



GAME DESIGN EDUCATION EXTENDS BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

What if you could be a game designer in only one year's time? And not just any game designer—a professional who is well educated, an efficient and effective team player, and trained in and knowledgeable about all facets of the game-development workflow, from initial idea to final delivery. What if, during that year and beyond, you had the opportunity to learn from, collaborate with, forge lasting relationships with, present your ideas to, and perhaps even work for local and global industry players?

Students of various ages, cultures, and walks of life are doing precisely that in the Vancouver Film School's (VFS's) Game Design program. Students in the eighth graduating class may have just embarked on new career paths, but

Up-to-date, comprehensive courses are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to a well-rounded game design education.

they entered the industry long before graduation day. Even while attending classes, students at Vancouver Film School are entrenched in the industry, each step of the way.

Industry Exposure

Vancouver Film School's Game Design program is headed by David Warfield, a 15-year veteran of Electronic Arts, a leading independent developer and publisher of interactive entertainment software. Warfield oversees a faculty comprising 30 part-time instruc-

tors who simultaneously hold positions in the game industry at companies such as Radical Entertainment, Electronic Arts, Next Level Games, Propaganda Games, Backbone Entertainment, Nokia Games, and Relic Entertainment. The faculty members' roles in the industry and regular contact with local companies ensure they provide students the optimal training and education to fill the role of game designers.

This capable staff also gains valuable input from an advisory board made up of top execu-

tives in game companies large and small. “The advisory board is regularly polled about the curriculum and where things are going in the industry,” explains Warfield.

The school also hosts guest speakers from game-development businesses who share their experiences, advice, and knowledge. Game company leaders, designers, and development staff often visit and talk about their process, providing students with valuable insight into the inner workings of successful game-development businesses.

Such deep-rooted industry involvement lends to the perpetual improvement and evolution of the curriculum, to keep pace with market and technological changes. Private colleges, such as VFS, tend to have more flexibility in adapting a curriculum faster and more easily than large, public institutions. At VFS, changes to a curriculum, teaching method, or individual class can be accomplished in little time. “We can modify courses right away and make bigger changes in just a few weeks,” Warfield continues. “After all, evolution is a requirement for success today, given rapid changes in the industry.”

Well Rounded

Students in the Game Design program attend nine courses per term, equating to 30 hours per week, in seven-week terms—for a total of 48 weeks in a one-year program. The classes are a combination of lecture- and workshop-based classes.

“Students are exposed to all tracks of the program, regardless of their specialty or specific niche,” explains Warfield. “They understand the entire process when they are through. They’ve seen what it takes to develop a game, from prototype design through completion; and they understand what they need to supplement their own skill sets.”

Warfield admits that students are often resistant to having to learn it all. He and the staff communicate that they don’t expect students to “ace” all parts of the process, but to understand all stages and be able to talk to other team members using terms they understand. “You have to work inside a team and effectively communicate your vision, understand their skill sets, and what they bring to a team environment,” he explains.

Students and graduates are better able to

find the optimal mix of talents in a work group if they know their strengths and weaknesses, including what they need, such as an artist or coding expert. In the end, they are often thankful for the broad-based education when they enter the work environment.

Game Design students attend courses on team management, game testing, bug tracking, post-mortem analysis, financial and legal considerations, and games marketing, as well as hone skills in scripting, 3D modeling, writing, and more. The goal is to instill students with an understanding of and experience doing virtually everything that goes into the making of a game.

“We expose students to so much, and then they all find their niche,” adds Andrew Laing, instructor of Level Design, Project Design and Development, and Presentation Skills. “It is always cool to see a student ‘come to life’ and decide they want to be a level designer, as an example.”

Studio-centricity

VFS’s Game Design program is purposefully set up to mimic a studio environment, as are the individual courses. They are molding not just knowledgeable and professional game designers, but also team players with a respect for the craft, the process, and each other.

“Students can ‘hit the ground running’ when they graduate, due to the studio-style instruction they receive here,” says Jacob Tran, instructor of Flash for Game Designers, Game Interface Design, and Portfolio Development. “When finished, they have battlefield experience,” adds Laing.

It is important to set up the fundamentals before doing all the cool stuff, Warfield interjects. “You have to have the methodology down. It matters much more than what system, engine, or platform it is or what tools you are using in development.” Case in point: Eight graduating classes have designed and developed new games. None of them are the same. They are all essentially using the same tools and engines, but they each found their own unique style.

“Game technology moves so quickly,” insists Tran. “Whatever tools we’re using today are just a means to an end. There are techniques that

tie into a lot of different tools and packages. It is the soft skills that you need.”

Team Philosophy

High on the staff’s list of top skills that students need to acquire is the ability to work effectively in team environments. In fact, a team atmosphere pervades the program, running throughout its classes and corridors, and beyond. “The ability to go out and work effectively in a team—that’s a positive thing,” notes Warfield. “A director on a film doesn’t get anything done if he doesn’t understand the team dynamic.”

Instructor Laing’s approach to courses—many of which at VFS are open-learning, peer-based workshops—boasts a balance



VFS students learn how to be team players capable of communicating their visions and of working efficiently and effectively in a workgroup.

of individual and team projects. In the Levels course he teaches, students develop their own game level and then must mesh with others in a team to combine all three individual creations into a single game level. “Going through a project can be like going through a battle,” he notes, “it breeds kinship and camaraderie.” Classes such as this also teach students that it’s important to be passionate and excited about

their art, but also sensitive to team members.

"You can't do it all by yourself," Warfield mentions. "You need to work in a team. The rogue, over-exuberant game designer doesn't seem to last in a team environment very long."

That team-based approach extends outside the classroom, as students from different tracks and programs collaborate on and contribute to each other's projects. Game Design students often post "help wanted" ads to stu-

dynamics, unique terminology, and technical vs. creative minds."

Today, half of VFS students hail from outside Canada, and a growing number of women are entering the Game Design program. The most influential factor is the presence of women in the classroom, admits Warfield. Male students often ask for the female perspective, which helps them to craft games that appeal to both sexes. "There definitely is a demand in the industry to get the female perspective... and guys are cleaner when women are in class with them," he quips.

The school's in-house Game Test Lab, equipped with all of today's advanced gaming consoles, enables students to observe people playing the games they designed and developed. The lab gets students thinking about how to improve their games for different target audiences. By watching others interact with their game, students can better consider: Is it fun to play? What does the player have to achieve? And do they care if they achieve it? The lab experience is so effective that Vancouver-based game developers also come to the lab to test their consumer games with VFS students.

The Home Stretch

During their final terms in VFS's Game Design program, students focus on planning and developing a project. They also concentrate on employment preparatory skills, such as interview technique, portfolio development, and showcasing various capabilities, including problem-solving.

Twelve weeks of game design and development culminate in a formal presentation to an impressive group of industry experts in Week 13. Forty industry players attended the last class presentation. In the audience sat professionals in roles ranging from owner, to human resources and recruiter, to producers, executives, and game designers—from BioWare, Surreal Software, Midway Games, Activision, and a number of local companies.

Following the student presentations, the industry night continues with students and invited guests socializing, networking, and playing games that the students have created.

In many cases, local designers, project managers, and executives provide their perspectives on what each student should be focusing on; in other cases, people have indicated they want certain students to work for them as soon as they finish school.

"We're plugged in," says Laing. "In addition to the connections and community we provide, we keep our ears to the ground. Many positions don't make it to posting before they are filled. Companies are calling to cherry-pick students and new graduates before posting a job."

With eight graduated classes working in the industry today, VFS's Game Design program is starting to get a reputation. Alumni are now "the industry," and many are gaining significant accolades. The work of two graduates of VFS's Game Design program will be showcased at the 2008 Independent Games Festival (IGF), which coincides with Game Developers Conference 2008 this month in San Francisco. VFS graduate Brandon Van Slyke helped to design Large Animal Games' Snapshot Adventures: Secret of Bird Island, an IGF finalist in the Design Innovation category. Foamzilla, a finalist in the IGF Student Showcase, is a VFS project by alumni Johan Eickmeyer and Mark Barazzuol. While studying at VFS, the team developed the original concept and built the level designs in three months for their final project. Other graduates have worked on major game releases like Mass Effect, Prototype, Skate, and Need for Speed: ProStreet. (Visit the VFS blog for more graduate success stories at www.vfs.com/blog.) Alumni also crafted First Fridays, for a chance to interact with alumni, students, instructors, and other industry members on the first Friday of every month.

"The real start is after school," acknowledges Lanh Doan, lab instructor in VFS's Game Design program. "You have to learn hands-on in the industry. Be flexible, strive beyond, and always evolve. If you're really good at one thing, don't just focus on that; branch out. Companies are looking to diversify, looking for a broad range of skills. Open yourself up and you will learn a lot more."

For more information, visit the Vancouver Film School's Game Design program Web page at www.vfs.com/gamesdesign.



VFS Game Design students benefit from the latest technologies, innovative instruction, and a studio environment.

dents in other VFS programs when seeking voice actors for their games. The end results include a better game experience, a broader voice-acting portfolio, and increased team-building and networking skills and experience. Moreover, says Warfield, "It's a mix of training and experiences. For example, you can imagine how someone coming from a mythology background can contribute to a game. It's the mix of ideas that really rounds out a team."

It's Who You Know

Whether students realize it at the time, the people they are exposed to during their time at VFS constitutes a large part of their overall education. Explains Laing: "On the first day of class, I say, 'Look around you. This is the beginning of your network.'" And he is right; from Day One, students are meeting other like-minded individuals.

"It is basically a year-long interview, interacting with people in the industry," says Tran. "Community is such a key factor. Final projects for some classes and programs are team projects, involving language barriers, different