

In the Trenches - Game Developers and the Quest for Innovation

The panel will explore the current state of the game industry and how best to innovate and stay fresh in an ever-changing marketplace. The implied value of innovation will be questioned along with the economic means to support it. That is to say, can we even afford to innovate? Can we afford not to?

Panelist will also explore emerging business models, alternate forms of funding and distribution and advances in corporate structure (e.g., mergers, outsourcing, etc).

This panel will be a good opportunity for the audience to interact with and ask questions from a fully professional roster of panelists. The goal is to have a lively and interactive discussion.

Moderator:

Jason Della Rocca

Executive Director, International Game Developers Association

Jason is the executive director of the International Game Developers Association (IGDA), a professional society committed to advancing the careers and enhancing the lives of game developers. Jason and the IGDA focus on connecting developers with their peers, promoting professional development, and advocating on issues that affect the developer community -- such as quality of life, creative freedoms, workforce diversity and credit standards. As the spokesperson for the IGDA, Jason has appeared in countless news outlets (e.g., Wired, Nightline, LA Times, NPR, Wall Street Journal, G4, etc) and has spoken at conferences around the world (e.g., GDC, E3, TGS, SIGGRAPH, ChinaJoy, DiGRA, etc). Jason has been a member of the game development community for over a decade, and has spent time at Matrox Graphics, Quazal and Silicon Graphics. Jason can be reached via [jason -at- igda - dot- org](mailto:jason-at-igda-dot-org).

Panelist Statements:

Hank Howie

President, Blue Fang Games

When thinking about the game industry today, the word that continually comes to mind is “broken”. Everyone inside and outside the industry realizes that to continue to grow, we must broaden our customer base far beyond the core gamers and male-dominated audiences upon which we’ve depended for so long. And grow we must, to continue to compete with other forms of entertainment, yes, but just as importantly, to help amortize the ever-rising

costs of game development. In order to achieve these ends, innovation, clearly, is critical. But at the same time, with development costs rising as they are, the entities that traditionally fund industry development, i.e., game publishers, are becoming more and more risk averse. The best source of innovation – independent developers – is being squeezed by those very same rising costs, so that they are fast becoming an endangered species. This is an industry “Catch-22” on multiple levels. Something – or some things – have to give. Alternate forms of financing, new channels of distribution and changes to the traditional game development model are all likely candidates. Which ones will bear the most fruit, over both the short and long term, remains to be seen, but all are worthy of discussion.

Bio: Hank Howie is the President of Blue Fang Games, creators of the multi-million selling *Zoo Tycoon* series of games, published by Microsoft. He manages the day-to-day operations of the company and guides Blue Fang’s business and strategic direction. Hank began his career in the gaming industry at Spinnaker Software in 1989 as a Product Manager for their games division. In 1993, Hank managed Interchange’s GameSpace, the Ziff-Davis/AT&T online multiplayer game service. In 1996, he signed on as the GM at Restrac, Inc., where his team built and launched Restrac’s suite of Internet recruiting products. Hank joined Blue Fang at its founding in 1998. Hank has also worked in the advertising industry, and was a top-performing salesperson for Toshiba Corporation. In addition to his responsibilities at Blue Fang, Hank is an active thought leader within the software industry. He has delivered numerous presentations at industry conferences including the Game Developers Conference and Women’s Game Conference, and was also a leading contributor to the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) white paper entitled *Quality of Life in the Game Industry: Challenges and Best Practices*. He’s been a guest on the PBS Show *Computer Chronicles* to discuss software and technology. Hank holds a BA degree in History from Bates College and an MBA degree from Boston College.

Steve Meretzky

Chief Game Designer, Floodgate Entertainment

The state of the retail game business today – PC and console games alike – is not a friendly environment for creativity or innovation. Huge budgets, a shrinking number of publishers and retail outlets, and conservative decision-making equals more sequels, a higher reliance on existing IP, and fewer chances being taken. The games being produced for the retail channel aren’t bad – for production values, gameplay balance, feature sets, and overall polish, they represent a new pinnacle of game development. But these advances are occurring in games that cover an ever-narrowing spectrum of the full human condition. However, there are areas where innovation is still possible: casual

games, mobile games, and the “indie” game movement. Even old-fashioned board games are undergoing a renaissance. The lower budgets, smaller teams, and shorter development cycles mean that more chances can be taken. Also, an “auteur” model of game development is still possible, where a single person’s vision can have a significant impact on the course of the game, which doesn’t guarantee innovation, but makes it significantly more likely.

Bio: Steve Meretzky is the Chief Game Designer for Floodgate Entertainment, a premier developer of mobile games. He has been designing games for nearly a quarter-century, beginning at adventure game pioneer Infocom in 1982, where his games included *Planetfall*, *Zork Zero*, and *Leather Goddesses of Phobos*. He co-founded the development studio Boffo Games, and has done freelance game design for many companies including Legend, Activision, Disney, Hasbro, and Blizzard. Prior to joining Floodgate, Steve was Principal Game Designer for WorldWinner, the leader in skill-based game competitions, where he continues to serve as Games Advisor. Steve is a former member of the Board of Directors of the IGDA; is a founder of Post Mortem, the monthly gathering of Boston area game developers; and helps organize the annual Game Designers Workshop. The 20th anniversary edition of his game *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, co-authored with Douglas Adams, recently won an award from the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA).

Joe Minton

Partner, Digital Development Management

Every year we collectively say that this industry has never been crazier, and every year we are right. Leading professionals and financiers of other industries examine the business model of game developers and publishers, and most of them walk away scratching their heads. 2006 brings us skyrocketing development costs, more platforms to consider than ever, longer development cycles, publishers losing money or having significant reductions in profits, outsourcing as common practice, employee lawsuits stemming from the creators finally being sick of their abysmal treatment, and the needs of the next generation teams forcing large hiring waves which are stretching thin the available veterans – many of whom have left the industry due to its, well, craziness. While all this is going on under the hood, the game industry is perhaps finally coming into its own as a part of mainstream American entertainment and culture. Expectations and examinations will rise; is the industry equal to the challenge?

Bio: Joe Minton is a partner at Digital Development Management, an industry leading video game agency that represents top-tier game development studios. Before co-

founding DDM, Joe served as President of the 13-year veteran game developer Cyberlore Studios. At Cyberlore, Joe was responsible for overseeing day-to-day operations, setting the corporate direction, building a management team and maintaining a tight ship in a competitive industry. Joe was responsible for all business development – securing millions of dollars in console & PC deals – and fostering major brand relationships with international companies like Hasbro and Playboy. Joe focused on becoming an expert on studio organization, personnel management and communication systems and has lectured on those subjects domestically and internationally.

Kent Quirk

CTO, CogniToy

Innovation is the holy grail of game design. Every game designer wants to be "original" -- everyone wants to make something memorable and lasting. It seems that most of us think that the path to innovation is to invent completely new modes of gameplay or user interface. Every so often -- *Tetris*, *Myst*, *Dance Dance Revolution* -- someone invents a new game style and a new genre, and waltzes into the annals of history. But at least as often, someone innovates and is wildly successful by improving on an existing design (*Snood*, *Unreal Tournament*, *John Madden Football*), or by combining key features of multiple designs with top-quality execution (*Tribes*, *Half-Life*). Innovation is necessary -- customers demand it, and so do development teams. But innovation must be managed, and it must be understood that innovation encompasses more than just user interface.

Bio: Kent Quirk doesn't easily fit into simple categories. Titles that describe him, depending on context, include entrepreneur, software architect, game designer, creative director, tri-athlete, teacher, coach, and "Dad". His areas of expertise include experimental user interface design, software engineering, computer game development, and programming languages. With 25 years of software development experience, he's been working in the areas of computer games and educational software since the mid 1990s. As the founder and CTO of CogniToy, he led the development of the acclaimed robot programming game *MindRover*. From 2003-2006, he was the software architect of Cosmic Blobs, which is 3D graphics software for kids developed and published by SolidWorks. He is now in the early stages of creating a new game venture.

Tracy Rosenthal-Newsom

Senior Producer, Harmonix Music Systems

As the video-gaming industry evolves into a mainstream form of entertainment, publishers and developers will need to consciously attract casual gamers and non-gamers. Many potential gamers hold negative perceptions about console

gaming that has created barriers to its broader acceptance. Among these are the perceived complexity and difficulty of console games, dexterity requirements, time commitment, and predominance of male-centric game genres, all of which prevent non-gamers from considering video games as an entertainment choice. By creating innovative new ways to play video games and by making games accessible to people who don't currently play video games, the gaming industry has the potential to break open the console gamer demographic and invite a broad range of new consumers to our market.

Bio: Tracy Rosenthal-Newsom is a senior producer at Harmonix Music Systems. A 10-year veteran in the games industry and a 13-year veteran in the film industry, Tracy has extensive experience leading game development teams and film production crews. During her six years at Harmonix, she has worked as senior producer on *Guitar Hero 2*, project leader on the *Karaoke Revolution* series and producer on *Frequency* and *Amplitude*. Prior to joining Harmonix, Tracy produced and designed arcade games for Disney Imagineering and children's games for Disney Interactive. As a member of the Directors Guild of America, Tracy worked as an assistant director on such major motion pictures as *The Fabulous Baker Boys*, *Dead Again*, *Beethoven*, *On Deadly Ground* and more.