From theory to practice: Canalside Studio, a case study

Canalside Studios
LET THE JOURNEY BEGIN...

Inspiring tomorrow’s professionals
School of Computing and Engineering Department of Informatics

- Provides courses in engineering, computer science, digital media etc.
- In 2005 validated two new degrees
  - BSc Computer Games Programming
  - BA computer Games Design

To ensure industry relevance curriculum developed in partnership with games companies (Team 17, Rockstar Leeds, GameRepublic etc)
The University has a long history of sandwich education (originally the mechanics institute)

The decline in placement opportunities is well documented (e.g. Wilson, 2012)

Work experience is still regarded as vital in helping graduates gain employment (government, sector skills councils, employers, all say graduates lack skills needed for employment)

Creative technology industries are important to the UK Economy (there are still shortages of talented graduates with the right skills for these industries, (Livingstone & Hope, 2012))
There are particular problems in finding placement opportunities in smaller companies (lots of creative technology companies are SME or Micro-enterprises).

Even more difficult in creative technology companies where security, IP and coding standards are an issue. (i.e. games companies)

Problem: Lots of capable students wanting placements but not enough available!
In 2005 staff from the School successfully applied to the Higher Education Innovation Fund to set up and in-house computer game studio, “Canalside” (with matched funding from the University £200,000 investment)

A commercial start up and part of University of Huddersfield Enterprises Ltd.

Fully equipped studio providing year long work placements with bursaries for 8 students each year

Managed by academic staff from the course team
Canalside Studio

• Getting the funding was the easy bit!
• Academic staff had relevant technical and creative skills but no commercial experience. Students were enthusiastic but inexperienced.
• We asked our games industry partners for help.
• Barriers to entry on AAA consoles and lack of standardisation on mobile in 2005 meant we could only develop on PC.
• Microsoft had recently released XNA framework for indie developers which made development easier
• Students entered international Dream Build Play competition for Microsoft Xbox Live Arcade (XBLA) and came second.
Canalside Studio

The Dream Build Play prize was a publishing contract with on XBLA
The 80:20 rule

- Although we had a successful game demo and a contract, 80% of the work of making the game lay ahead - we had about 20% of the knowledge required to do this
- We all had to learn very fast
- We learned from games industry members locally
- We learned from Microsoft (XBLA team in Seattle)
- The academic staff had some formal training on business (MBA etc)
- Students and staff learned together as a team
- We learned to be a team
- We made lots of mistakes
Learning to do business

- As a studio start up within the University we had to learn to do business and liaise with internal and external partners
- Microsoft was an intimidating partner but the people we worked with were very helpful and always quick to respond
- Although the University is very committed to Enterprise activity (Times Higher award!) at the time no-one had experience of this sort of software publishing contract
  - This led to delays in finalising the contract and insurances
  - We had difficulties getting the network permissions
  - Communication internally was often slower than when dealing with America.
  - We had to develop new networks across the organisation.
Team-working and Managing

- Working together in a commercial environment required students and staff to reconstruct their relationship.
- Managing the team required a shift in emphasis from teaching related values such as “individual learning”, “experience” and “process” towards pragmatic industry values like “time”, “cost”, “quality”
- Effective team-working is fundamental to games development so the Team had to come first every time.
- The Studio has formal HR rules, which were occasionally needed and we have made some tough decisions.
Lessons

• We learned to make and publish games!
• Learning alongside the students and from industry experts provided an “enterprise apprenticeship” for academic staff.
• Cultural differences between industry and academia present challenges to academic staff engaging in Enterprise.
• Work experience enhances employability, there are no short cuts to this, simulated work in the classroom lacks bite!
Benefits

• We have gained professional developer status with Microsoft and have sold some games (not many)
• We are more credible with our industry partners because we have shown that we can make the journey from theory to practice
• The experience of practical games development authenticates teaching.
• Students involved in the studio have gained employment with games developers including: EA, Rockstar, Full Fat, Four Door Lemon, Crytek, Red Kite, Codemasters, Lightning Fish, Team17
Canalside Studio

Yo-Ho Kablammo

Game Rating: E (Everyone)
Mild Fantasy Violence

Online Interactions Not Rated by the ESRB

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