

Artist Management in a Small Games Company

GDC 2004



SPEAKER BIOS

Di Davies – Visual Development manager

- ❑ 8 years traditional animation experience before moving to games in 1992.
- ❑ Going on 12 years experience in this industry.
- ❑ Worked on over 20 projects on various platforms as a production artist and lead.
- ❑ Joined Vicarious Visions in 2001. Now building a new visual development group.

Steve Derrick – Handheld Art Group manager

- ❑ Has a BFA in painting and drawing from University of Utah & a degree in computer animation from the Art Institute of Phoenix.
- ❑ Worked as a storyboard artist for 2 years before entering the games biz.
- ❑ Worked as lead artist for key GameBoy Advance titles. Worked on PSX and N64 platforms.
- ❑ Joined Vicarious Visions in 1999. Became group manager in 2002.



INTRO

We have spent many years working as production artists. We transitioned from lead artist roles into manager roles. We work for a company that needs us to change tactics to respond to change. We come from different experiences and backgrounds, but share common challenges.

As artists who devote more and more time to planning, coordination and coaching as opposed to doing hands on work our challenges sometimes lead us to soul-searching questions. And then there are fires to put out and we put aside those questions.

This session touches a bit on the philosophical and a bit on the tactical.



Production Artist to Manager

ACK!!!

Doing production work results in a tangible and familiar output for an artist. Shifting to management means no longer having that way of measuring your worth, success or progress.

Now you are responsible for empowering others to do the work.

YOU AREN'T ALONE.



Production Artist to Manager (cont)

COMMON MISTAKES.

- Staying within your comfort zone
Reverting to production when things are tough.
- The good guy syndrome
It's not a popularity contest, it's a business.
- Not asking for help
Wanting to appear capable, you take on too much stress.
- Excessive optimism
Consider more factors in estimates and plans.
- Perceived freedom
If you just want control or power, ya came to the wrong place!

Production Artist to Manager (cont)

KEY COMPONENTS.

- Delegation
People learn by doing. Balance hands on work with allowing others to work.
- Communication
Discussion and feedback make a better product. Use meetings wisely!
- Leadership
Accept that you will make mistakes and learn from them.
- Knowledge
Stay up to date with technology and share your knowledge generously.
- Coaching
Help your people to succeed.



Production Artist to Manager (cont)

WHY? WHAT DO YOU GET OUT OF IT?

- Help others to grow
It actually feels great to help someone actively grow their career.
- Skill development
By developing others capabilities, you learn a lot yourself.
- Overcome stereotypes
The word "Manager" can often have negative connotations.
- Social development
Conflict resolution, facilitation and communication will make you more aware of social relationships.

Production Artist to Manager (cont)

WHY? WHAT DO YOU GET OUT OF IT?

- Broader knowledge
Knowing more of the facts that comes with managing, you can make better decisions.
- Helping to shape the industry
The work you do now as a leader impacts the future of the industry.
- The perks
As a leader, you may travel and meet people in association with cool projects or licenses 😊



Production Artist to Manager (cont)

WHAT DO YOU NEED?

- Feedback
It's a tough gig - are you getting regular feedback?
- Support
When you are making tough decisions, or don't know what decision to make, who is there to help guide you?
- Goals
Set yourself regular goals and find out what is expected for you to accomplish in order to stay on track.



Artist Management

CHALLENGES – THE PEOPLE STUFF

- Personalities
People may cause conflict with you and you may cause conflict with others.
- Harnessing creativity
There's a time for ideas and a time for implementation - how do you stem the flow of ideas and experimentation into production time?
- Professionalism
We get to wear jeans and tees to work - but we're here to do a job.
- Feedback
You need to get feedback from the people you are managing if you want to be effective.

THE NEXT STEP

You were a strong lead on multiple projects. You are promoted to a departmental management role.

How do you prepare?



So anyway... I was at a power lunch and scribbled the best idea ever for a game on this here Hollywood Planet napkin AND... since I used to fingerpaint in kindergarten I kinda understand art...





Big Picture!

HUH? WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?

- Pay attention to what is happening around you.

How will the current plan or day-to-day activities affect the department and the company in the future?

- *Pay attention to history.*

What has happened in the past in the industry or in your experience that can help predict the outcome?

- Plan for the future, not just the present.

- Communicate with others who may be affected

Building an Art Department

FACTORS.

- Company variables

Structure = size of company + needs + opportunity

Production = type of games developed + SKU plan

- Experience variables

Structure may be determined by artists with different backgrounds.

- Job variables

Job descriptions and duties will differ based on these factors.

Building an Art Department (cont)

PLANNING.

- Well-defined roles.

Agree up front who will do what. Even small teams need structure.

- Factor in artist development.

If your company cannot provide training, consider teaming up people with complementary skills and abilities to effectively mentor each other.

- Moving from ad hoc to defined process.

Bureaucracy versus tools for success.



Resource Planning

KNOW YOUR ARTISTS CAPABILITIES AND NEEDS!

It is critical for staffing purposes, individual growth, and departmental growth to have a solid sense of what each person can do and can be trained to do.

It is your job as an art manager to make sure the project managers are aware of people's untapped potential and capability.



Resource Planning (cont)

CONSIDER THE GREATER GOOD

- What is best for the company and your department?

High stakes projects need visionaries as well as implementers.

Consider career needs of your people when making decisions.

Burning out the talent is wasteful!

- *You can't please everyone all the time.*

Every project manager wants the perceived superstar.

Consider personality mix as well as skill sets.

Techniques for Growth

Not every company has the group manager role like we do at VV. As managers solely responsible for people and departmental growth, there are things we do to ensure it happens.

Examples:

- **Training.** *It can't be said enough how important this is!*
- *Resource allocation discussions. Good chance to speak up about who can do what and who needs opportunity.*
- *Using low-risk projects to grow leaders or train people in skills when you can't take the time or money to formally do training.*
- *Critical stage analysis to identify better techniques, skill development and flaws in current processes. This also reveals training needs*



Plan for Rapid Change

SCENARIO.

- You have 8 artists available who have been doing console development.
- You have 5 additional team members who are outsourced.
- The publisher wants a new, next gen title that requires 3 x the resources but the budget is only slightly higher.
- Your company needs a more cost effective solution while raising the bar on quality.

HOW CAN YOU PLAN TO PREPARE?

Plan for Rapid Change (cont)

FACTORS THAT HELP.

- Have a flexible structure in place.
 - Build "extensible teams".
 - Develop people to be able to step into lead roles if needed.
- Increase efficiency.
 - Look for proactive people to be the leaders.
 - Promote good communication habits.
 - Encourage peer mentorship. Promote a "pitch in and help" attitude
- Prepare everyone for the unexpected.
 - Teach people strategies for adapting to change.
- Be quality-conscious.
 - Specialize where needed Generalize when



It Takes Time to Build Success!

- Allow for changeovers in software.
 - Ask for a training budget and time.
 - Use or create "down time" for training time.
- Pace the energy of people.
 - Down time is foundation-building time.
 - Vary the roles of people when possible - variety is spicy!
- Use recruiting opportunities.
 - Keep your eye on the future as well as the present.
 - Invest in recruiting trips - ask to join HR on their trips.