
Interview by
JUDD ETHAN RUGGILL
& KEN S. MCALLISTER

Union yes?

Computer game design, management, and labor relations

An Interview with Joshua Peery

This interview is excerpted from a series of meetings we conducted with Joshua Peery in 2011 and 2012. Mr. Peery is a game developer and project manager who has worked for Icarus Studios, Aten, Electrotank, and Carbine Studios on titles such as *Fallen Earth*¹, *Imagine Town*², and *Wildstar*³. In this interview, he talks about team management, development crunch time, the possibilities for widespread industry unionization, and more.

Our conversations with Mr. Peery were initiated as part of a broader and multi-institutional project exploring computer game labor and laborers. The principle goal of the project is to reveal the political and interpersonal economies of contemporary game development, economies that are fundamental to the games people play and the cultures that arise from that play. These economies are not yet well understood, however, in large part because of the game industry's generally secretive nature. Game developers are bound by all manner of legal agreements and directives designed to protect intellectual property and real and potential profits. As a result, game workers typically are not able to share the realities of their jobs except for casually and with each other. Hence our interest in and study of game labor: we want to better understand and disseminate the processes by which play is made into work, and work into play. Indeed, it is only by unpacking the art and craft of game development that scholars can fully illuminate the nature, practice, and implications of computer game play.

While we have interviewed a range of game industry personnel for this project, from product testers and designers to project managers and attorneys, we selected this interview to share because of its timely connection to the broad and multi-industry labor issues currently in play in Europe and the United States. Organized labor power in general is facing a frontal assault on both sides of the Atlantic, with the Eurozone pursuing aggressive austerity measures on pensions and US businesses and politicians working to dismantle collective bargaining. And yet in this interview, the decidedly anti-union Mr. Peery argues that labor unions make particular sense for the game industry. He is deeply critical of industry practice, of its idiosyncrasies and failure to conduct business in ways that are de rigueur in other commercial spheres. This is not the pic-

1. Icarus Studios. *Fallen Earth*, USA, 2009.

2. Electrotank. USA, 2011.

3. Carbine Studios. *NCsoft*, South Korea, forthcoming.

ture painted by the game industry nor the popular press, however, which work hard to hide the work of game development and also cast it as creative play. Mr. Peery's insights are thus both topical and counterhegemonic, an insider's perspective and call for action on the state of working at play.

How did you come to develop games for a living?

Well, I came to the games industry in a roundabout way. I was working full time as a construction estimator while finishing my B.A. in English and Film at North Carolina State University. I entered the M.A. program there, and during my second semester an email came across the student listserv from Icarus Studios—the company was looking for writers. I was a long time video and tabletop/pen and paper gamer, so on a lark I applied. I also thought it would be nice to work for an industry that actually valued what I had been studying in college. I sent in my resume, some writing samples, and a scenario I designed for *Mordheim*⁴, a miniatures skirmish game. The material I sent was a perfect fit for Lead Designer Lee Hammock's tastes. He was a *Mordheim* fan, and one of my other pieces was novella set in *Glen Cook's Black Company IP*⁵, another of Lee's favorites. As a result, I got a one-on-one interview with Lee, and then later a group interview with the producer, the team I'd be joining, and the person I would be replacing. At the second interview, I brought a war games campaign system I had designed and self-published. Later, I was told that the manual for that system was a large part of me getting hired, which was in November of 2007.

And you were hired as a writer?

The title was never clear, but yes, the position entailed writing, design, implementation, and, since I had a knack for it, world building. This was for *Fallen Earth*, an MMORPG. After about a year, I was given more responsibility for the game's content, and eventually I was tasked with writing/designing for two of the six player factions, and writing for two of the NPC factions, one of which was a major one. Being a relatively small team, however, we also had to develop block zone and neutral content.

By the second year, the producer, who had never really looked at my resume, found out that I had been a project manager during my construction years, and I started taking on producer and SCRUM (a project management modality) duties. Lee, who hired me, left for greener pastures, and Icarus began looking to promote from within. The job was eventually split three ways, and I was asked to head up the content team as leader. Three weeks later, right when the *Blood Sports* expansion was supposed to ship, things went south. Icarus Studios was largely a CEO/owner operator driven LLC, with private investments driving the development of *Fallen Earth*. The day before the shipment of the *Blood Sports* discs, the primary investor pulled the funding. Icarus management tried to sell the game but couldn't. The company was supposed to be a tools firm, and *Fallen Earth* the showcase. Eventually, Icarus did find a new

4. Games Workshop. UK, 1998. Tabletop game.

5. Cook, G. (1984). *The Black Company*. New York, NY: Tor; (1984). *Shadows Linger*. New York, NY: Tor; (1985). *The White Rose*. New York, NY: Tor; (1989). *Shadow Games*. New York, NY: Tor; (1990). *Dreams of Steel*. New York, NY: Tor; (1996). *Bleak Seasons*. New York, NY: Tor; (1997). *She is the Darkness*. New York, NY: Tor; (1999). *Water Sleeps*. New York, NY: Tor; (2000). *Soldiers Live*. New York, NY: Tor.

money source: GamersFirst, which took over *APB: All Points Bulletin*⁶ after the colossal failures surrounding it.

Supposedly, the reason that funding got pulled for *Blood Sports* was it was the last of several near misses, and perhaps the funder didn't have any faith left. Also it's possible that they didn't like how the money was being used. One issue rumored was that money earmarked for marketing was used for development. Ultimately, I feel that the funder didn't like the subscription numbers and wanted to liquidate via a sale, which management wasn't able to pull off. Really it was a combination of economy panic and a burned out investor relationship.

Anyway, as a result of the defunding, everyone on the project was laid off, except the two people above me. Within a few weeks, I was brought back on a contract basis. Money was tight for the firm—it was just barely staying afloat. The contract lasted five weeks, and then the company needed to “juggle” talent. I was switched for an artist and a programmer, and found myself in the unique position of not having the years of experience to match the title I had earned. The bad economy was also finally starting to hit the games industry.

From July until January, I had a lot of interviews and close calls. I was also considering some faculty positions. At that point, two colleagues from Icarus, one who left before the cull and one who was coming off a tour of duty at CCP-Iceland, hired me to be a creative writer on a serious game for high school freshmen. A few weeks after I joined my colleagues, I started getting frantic emails and Facebook messages from Aten asking if I could start immediately on contract. The first messages came in around 11:30pm on New Year's Eve, I believe. After a series of phone interviews a couple of weeks after I started at Aten, I also began working at Electrotank.

I worked at Aten for about 4 months taking core competencies (STEM – Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) documents from teachers and turning them into scenarios where the students learn and investigate situations and are then tested.

At Electrotank, I was hired to be an Associate Producer on *Imagine Town* and provide *game designer* acumen to the Ubisoft content that Electrotank was making/ implementing in the game. But by the time I joined Electrotank, the game was almost done in terms of its design. I ultimately didn't do much design—it was more like supervising day-to-day operations on the project. At the same time, though, I was splitting my time with another project. Electrotank founder, Jobe Makar, wanted to remake one of the games that made the company famous and pots of cash back in the day. So, I designed the leveling system, items, achievements, and got all the “branding” (i.e., world companies, NPCs, etc.) in the can.

Electrotank is largely contract and, with the release of *Rinksters*⁷ and the eminent gold release of *Imagine Town*, contractors like me were no longer supported by the contract money the company was collecting to develop those titles. Hence, my departure from the company.

6. APB: All Points Bulletin. Realtime Worlds, Scotland, 2010.

Six months more of interviewing and I ended up with offers from Eyes Wide Games, producing TV IP Facebook games, and Carbine Studios to design content on *Wildstar*.

I took the Carbine Studios offer and began in April 2012.

It sounds as if your career thus far has been fairly dynamic.

Is that just luck of the draw, or is it something more systemic?

The game industry is very fluid with regard to labor. In fact, I knew that going in. It's evolving into something like the film industry. Sometimes I think that the game industry may need unions, and if you knew me, you'd be surprised by that. Something is wrong with the "hire up, crunch time them to death, and fire on launch" stories I see over and over. Development houses should be up front (like film studios), have a transparent schedule, and let people know they are there only for a given project. MMO firms, if marginally successful, can sustain a service style company. But these fly-by-night game development houses are bad news.

How can you tell if a development house is fly-by-night given the extreme transience of the industry in general?

There are certain things I look for: the IP they hold, the money backing the company, and first-hand accounts of people working there.

If the game industry were to have a union (or set of unions), is there an exemplar?

I think film industry model would be good. Game writers could meld into the writers guild, for example. In fact, most game voice actors are unionized already. The real problem with the game industry is the fake crunch times and no warning lay-offs. Fake crunch is a cost cutting measure. You have people on salary, and thus there's no overtime—it's all work. The "hey you're making games for a living" is a tired excuse for abusing labor, especially with the money games are making now. And then there are the disturbed developers who believe that crunch is a hard core honor.

There's also another problem: a lot of the middle management and leadership in game development are people with zero management or business experience. Their training is on-the-job, but not formal. As a result, a culture of crunch is forming. My team at Icarus, which was well managed with high output designers, would come in on some crunch weekends, but we had nothing to do. We came in because others were behind.

Given your experiences, does crunch affect different members of the development team differently?

Oh there are double standards. I've seen salt miners treated better than some programmers. At the same time, artists tend to be treated with kid gloves. I don't recall ever seeing an artist on crunch—if it wasn't done, it was cut. I had to ride herd on the gun artist and animators to get the new models into the

7. Electrotank. Vismonde, USA, 2011.

Blood Sports expansion. I think SCRUM is helping to bring art in games around, though—non-artists were giving artists too much leash.

The thing is, I think the game industry can't or won't pay for the highly motivated, most talented artists out there. Those folks go into other fields like film, advertising, television, or corporate branding. Most of the artists I've met went to an art trade school, not a design college. Granted, they can be every bit as talented, but perhaps less disciplined.

Have the various roles you have occupied in the industry over the years given you access to investor relations, or are such things kept distinct from the development side?

My sense of investor relations comes mostly second hand, but from those in the know. Coming to the game industry after my first career and being somewhat older, my age peers are the management, and that's with whom I tend to chew the fat. Investor relations are generally not part of the developer's every day. We usually only come in contact with that sphere when needed to wow the investors with a tangible, creative part of the game (e.g., demo explanations). That said, I have been approached by investors to work on projects to attract further investment or sell outright. Recently, that's been the case with the expanding role of Unity 3D as a platform. Sometimes the approach comes with the promise of future compensation (e.g., money, stock options, etc.), but a lot of the time it's for resume fodder (i.e., games published). Thank goodness for Kongregate (<http://www.kongregate.com/>).

With Kongregate, a developer creates a game, it is published on the Kongregate site, and then used to solicit funding for further development?

Well, Kongregate will pay out if a game gets lots of players, but in general it's like NASCAR: show a fast car—in this case, a good game—and get a sponsor or get hired to work for a better team. At least that's the theory. I've got a colleague who feels that large firms are flooding Kongregate with betas, which squeezes out smaller developers. Three-person teams can't compete with ten to twenty-person teams, and less attention is paid to smaller games...which are smaller because of time/asset constraints. Plus, the big companies have brand recognition on their side. It's a professionals versus college game, if you will. And when it comes to the design competitions Kongregate holds, the bigger firms win from pure labor standpoint: more polish, fuller design, more people contributing in same amount of time. Game design is iterative, in my opinion, and the more time and/or people a game gets, the better it can do.

How does management in the game industry differ from the management you did as a construction estimator?

Actually, the management processes are fairly similar: a budget, time frame, different disciplines working in conjunction to develop a single product, and so on. However, in construction, crunch time is paid by the people screwing

up. It was a fairly smooth transition for me, other than having to endure what I saw as rookie management mistakes. The thing with the game industry is that those kinds of mistakes are pervasive. Just because you're the best in a discipline doesn't mean you can manage others. Electrotank bucked that pitfall: the founder wasn't the CEO—the CEO was a Wharton MBA with other industry chops. Of the firms I've been with, it most reminded me of my other career, i.e., efficient. It would be great if managers in the game industry had at least some book training or management experience. Unfortunately, most game programs in schools today emphasize art or programming. If they could throw in a business or process engineering class, that would be awesome. Now, there are software engineering management programs, but game development is different than software development. It's not just code—it's marketing, content, art. Nothing in cold programming is related, in my opinion. With software development, you're developing a tool to do one thing (e.g., accounting). It's much more clear cut than working with entertainment software.

Having worked as both a game designer and a project manager, what do you feel are the most important things to understand in each role?

For a manager, it's important to understand that the development process is going to be a mixture of fluff and crunch, i.e., the technical versus the tangible. Managing art versus content versus scripters is a delicate balance, and it's important to never promise what can't be delivered. Never hype an unreleased product, and never ever promise a feature before a game goes live.

For a developer, it's pretty much the same. SCRUM systems allow for the best case and worse case development cycle. Throw out a wish list of stuff you think you can do, but don't be afraid to scale back. Be active and play all sorts of games, but play your own game in as close to real conditions as possible...that is, with real players and without cheats or back doors. It's a way to find out real quick what is and isn't fun. What looks good on paper or metric (game balance) can be boring as hell.

Given your sense of the industry, have you ever considered hiring your own team and opening a studio?

Working for yourself is the hardest job you'll have, but the more I experience, the more it becomes attractive. If I were to hire, I would look for a combination of passion and skill, people who are trainable, people who want to make the best product they can. Outsourcing is common, but I don't know that I'd outsource anything. I wouldn't want paycheck designers. I'd want a game development society. The work environment is the most important thing for a firm. Management should be the last resort, so-to-speak, with the culture and proper hiring allowing for smooth operation. I would want to get people to commit to clear goals and then be held accountable, plus I would import something from the construction industry: the 90-day clause, signed up front. If you don't fit in, you get let go.

What is the hiring process like?

Companies are real cautious on hires these days, especially hires that involve relocation. I think they should dispense with relocation packages and instead institute 90-day clauses. This would at least give them a chance to test people out in a less contrived manner. If they pass, then relocate them. And the process itself is much different than it used to be, with design tests and multiple phone interviews. Getting my first design job was simply two face-to-face interviews. There are still face-to-face interviews—eventually—but they’re more or less personality matching meet and greets. I don’t know about other industries, but with games it has gotten to be a real hassle to apply via non-nepotism channels. Part of it’s due to the general state of the economy, and part is due to failed hires. In fact, I’ve got colleague who’s currently interviewing for a slot left by a failed hire.

What are your career goals?

Ideally, I’d like to helm my own design company/project. Failing that, I’d stay in the industry for a while and then use my experience and M.A. to teach game writing and design. Actually, academia was my main course prior to going into games—I was going to school to teach film. My alma mater has a games research initiative chaired by the computer science and design colleges. I’m kind of hoping to convince them that they’re missing the content element of their efforts and that I should be teaching content development and writing for them. The thing is, game writing is unlike other sorts of writing in form, voice, and even measuring reader tolerance for reading it.