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I often find colleagues, clients and students argue about ideas. What to put into a game, what to leave out and how to move forward. Many times arguments are poorly made, defending or dismissing ideas on the grounds of different preferences, personal liking, dangerous superficial knowledge or different underlying goals. This causes motivation to drop and ideas to be accepted thanks to the persuasive skill of their proponent instead of their actual value.

Here are 3 steps, that in my professional experience drastically help make discussions more productive and allow the strongest ideas to emerge:

1. Define Success

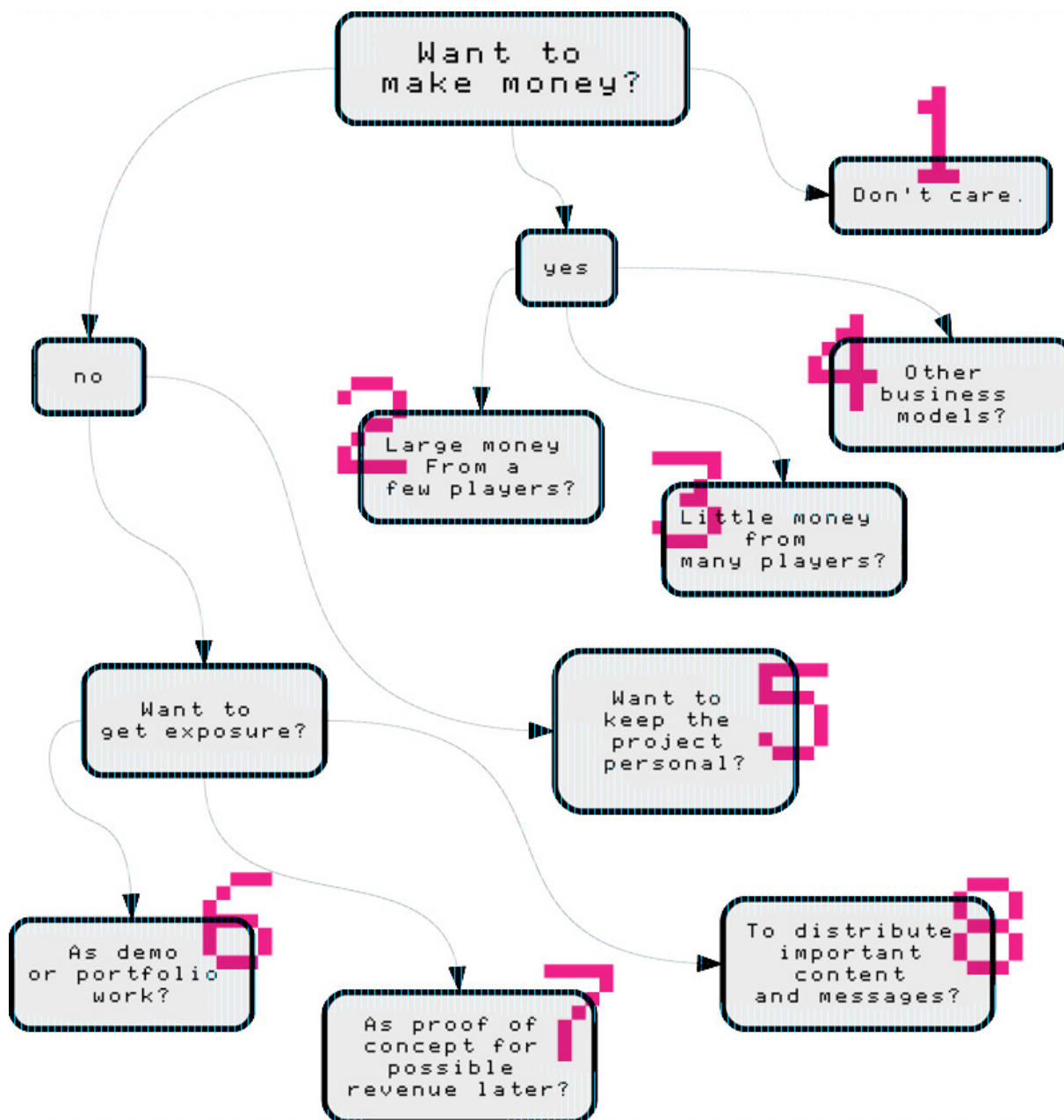
The very first thing you as a team need to agree on, the basis of every future game design decision, is the desired impact of the game. Agree on a definition of success. This is way more fundamental and formative, than for example, what kind of game you wanna make. Sure you already have an idea for a game, but to effectively shape this idea into something successful, you need to define the goal first.

With a lot of my clients and many student project teams (I do consulting), I find this step to be criminally overlooked. Most people have such a clear idea of what success means to them, that they simply assert it to be some sort of general truth, not necessary to be discussed. Wrong. Success and the desired feedback from the player community have so many substantial variations, it's not even funny anymore. The unspoken idea of the obviousness of what success means can make a major misunderstanding silently grow and grow. And this tumor-like growth can in critical team discussions late in the project blow up in everybody's faces.

And when it slowly dawns to the team members, that they weren't rowing in the same direction to begin with, ideas and features need to get muscled through without general consent and motivation drops to the ground.

You need to work out the differences in goals and desires first, before there is already so much work, effort, emotional investment and resources at stake. It is way more easily to find consensus, when there isn't already investment to lose or the feeling of sudden division or pressuring deadlines looming. So do it before work starts, if possible.

A few example questions to get everybody on the same page before the shit hits the fan and a few example conclusions to draw from answers:



1. If you agree on don't care (which means also not aiming for anything after "no"), there is little in the way of just going all out with your own personal preferences regarding content and working method. You can be as offensive or mainstream as you like and do not need to commit to any work schedule or to finishing the game at all.

2. If you want players to pay solid money for your game you need to provide something special for your target audience, which feels to them worthy of their money and has personal value to them. This limits the broader appeal of the game, since you need to tailor to specific tastes. But this also allows for a dedicated fan base to emerge.

3. If you want to reach many players, which individually just spend a few bucks on the game or even nothing at all (free-to-play, micro transactions etc.) you need to widen your audience. This forces your designs to be rather generic and appealing to a wide range of tastes and your game needs to be rather accessible (casual gameplay or tried and true game mechanics).

4. Many other business models require different approaches, but all have one thing in common. You need to serve the paying audience and that puts your own personal preferences on the backseat. And you need to commit to professional behavior regarding deadlines and product quality.

5. Maybe your team agrees on this game just being for practice, self-exploration or experimentation or just a fun activity for the group.

6. If your team commits to delivering demo or portfolio work putting your own strengths on display becomes more important than catering to an extern audience.

7. If you want your game to be a proof of concept, you need to consider everything as if you want to make money, but do not need to worry about implementing monetization features. Gathering a player following, even as a free game, is more important here.

8. Sometimes the message or content you want push is more valuable than general popularity or any commercial success. Controversial statements and tacky subjects usually aren't very marketable, but still important to be put out there.

I'm pretty sure there are a 9th, 10th and more conclusions this questionnaire could lead to, which I can't think of right now. But you can see that success can come in many shapes and forms, each require individual commitment and each giving individual freedoms. Of course with the right planning and open communication even multiple different goals at once can be achieved, but that's not a given and requires clever project management and social skills.

2. Survival Of The Fittest

After you as a team settled on a success model, you need to find out what it takes to meet that goal. Find precedence in games (or other media) that had the kind of success you are aiming for. Get to know your target audience and what it needs to get in order to react in the way you intend. Do this thoroughly and comprehensive. Mechanics, art style, image language, music, genre, monetization, wording, archetypes, stereotypes, pacing, difficulty, accessibility, rewards, naming, etc. what worked in favor of your goals and what didn't. Take your time and document your findings properly for everybody to understand and extract criteria from your findings. Knowing is half the battle.

When you established criteria for what makes a game successful, based on empirical data, then and just then work on finding ways to make your own creative preferences fit with said criteria and add something unique to the mix. Now you got a vision. This vision now works as natural habitat for ideas, where only the fittest survive.

And when members of the team make a case against or for an idea, there is only one question to answer: Does the idea benefit our goal by meeting the previously established criteria?

Don't overvalue how much you like something. When a comedian works on his routine, after listening to and redefining his jokes a thousand times, he still needs to know that they are funny, even though he can't laugh his own routine anymore. He needs to know the criteria for a strong routine for a certain audience and follow through. Criteria are a solid sound basis for decision making. Trying to follow your liking is aiming at a moving target.

3. Write It The Fuck Down!

Many teams confuse meeting protocols for some sort of note pad. You just writing down and quickly noting what has been said, so we don't forget something. Wrong again. Protocols are contracts. You write down the names of whoever is participating in the decision making, you argue, fight, evaluate whatever, until there is an agreement on how to proceed and then you write it down in the protocol.

Everybody involved in that meeting is bound by the written consent that the protocol represents. This forces the written agreements to be formulated as crystal clear and binding as possible. The meeting is over when everybody read the protocol and agrees to be bound by its statements. Not a moment before that. If members aren't sure about certain paragraphs in the protocol or flat out take issue, than you found an unresolved point on your agenda. Every team member needs to be very critical with the wording of the protocol.

Many times, you will find that the spoken agreement you though you reached is no agreement at all and contains many unresolved questions. Having to commit to a written statement minimizes misunderstanding.

I often find the protocol writer in meetings to be "trusted" with getting everything written down correctly and

comprehensively, which is utterly impossible. It impractical and downright silly to have him write down every single word that is said. And when the writer therefore has to select what to write down, what to ignore, and he has to decide how to phrase it and compress it, then it is not going to accurately represent what each individual team member came to understand. Never. Everybody has to read the protocol and approve it before moving on.

Ideas need to be approved, so work can continue. If an a certain issue can't be resolved in this very meeting, the way forward is to get more information to make a better case next time, which also needs to be properly written down and be treated as binding working agreement.

Take The Time

All those steps above cost time. Sometimes people think very much alike already and there is little effort involved in finding consensus. But by far the most of times, it is actual work to set up a solid framework to evaluate ideas and make decisions. But the time you invest early on will benefit you later, make arguments shorter or even superfluous and will result in you getting closer to your goal.

If you have additional experiences and opinions to share, please do in the comment section. Thanks.

3 THOUGHTS ON "TEAMWORK: AGREEING ON THE BEST IDEAS"



SlobberGoat

on **July 22, 2011 at 5:14 pm** said:

Want to make money? No.

Want to get Exposure? No.

Q6: Show off your skills? No.

Q7: Test the waters? No.

Q8: Political? No.

Q: Then why?

A: Because we want to create a world that *we* would enjoy playing in.



Stefan Sigl

on **July 20, 2011 at 11:49 am** said:

Hey

mabey u did not notice yet ... but your link on the main page to this page is broken ... u forgot the "h" on "http"

greetings



Anjin Anhut

on **July 20, 2011 at 12:05 pm** said:

Thanks Stefan.

Fixed it.