then, as you move towards the crucial launch period, you should have enough left to further broaden the impact and target audience. Hopefully at the end of it all, everyone who is interested in games, or the specific genre you are aiming for, are storming retailers to get the product.

As part of this, I should mention that when dealing with the press, do

your best and make sure you come prepared. Use positive energy: Be honest, friendly, welcome and knowledgeable. Make sure you truly mean what you say, and if you don't, focus on something else. People notice. Make sure it's obvious you have complete faith in your game, because if you don't, who will? Also never complain that much over late deadlines. In my experience a lot of members of the press are working on very tight deadlines, and this is often something which simply comes with the job.

Never take it personal either. If someone doesn't give you what they promised, or you get a bad review etc., shake it off and move on. Learn from the experience, and do better next time.

From a public relations standpoint, I think a person who sees beyond base results and likes journalists not just for the coverage they can give, but for who they are as people, normally gets further. You should also have a passion for your games and company, of course, in addition to very, very good abilities to communicate both in writing and in person. You should also be able to fix a lot of stuff on your own, and depend on your ability to do so. If you in addition have a broad network and know the ins and outs of the world of gaming PR you should be able to do great.

Determining when to start media outreach depends entirely on the project. For instance, on an MMO, you need a lot more time, while on a sequel or licensed product, six months would in many cases be just fine. If you want to keep up with trends, I would say UK print magazine *Edge* is the place to be reading.

Oh, and if you ever find yourself in a situation like Rockstar and the *Hot Coffee* scandal, the best strategy is to be honest – it normally helps most of the way as long as one is not too blunt. Say 'I'm sorry' if you have done wrong by consumers, but keep your head high as well. Keep on pushing. If you make great games, you'll always bounce back, regardless of how hard you get hit."

Alex Josef

CEO, Pacific Media Partners

Titles Worked On: *Diablo II*, *Operation Flashpoint*

"To stage a powerful videogame PR campaign, you have to have clearly-defined objectives and a solid plan upon commencing. It's extremely important to determine what type of product you are working with and who the audience is and make sure that your goals and expectations are realistic.

Once these items are determined then a fairly detailed timeline of actions and tactics can be produced, which creates an excellent foundation for a successful campaign. From that point forward, it's mostly about tweaking and adding in some off-the-cuff creativity to ensure peak performance. One could liken it to driving a car: You can buy a fantastic, high-performance Ferrari (in this case, the PR plan), but unless you know how to handle it behind the wheel, you're S.O.L.

Bearing this in mind, a great public relations rep should always be keeping abreast of what is happening in his/her industry. In addition, you can never knock continuing education: Continuing to learn and polish one's skills is vital. The types of tactics that are used in a videogame PR campaign today differ greatly from the ones used even 3-5 years ago. And without continuing to learn your craft, you just end up in that general pool of mediocrity that doesn't ultimately serve you or your company/client. Many agencies understand this and will sponsor employees in this regard. We actually have a policy in place making it mandatory for our employees to attend various lectures and extension classes in order to ensure their skills remain honed.

Still, there's no substitute for sound judgment. It's totally possible for

PR reps to be friends with journalists and clients, but it's essential to understand the importance of maintaining a professional relationship and not allowing a friendship to cloud those lines. Are there going to be times at events or trade shows where the drinks are flowing and nobody is really thinking about work? Of course there are, but in an industry such as this – one based so heavily on relationships and reputation, you never want to end up being “that guy” or “girl.” You know, the one that (take your pick) got arrested, passed out, told their client that they think their game sucks, told a journalist their writing sucks, etc.

It's especially important when dealing with clients. Regardless of how tight a relationship exists there, it's of utmost importance to always instill a level of confidence in them. They need to know that they can count on you to handle things and represent their company/product in the best possible light.

I might be biased, but I think that a company can always benefit from using an agency too. At the very least, an agency can come in and provide a new perspective or breathe some fresh air into an existing campaign. The one core advantage to working with an agency is having a *team* there to operate on behalf of the company. Obviously, this can save money by providing multiple people to work on various tasks and eliminating the overhead of an in-house team. There are a couple of key things to keep in mind when choosing an agency, however...

Firstly, if there is no in-house team involved, then it is imperative to work with an agency that can competently guide the campaign without in-house strategy or direction. They must have the company's objectives and interests at heart and be confident enough to not just be “yes men.” If there is an in-house PR presence, then the agency must be able to work in a cohesive manner with that individual or team. The agency must under-

stand when it's time to take various burdens off of an in-house staff's shoulders and help them to really shine.

Of course, you can't work miracles. If a product is a true stinker, then chances are, any savvy member of the gaming press is going to figure it out – and quick. There are, however, some key elements to conducting a demo for a poor product that can help soften the landing and maybe even make it look good.

The single most important factor is presenting the product in a controlled environment. As the PR rep, you should know which features of your game are the best and which are the worst – obviously, you know which ones to highlight. By maintaining control over the demo, you are able to steer things in your favor versus just handing over a controller and saying ‘go for it.’ I won't mention the company it was for, but a few years ago I actually secured two covers for a game that really should never have even been made. It was all due to controlled presentation.

Smart PR people listen, evaluate and do. That's all it takes to reach the top. You have to be able to view a project or situation (listen), understand and process the information correctly (evaluate) and then mobilize in order to achieve the desired results (do). Nonetheless, if pressed to give day-to-day advice to anyone in the biz, I'd say this: Maintain and foster relationships with the press.

These are the people that you deal with day-to-day and they actually appreciate when someone recognizes them as an individual and not just another journalist. A brief phone call or email just to say hello and let a writer know you read his/her latest article and enjoyed it can really go a long way. Or, maybe, you just go grab a drink with them and talk about anything but work...

Don't be stingy with your efforts at outreach either. Although your

core audience might be hardcore gamers, it's still important to target the mainstream and lifestyle press too, as well as business trades. Depending on what type of game it is, the PR team should be able to determine which of these segments is most appropriate. That being said, it is important to craft different angles and pitches for the various types of publications that will be targeted. Using the same pitch for *Playboy* that you would *Game Informer* just isn't smart business.

When to begin PR outreach? It all depends on the game and the budget. A big-budget endeavor such as a *World of Warcraft* or *Halo* can afford to begin outreach 18-24 months before launch. But for most games, this is neither feasible nor necessary. For your typical high-profile title, it's usually ideal to begin 12-18 months prior to launch. This enables the PR team to implement three phases of outreach – the alpha/first-look phase, beta/preview phase and the final review phase. In between, of course, the PR team would employ various strategies and tactics to keep the game top-of-mind during fallow periods.

Depending on what stage of development the game is in when the PR campaign is initiated, this lead time could be shortened to as little as 6-9 months. Any less than that amount of time cuts into its effectiveness... Especially when taking into consideration the longer lead times of consumer print publications.

The one exception to this rule would be a budget/value-priced title or one that may not be suitable for consumer print coverage. In this case, the entire campaign could be collapsed down to 4-6 months."

Laura Heeb Mustard

VP of Corporate Communications, Chair Entertainment

Titles Worked On: *NBA Jam*, *Psychonauts*, *Advent Rising*

"I think the best way to have a successful gaming PR campaign is to take the time to: 1. Identify your goals, 2. Devise an appropriate plan and 3. Create a realistic budget. This process forces you to prioritize and determine the best strategy for the individual product. It also eliminates wasting valuable time and resources to create opportunities your client may not have the desire or resources to fully explore.

Also worth nothing: When dealing with the press, it's important to always be honest. No product campaign or pitch is worth potentially damaging your relationship with the journalist or media outlet. Journalists appreciate when a PR person makes an effort to level with them and through time will develop more respect for the relationship they have with that person.

A great publicist is also careful to respect an editor's deadline and to be sure you don't promise assets you're not sure you can deliver. However, things happen, and because an editor's entire story sometimes hinges on your ability to meet this deadline, it's important you let them know if you've encountered an issue that might prevent you from delivering. In those cases, I've always made a point of working with the journalist to provide some alternative solution, whether this means providing some other form of assets, substituting another game, arranging for them to speak to an executive or even passing them along to a colleague that can give another twist on the story.

A great gaming PR person exemplifies a lot of the same qualities that make someone great at any other profession... Passion. Professionalism.

Attention to detail. Sense of urgency. The desire to do more than what is expected of them. Of course, you also have to be good at building relationships and have the ability to multitask.

However, truly great PR people have the ability to see the larger picture. Not simply just the product or task at hand, but how does the product fit into the company's long term strategy? Will their efforts impact those of their licensing partners? Does it make sense to go public with something earlier than planned to capitalize on an opportunity that won't present itself later? What's going on in the world that might present a certain public sensitivity to something you're announcing and will it negatively impact your client?

I have always viewed my job as working for both the client and the journalist. I am responsible for representing my clients to the best of my ability, however, part of that is helping the journalist accomplish what he or she needs to for their story. I know I've done my job well when both the journalist and my client are happy because a great story was written.

I've had the opportunity to work in all facets of game PR – as part of an in-house team at Acclaim, an account director at a PR agency, and as a freelance publicist.

The benefit of having a strong internal PR team is that they have the advantage of sharing one unified message that can be weaved throughout the entire product line and serves the overall messaging of the company itself. For example: Corporate PR is often better managed in-house because you have more direct access to key executives. Therefore, you are more a part of the actual process. There are similar benefits to handling product PR with an in-house team, since they can easily coordinate with the other departments and have direct access to the development teams, sales, marketing, etc.

However, agencies can provide a huge benefit when you are looking to specialize in certain key areas. For example, a product that targets the hardcore gaming audience would benefit from an agency that specializes in the enthusiast press, while another with a big Hollywood tie-in, such as *Enter the Matrix* or *Aeon Flux*, requires an agency with more entertainment experience in celebrity or licensing pitches, red carpet events, etc. Other agencies that specialize in high-profile events, viral marketing, publicity stunts, etc. can all be useful when the product calls for it.

Also, in a case where an internal team has great relationships with the enthusiast press, but their reach in the consumer media isn't as strong, it's beneficial for them to hire an agency that has more expertise in the consumer media, while the internal team continues to handle the enthusiast press. A smaller internal team that handles a lot of corporate PR and has more responsibilities to internal departments can benefit from hiring an agency to handle both enthusiast and consumer media outreach, while they provide strategy and oversight.

Of paramount importance to keep in mind, though: Every game, no matter how great or small, has something of interest to talk about. You need to identify what that is and focus on that – what's different, unique and FUN. I think a mistake some PR people make is that they try to show all games as if they are "AAA" games. Sometimes, it's best to keep it short, show what looks great and talk about what is most appealing or unique about the game.

That doesn't mean you shouldn't be savvy about how you present titles. The smartest thing I've seen a PR person do was to pass on an opportunity and pull a game from being

shown because it wasn't ready. Passing on an opportunity or even disappointing journalists expecting to see the game is always better than the

damage caused by showing a game before it's ready. A negative first impression or a bad play experience can absolutely kill a game.

The most ill-advised thing I see PR people do is “drink the [corporate] Kool Aid.” You have to know your product and be careful to not buy into you or your client's own PR. Just because your client thinks every product in their lineup can easily land a *Game Informer* cover does not mean it can. Nor does it mean you should go against your judgment and pitch every one of them. It's the PR person's job to manage those expectations and prioritize.

In general, the length and reach of a PR campaign should really depend on the individual product and what your goals are. Since the enthusiast press caters to the hardcore fans who want to know everything first, you want to go to them early since they are likely to cover things throughout several stages of development. However, the consumer media is more about mass market audiences and casual gamers, so you're best to plan your coverage with them closer to when the game will be available.

Movie studios do 90% of their PR for two weeks prior to a film's release because their sole focus is to sell tickets. Games don't work like that. In order to get the type of mass market exposure you need to have a game hit huge at launch, you need to start with the industry trendsetters and get them excited. They'll begin talking about it and that gets you the attention of the enthusiast press, who – with enough support – can get your game on the very small radar of the consumer press, broadcast media, etc., which is where the real groundswell of publicity can be seen.

Smaller, lower priority games are not capable of keeping the interest of the media as long and so their campaigns should be more compact. If the game only warrants a few previews and a handful of reviews, those should be timed to hit closer to the product launch in order

to make as much of an impact on sales as possible.

Freelance journalists can be a huge asset to any PR campaign in terms of keeping interest levels high, however. Because they're freelancers, they have the opportunity to write stories for many publications that don't cover games often and are thus looking for more original story pitches. The gaming magazines are great, but are most often locked into their format – news, previews, reviews and a feature. Plus, because they are always looking to secure placements, freelancers are always very open to your ideas and working with you to create a story.

Allow me to share a few tips for planning special events too. I am convinced that the success of your event is not about how much money you spend, what food you serve or whether it takes place in small conference room or on a tropical island. It's really about the games and how you prepare and present them to the media.

As an example, I had two clients doing similar events to garner attention for their products in holiday gift guides. One large client spared no expense to show several games in a large warehouse that had been decorated as if it were the North Pole. It looked beautiful and the games were presented perfectly.

Another client had a much smaller budget which required us to show their lineup in our office conference room. It certainly wasn't as glamorous, but the games were presented perfectly. In the end, both events were successful, we worked hard so that each received the same attention and coverage from the media and both clients were thrilled. Ultimately, we were successful because the games were presented well and we worked hard to produce results.

Last, but not least, the biggest misconception about gaming PR is that the journalists you work with are nothing more than opinionated fanboys.

In most cases I have found that to be inaccurate and think that those who underestimate or undervalue the level of knowledge and influence of the top-tier gaming journalists are overlooking some invaluable resources.

These guys are smart. Most of them have been covering games for a very long time and they know their stuff. I've been around long enough to recall a time when there wasn't as much professionalism on the part of journalists... Or publicists, but we're a much more competitive and sophisticated industry now. Ten years ago there were about 20 enthusiast press members and scoring a cover feature might have been as easy as buying a few drinks or outfitting them with new ski gear.

However, that's simply not the case today, when there are literally hundreds of games competing for the same media coverage. It's not just about relationships: You've got to know your stuff, or journalists won't give you the time of day."

Mike Breslin

VP of Marketing and PR, I-play

Titles Worked On: *Jewel Quest, 24: Agent Down*

"To make game PR and marketing campaigns really take off, co-market/promote your products with similarly-themed content such as toys, DVDs, comics, ringtones, wallpapers, video downloads, etc. These open additional advertising and promotional opportunities. Secondly, if game IP is licensed, work closely with the license holder to integrate your product into ALL of their appropriate marketing communications.

For instance, I-play worked together with Universal Studios to cooper-

atively promote [mobile phone game] *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo* in all the movie marketing communications they put together ranging from in-theater trailers to movie posters, websites, print ads and cineplex point-of-purchase materials. All communications contained short codes that fans were able to text in for a chance to win prizes, download free mobile demos and exclusive wallpapers from Burger King, and enjoy *The Fast and The Furious* trivia. Each served as a catalyst and driver for additional game sales. As a result, it's the most successful mobile game racing franchise of all time, resulting in over 6.5 million downloads. I credit our ability to successfully cross-promote the title with its license holder for these results.

For mobile providers, connected gaming across various platforms is the future. It will allow us to extend brands and market products across multiple channels not only into the household, but also directly to the consumer via mobile. In the age of obtaining bits of information through these various technologies, content companies have to offer a full suite of entertainment products that can be delivered in a variety of ways to meet customer demand.

Staying ahead of the curve with new mobile technologies and delivery methods, I-play is moving into what is the future of mobile entertainment marketing by offering WAP content bundles such as mobile games, wallpapers, ringtones and video, all deliverable in various methods to ensure customer satisfaction and maximize awareness of our products.

Being able to bundle products with other forms of similarly themed content via WAP sites allows you to co-promote with strategic partners to increase reach and tap additional revenue streams by reaching consumers and driving demand for your product. Customers want variety and we have to pay attention to offering such content to keep the consumer interested in our games and coming back for more. We need to offer better

propositions to consumers, which can be made available through packaged entertainment and value bundles that allow for more options and ultimately a better price point for the consumer. Additionally, we've found that specific tactics such as preorder campaigns, short code promotions and contests (i.e. the *Jewel Quest* \$25,000 Diamond Hunt Sweepstakes) also help to continue driving demand for games and maintain continued customer loyalty."

Neil Haldar

VP of Content Programming and Strategy, SkyZone

Titles Worked On: *Stargate: SG-1*, *Extreme Hangman*

"Some thoughts for current students: Breaking into the game marketing and promoting biz all begins with having a passion for video games and the industry, and that passion is the key to your success.

Once you have determined that it's the industry you want to work in, begin looking at which colleges offer an academic program in game production or development. There are also several different ways to further your knowledge, either through internships or taking classes that give you a technical or business edge. You can also look into professional certification programs which are offered at many colleges – these consist of 4-5 courses in various videogame topics based on what you're interested in and can usually be tailored to fit your schedule whether you're a student or working a full-time job.

Most importantly, stick to it. The business of making games is tough, shrewd and fast-paced. Consider joining associations like the

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International Game Developers Association (IGDA) and attending tradeshows like the Game Developer's Conference (GDC) to network with peers and build rapport in the industry.

Videogame marketing has changed significantly over the past few years. Today's consumer has a very short attention span, and there is greater demand for convenience and ease of access. Instantaneous access and entertainment on the go are two important functions of marketing, especially on mobile devices. The mobile platform is the largest mass market device and gives marketers a powerful combination of reaching consumers exactly where they are and delivering targeted information and content that extends and augments their experience with the brand.

A must-do checklist to consider when marketing or promoting any title:

- 1. Know the product.** What is the point and objective of the game? Why is it different from other games out there?
- 2. Determine the main selling points.** Why do you think people will like it?
- 3. Who wants the product?** Determine target market demographics. How do you spur demand among and outside the target market demographics?
- 4. What competitive products already exist in the marketplace?** The marketing campaign must differentiate itself and stand out against these competitive products.
- 5. Increasingly, know the genre's history.** Groundbreaking titles only come along once in awhile, and if you don't know the history of innovation in a given genre, you risk losing touch with your audience and remembering how to speak to them."

Mark Cottam

CEO, Mumbo Jumbo

Titles Worked On: *Luxor 2, Slingo Quest, Bejeweled*

“Crucial to our success at retail early on was the fact that we picked titles that were already successful online. It’s one thing to approach a retailer with a new product; another when you have key talking points like millions of downloads or high-profile online brands to help lay the foundation for it. There’s this perception sometimes that casual games should be looked at the same as shareware, which is something we’ve always tried to get away from. Yes, our games are casual, but we made a point of positioning them as best-of-breed for the category.

A lot of publishers think they can take a product that’s solid and go directly to retail with it. That couldn’t be farther from the truth. The fact is, moving your game from AOL to Yahoo! isn’t nearly as difficult as getting it into a Wal-Mart – that requires major effort in the form of costs, contracts, time and relationship-building. Everything a retailer like Target or GameStop sells, they’ve been conditioned to sell – brands are everything in the eyes of these chains. To succeed at this level, you need a solid product that can sell at the volumes they require, and will continue to do so. You’re only as good as your last shipment.

My advice for getting ahead in this business: Focus on quality and always try to push the envelope. In the casual space, this means making fun games that meet consumers’ needs which they can enjoy for 5 minutes or 5 hours. To make a musical analogy, an interesting comparison I like to make is that I say we’re writing singles, not albums. Consumers can buy our products with confidence, knowing they’ll get the same high-quality

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experience across all platforms from mobile handsets to the Wii. With a high-profile brand like Electronic Arts’ *Madden NFL* or *FIFA* series, there’s just too much depth and content to hope to cram everything in and enjoy an equally deep and enjoyable title on the PSP as you would the PlayStation 3.

Ultimately, though, success at retail requires a lot of hard work. A giant like Wal-Mart doesn’t just hand out deals. In addition to a quality piece of software, you need to go in with a sound portfolio and solid track record that shows you have the ability to move games in the quantities they require.”

Greg Fischbach

Founder, Acclaim Entertainment

Titles Worked On: *Turok, Extreme G, BMX XXX*

“This business goes through cycles – at times, there aren’t enough suppliers of game product to meet demand for certain platforms and titles. Then, when there are finally enough providers, the market switches to a licensing model, where the brands themselves are needed to get product onto the market... And, in many ways, become more important than the content itself. Right now: Licenses are strictly a marketing vehicle – content is the most important thing.

One thing I see that’s troubling is how the mainstream videogame industry somehow went off on this bent where it began to think greater realism and more buttons meant better titles. It’s begun to limit the audience. If you look at a phenomenon like casual games, the user interface is

incredibly simple – anyone can pick up and play these titles, and the mouse used to control them has what, two buttons? The problem is that marketers have always looked at their traditional audience as well-educated 18-24 year-old males. That's OK – they're a part of the market. But what we're starting to find out now is that maybe casual gaming is the bigger part of the pie, suggesting that companies should start to design titles that are more accessible.

Looking back over Acclaim's history, I'd say one of the smartest things we did was to be the first company to move into licensed games – it gave us a real edge and the ability to strengthen our marketing dollars. It's easier to sell something consumers already recognize, and saves millions, since the product already has brand recognition to support it. We were also the first game publisher to be platform-agnostic – a decision based on economic modeling, the method all smart companies should use when making the decision to go exclusive or not.

I would also advise prospective publishers to have a solid green-light process in place that fosters dialogue between various departments including sales, branding, product marketing, development and finance. All areas have to be involved, no matter if your company is 25 or 2500 people, and everyone has to buy into ideas being considered for approval. Teamwork is everything – you need to invest in your people, because when they're motivated and trust in one another, it's amazing what you can accomplish.

As for pitfalls I'd caution people about, let's start with this – sometimes being first to market with a certain concept can be very profitable, but sometimes, being cutting-edge is very dangerous. From a marketing standpoint, *BMX XXX* brought more visitors to our website in the 3-month period before its launch than any other product in our entire history. You'd think we'd have been shipping millions; instead, thousands were

more accurate. There was a complete disconnect with mass merchants: They just weren't ready for such an edgy product.

Likewise, review scores don't always tell the tale. Our inline skating game did great with critics – I think we sold 3 of those as well. And fun games don't always sell the most: Our *ATV Quad* game played poorly, yet kept selling out at Wal-Mart... we couldn't stock them fast enough. The lesson here is that there's no sure formula for guaranteeing a hit.

Otherwise, unless you're really of a large size, I'd caution publishers to stay out of the next-generation console market. It takes too long to see returns, and a small company can't sustain the potential losses. Right now, young and hungry publishers need to reach out to fresher parts of the business to find success and look for newer, better market segments and revenue streams. I think it's a strategy casual and mobile publishers are proving is quite viable."

Richard Sherman

President, Pacific Media Partners

Projects Worked On: *Shot-Online*, *Voodoo PC*

"Allow me to share the Top 5 strategies for building ultra-successful online banner advertising campaigns around games and software/hardware publishers with you. While there are numerous approaches that can maximize the success of an online banner campaign, none are quite as important as the following – follow these and your chances for success will increase dramatically.

Research – Using top-tier syndicated research tools such as *Nielson @*

Plan will help you identify sites that index high for users or purchasers of products such as yours. It will also uncover sites you might not have even considered, yet *should* consider. This is a time-saving tool that will help you identify the best possible site candidates for your campaign. Without it, you are only guessing... which often results in compromised advertising campaigns.

Measurement – Online advertising is set apart from all other advertising vehicles by its ability to offer advertisers real-time results. Savvy marketers should measure click-through rate as well as conversion rates if a campaign is tied to any kind of online transaction. Whenever you make changes in your campaign such as rotating in new creative, testing different ad units, etc., collecting up-to-date and accurate campaign data will help you identify which improvements need to be made.

Testing – Before you launch a major campaign that involves significant budget, run a short test campaign about two weeks in duration that involves multiple sites (usually between 5-20, depending on how large your target audience is). When the campaign has ended, calculate which sites generated the best response based on campaign goals, i.e. highest click-through rate or lowest cost per sale – these should be your roll-out candidates.

Utilizing Campaign-Specific Landing Pages – A simple, but effective landing page that ties in directly with your advertising message can have a dramatic impact on conversion rate, especially when you are promoting a specific product.

Campaign Optimization – Monitoring campaign performance on a frequent basis and constantly communicating results to partners is integral to delivering a successful online campaign. By identifying top-performing

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placements through campaign performance reports and working with game publishers to shift budgets from underperforming placements to higher-performing placements, you can dramatically bolster overall campaign results.

Mind you, these are just some of the strategies you'll need to employ to get the most from your game-based online banner campaigns. As an agency that is a *dedicated advocate* for our clients' online advertising success, we employ the latest research as well as an in-depth analysis of each advertising opportunity to maximize our clients' results."

Matt Frary

Senior Global PR Manager, Sierra Entertainment

Titles Worked On: *Unreal* franchise, *Driv3r*, *Scarface*

"If you want to pull off a great public relations campaign, there's no trick to it. Merely know your game. Know your audience. Know your competition. Strategizing around these points is what makes a PR plan unique and successful. What works for one game may not work for another – PR is not a robotic profession that can simply be replicated over and over.

Despite what marketing colleagues and executives will tell you, focusing on, studying and attempting to replicate what another company does well with a specific game will more often than not lead to diminished results. PR is an art form, not a science – it takes gut calls, hunches, vision and flexibility to change direction mid-stream. Sometimes it takes serious stones to stick to your guns regarding what is right.

Some other thoughts: Always try and provide the press with a story

that has exclusivity, wide interest and news value. If you didn't go to school for journalism, I really suggest that you take classes to get the basic understanding of what professional journalists are interested in. Pitching stories without value – especially for covers – will only make editors turn away from you faster in the future. Always abide by the standard rules of journalistic ethics too. Lying is lying anyway you cut it. Calling it “spin” doesn't make it any better.

Also, in terms of presenting your products in the best possible light, first, make a conscious choice to show or not show. The most important thing I try to do up-front with product development and marketing colleagues is get a group commitment that we will NOT show the game until it is ready. Stick to your guns. You can be honest – tell the press at whatever event the game is missing from that you feel it's not ready to show. Games journalists are experienced in development issues and have an understanding of them.

Second, focus on what DOES look good. If the game is clearly just a coaster in a box and it's never going to change, find the three things that make the game different or special and focus solely on those three things. If you have three features you can focus on, you've got yourself a 10-15 minute demo. Don't try and over-hype the game to the journalist in this situation either; you're not fooling anybody, but you are drawing attention to what works as opposed to exposing what doesn't.

The length of any PR plan should be determined by the product; each should be unique. I've spearheaded

24-month plans and I've done 7-month plans as well. It all depends on the game, the audience, the time of year and the quality of product. Big licenses and sequels can generally take longer to promote than original IP. But you really have to ask yourself: Where is the competition shipping and

pushing hard? Can you go head-to-head and win, or at least compete? Is there an event that would be a perfect tie-in for an announcement? What about worldwide PR – when do they want to announce? That said, generally speaking, between 10-14 months is good rule of thumb to budget time-wise for a middle-of-the-road game's public relations campaign.

One last personal pet peeve too...

One of the things that many PR people ignore is the importance of screenshots and what should/shouldn't be done in terms of producing assets. This is one of the biggest challenges in games PR; securing authentic assets that deliver core strategic messaging or are designed to evoke an emotional response. Many PR people rely on marketing or product development departments to produce, choose and hand over high-quality screenshots. The problem being that the materials provided don't always qualify as such – and are then used blindly for all manner of media outreach.

The point I'm driving at: Gaming PR representatives need to seize ownership of the assets they plan on using. Again, stop and think: What do the shots you release say about your game? What is being shown in the shot that helps get across your key messages? What features/scenes are being displayed? When are you using which shots with what content and to what purpose? Is it even necessary to distribute screenshots at that moment? What is the source of these shots? Are they screenshots at all? Are they “polished,” “*Photoshop*-ped,” “retouched,” or completely faked? These are all questions that oftentimes go unanswered in favor of getting a quick hit or seizing upon an opportunity.

The problem here is that I see a complete lack of discipline and ownership of screenshots by PR people all the time. Screenshots are given to them and they in turn spit them out to the media. They are treating them

as “assets” as opposed to important messaging vehicles. Some of the prettiest screenshots I’ve ever seen were taken without messaging in mind. Sure, they’re pretty to look at – but you’re not TELLING me anything about the game that gets me interested or excited to play. Therefore, the shot isn’t delivering on what it should.

How to remedy this? Take the time to sit with whoever is taking the screenshots and direct this person like you would if producing a movie: If you can, move the camera and adjust it to a position that shows what you want to show, or better highlights particularly striking features. The difference can be downright stunning when you look at shots side-to-side – one spat out by QA or a developer and the other designed, framed, shot and selected with a smart PR person’s assistance.

Results aren’t just much better; unlike enhanced or mocked up screens, they’re also genuine, and less prone to ultimately disappointing consumers. I really wish PR people throughout the industry could band together and agree to bring this practice to an end. No matter what the reason, it’s cheating, it’s lying to the media and the consumer, and it’s wrong.”

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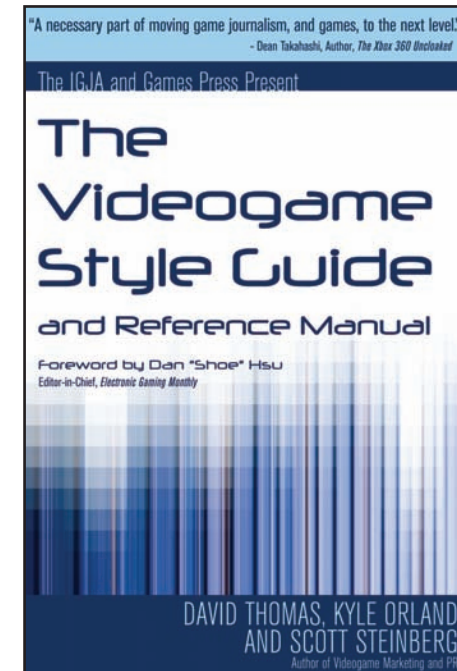
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Scott Steinberg is co-author of *The Videogame Style Guide* (www.gamestyleguide.com) and managing director of Embassy Multimedia Consultants, which counsels developers, publishers, retailers, distributors and financial institutions regarding the development, publishing and promotion of computer and videogames worldwide.

The industry's most prolific freelance author and radio/TV host, this former *Los Angeles Times* Game Design columnist has covered gaming/technology for 300+ media outlets from CNN to Clear Channel Communications, *The New York Times*, *Rolling Stone*, *USA Today* and *TV Guide*, including virtually all computer/videogame publications. He's also the founder of half a dozen companies including copywriting collective Clandestine Media Group, PC game licensor/publisher Overload Entertainment and Games Press USA, the ultimate resource for game journalists.

Past ventures include turns as a VP of Product Acquisitions for French videogame publisher Microids, Director of Acquisitions for DreamCatcher Interactive/The Adventure Co. and game designer/PR director for Iridon Interactive. He's also a successful self-publisher of PC/console titles, e.g. *Heavyweight Thunder*, which was produced out of a back bedroom, and sold 75,000+ pieces worldwide. As a decade-long career spanning every discipline from administration and development to finance, marketing and public relations illustrates, he lives and breathes interactive entertainment.

Reach out to him online at www.scottsteinberg.com.



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