



Paris Game Developers
Conference

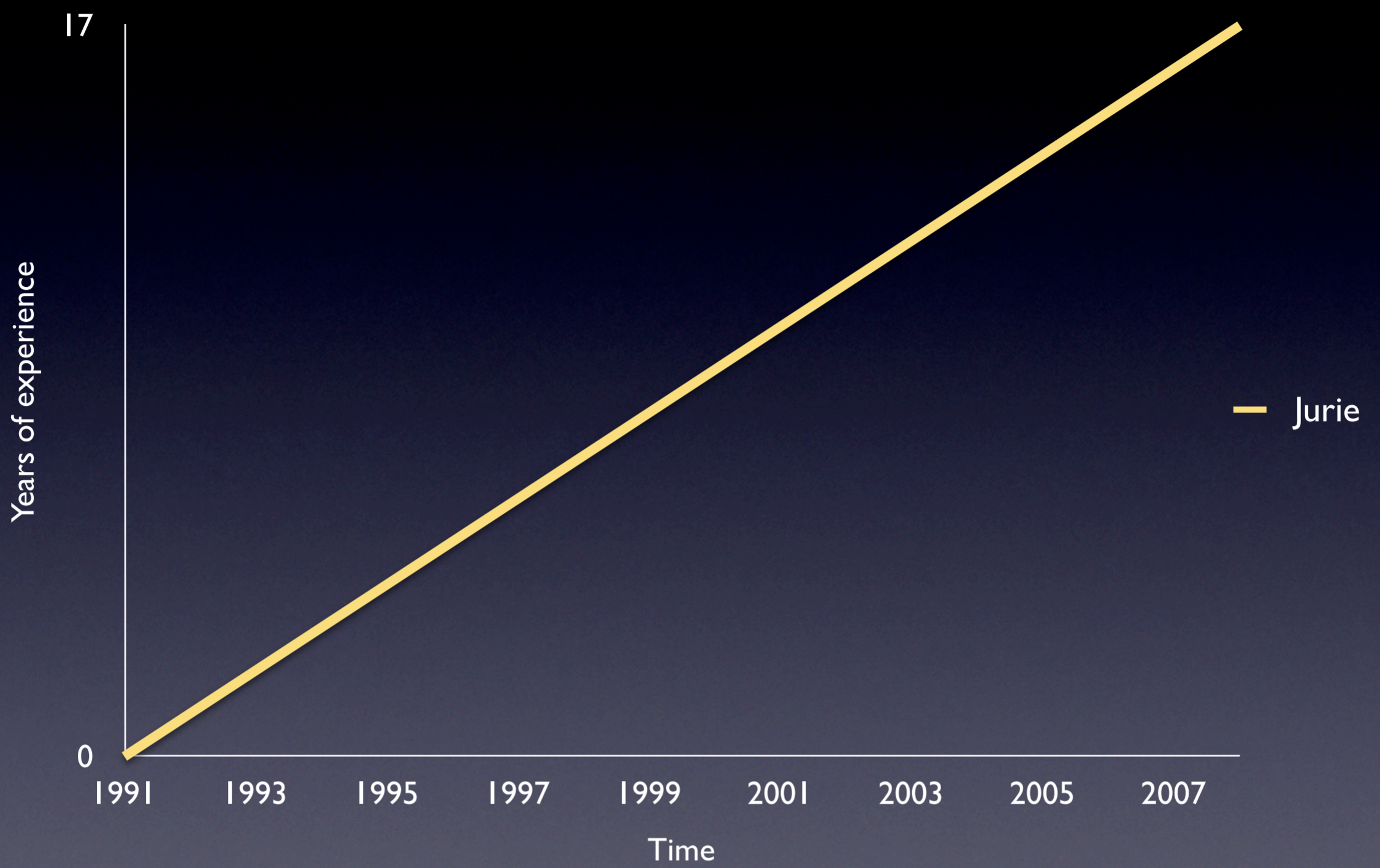
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June 23-24
at Coeur Défense
Paris - FRANCE

Tuesday, January 27, 2009

Hello everyone. Let's get started.

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First very quickly something about myself. My name is Jurie Horneman. I have worked in the games industry for 17 years. I am Dutch. I have worked in Germany, France and Austria, as a programmer, a game designer and a producer. Right now I am a free-lance producer and game designer based in Vienna.

Producing & Productivity

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I am going to talk about producing and productivity.

I just noticed the French title of this talk is 'Gerer les flux', controlling the streams. I want to clarify that this talk is not about Ghostbusters.

I hope it will be enlightening for beginning producers, and interesting for experienced producers.

The obligatory 'What I mean by **producer**' slide

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Different companies have different definitions of what a producer's job is.

Obviously I am not talking about producers who work on the publishing side. I am talking about people who lead a development project. I am going to talk about managing game developers: artists, designers, programmers, QA, and so forth.

My experience is with teams up to about 50 people. Beyond that, you may not be able to use some of the concrete methods I am going to talk about here, as you will probably have an additional layer of delegation between yourself and the team.

But even though some of the things I talk about may be different in your situation, I think you will find that most of what I am going to say will still be relevant.

To me, the key aspect of being a producer is that you are responsible for ALL people on the team and ALL aspects of the project. A lead programmer is only responsible for managing the coders and for the technical aspects of the game. A test lead is only responsible for managing testers and for the testing of the game. Even a project manager or an assistant de prod or whatever is only responsible for the fine details of scheduling and tracking the project.

But the producer is responsible for global aspects. That includes profitability, quality, morale and productivity.

What this talk is **not** about

- ✱ Methodology
- ✱ Theory
- ✱ Project planning, budgets, marketing, game design
- ✱ A complete list of what a producer does

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I am not going to talk about any methodologies from 'normal' software development such as SCRUM or eXtreme Programming. Not that there's anything wrong with them.

I am not going to quote Harvard Business School case studies showing that if you do X or Y, your productivity will go up by 5%. As far as I know, that data just doesn't exist for game development. This is based on my experience. Maybe some of it is idiosyncratic.

I am not going to be talking about scheduling or budgets or anything like that.

There are many super-interesting topics related to producing that I will not have time to talk about.

Three key points

- ✱ Create an environment for productivity
- ✱ There are no short-cuts or silver bullets
- ✱ Behave yourself

1. Create the conditions for Flow.
2. This is particularly important. I am not going to say that if you use method A, B or C, your productivity will magically go up, because it doesn't work that way. In fact, this talk is mostly about why it doesn't work that way. I am trying to explore some of the fundamental, essential aspects of producing, and I hope that you will come away with some good thinking tools and a lot of food for thought for helping you make your team more productive.
3. Your behavior matters.

What this talk **is** about

- ✱ Areas where you can affect productivity
- ✱ How to change how people work
- ✱ How to be a producer

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First I am going to talk about some areas that you should pay attention to, that you should be aware of, and where you can do things that affect productivity.

Then I am going to talk about how you can change the way people work.

And finally I will talk about being a producer.

So, let's get started.

Area 1 Goals

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The first thing a producer should do to make a project advance smoothly is set clear, achievable goals. What, when. Maybe who, why, how.

When you know what you should focus your efforts on, it is easy to work productively. Good goals reduce complexity: they strip away clutter and unnecessary details. It is good when everyone on the team is aware of the big picture, but they should not have to *worry* about the big picture. Worry is distracting. Worrying about the big picture is the job of the producer.

Different kinds of goals

- ✱ What needs to be made for whom?
- ✱ High-level schedule and milestone definitions
- ✱ Immediate tasks
- ✱ Bug priorities
- ✱ ... your leads set goals too

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You need to set goals on many different levels:

What kind of game are you going to make? How big is the budget? Who is the target audience? This is where you work with upper management or publishers or investors and find out exactly what the project needs to achieve.

You need to make a **high-level schedule** and define milestones. You may have someone on the team, a project manager or associate producer or whatever you call them, whose job it is to do the fine-grained day to day scheduling, but the high-level scheduling is your responsibility.

Try to be as clear in your milestone definitions as possible. Explain what needs to be there and what doesn't. Define quality levels. How playable should a level be? How many A bugs are OK? How many B bugs? Define attributes and not just features. How high should the frame rate be? Define an acceptable range and prioritize each element. Say that you absolutely need 3 characters in there, but it would be nice to have 5 characters. That will make hitting milestones a lot easier.

I think prioritizing and setting quality levels are your number one tool for getting a project done on time, independent of anything else. It's not the only tool, but it's your best tool. Many people in the industry seem to think crunching is the best tool...

During production the **immediate tasks** need to be clearly set, for the next week or two. That is usually enough. You probably won't do that yourself but you need to make sure it is done well.

In **bug-fixing** phases you need to determine bug priorities. Bug priorities are goals that you use to focus the efforts of your team. And by tweaking the bug priorities in your bug-fixing phases, you make it a lot easier for everyone to hit the milestone. Again, it's about ranges.

But **your leads** are setting goals too. They may be writing game design documents, technical design documents, test plans, art bibles, level design guidelines, etc. These are all goals for your team. Now as a producer, you probably won't work on this directly, but you need to make sure that it gets made and that it is good enough. You need to set quality standards and you may need to teach your leads about clear writing.

Goals should be achievable and specific

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You want to set goals that can be achieved. Achieving goals is very motivating, and motivation is good for productivity.

You also do not want there to be doubt about whether a goal has been achieved or not. 'Make things better by next week' – wow, that leaves some space for interpretation.

Area 2

Information Flow

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The next area you should pay attention to is information flow. You have to make sure information is getting to where it should.

Make sure **information** is getting to where it should

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You cannot do your job, and the team cannot efficiently do theirs, without good information. It is no use setting goals if the team doesn't find out about them. Nothing you put in place will work well if information is not getting to people, so this amplifies everything else.

The key to information flow is asking which information people need to work, how they will get this information, and then putting in place rules, processes, tools to make this happen.

What kind of information? Whatever their team needs to do their job. What do they need to do, what is the next milestone, should they install a new tool, should they not get the latest code from the repository, there's free ice-cream in the kitchen, here is how you should check in your work.

Try making it easy for people to find the information you need. Realize that you, because you are a producer, will have a lot more practice in time management, in using Outlook, in using wikis, than most people on your team. So make it easy for them. Think about which information you are going to push at people and what you are going to let them pull by themselves. Think about how hard it is going to be for them to get just the information they need. People shouldn't have to chase information.

Your tools

- ✱ Email
- ✱ Instant Messaging
- ✱ Wikis
- ✱ Intranet
- ✱ Bug trackers
- ✱ Big pieces of paper taped to walls
- ✱ Team meetings
- ✱ Actually going over and **talking to people**

Understand the pros and cons of the different tools you have. All of these have their use. Not everyone uses all of these. Some companies ban IM or don't have an A0 plotter.

It doesn't matter exactly which bug tracker you're using or which wiki system. What matters is that you use it. You should spend more time on actually putting in good data and especially making sure it stays relevant, and less in choosing the right tool or debating how things should be formatted or structured.

Team meetings

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If you need to give information to your team, try to do regular meetings with the whole team if you can. You can convey more to people, you can react to people, you can answer questions, you are literally standing up for what you believe in – I hope you believe in it – and your relationship with the team will improve.

Area 3

Processes

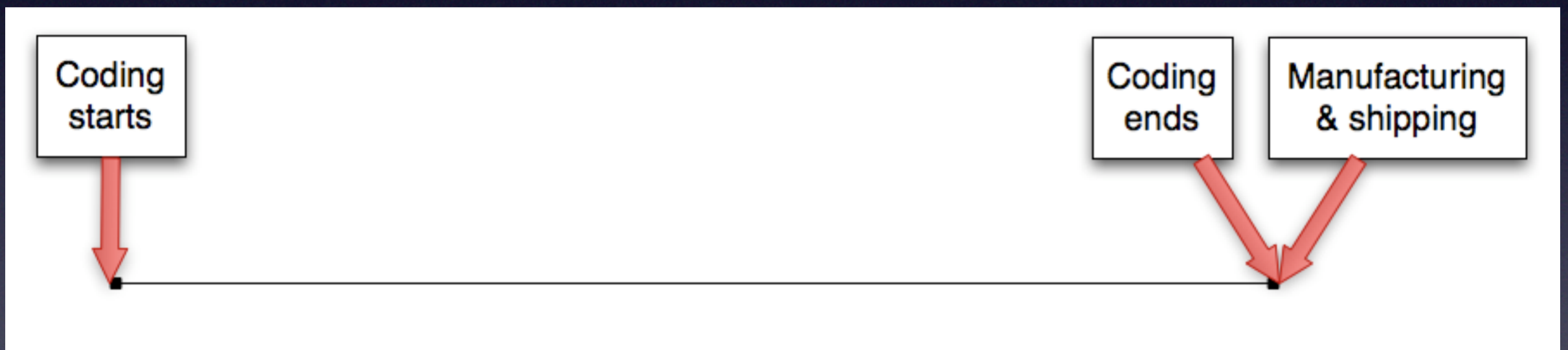
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The next area. When I say 'processes', I mean formal processes – processes you have thought about, agreed upon, and written down. This is something that I see very much as the job of the producer, even though individual departments also have their own processes.

Let me give you an example of a process.

The good old days



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Back in the good old days, there were no alpha or beta milestones. We just kept implementing and adding and changing until the end. As teams grow bigger games contained more and more bugs and we realized that this was not a good way to go about things. So someone decided that on the next project, assuming there is a next project, they were going to add a special period at the end just for bug-fixing, where nobody is allowed to add new features or content anymore. And that's a process. A pretty simple one even, that people in 'normal' software development had been using for years.

After some companies started doing this, people started to compare notes at events like GDC, and they realized everyone was doing more or less the same thing, and it became an industry best practice and suddenly you can't get a publishing deal anymore without a bugfixing phase.

What processes do

- ✱ Reduce complexity
- ✱ Institutional memory
- ✱ Do the right thing

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Processes do 3 things:

(reduce complexity)

First of all, processes make things simpler. Most of the time that is a good thing, because your work becomes less confusing and you can focus on what is important. In the example I just gave, you know, when you add a new feature or content, that you should be careful about interactions with other stuff, but you don't need the skill of a brain surgeon. Because there will be a phase where you're going to test everything together and fix all the bugs. So, less on your mind, less distraction, higher productivity.

(institutional memory)

Second, processes are a kind of memory – the things your organization has learned can be 'encoded' in a process so it doesn't need to be learned again. In the example I gave, your company does not need to learn that bugfixing takes time, and that every time you add something to a game, it can introduce new bugs. Processes help you to avoid making mistakes more than once. And less mistakes means higher productivity.

(do the right thing)

Third, processes help you do the right thing at the right time. I find this fascinating. Think again about the example of the bugfixing phase. It seems pretty obvious now that you need to stop implementing and start testing and bugfixing at some point. But when you're there, in the moment, and you see this super-cool feature and it would take just 5 minutes to add... it is really, really tough to make the decision to not put that in. And that is what is key: in the moment when you need to do something, you may not be in the right state of mind to do it. You have a very different set of priorities when you're down in the trenches than when you're objectively looking at the whole project. And you may make a decision that feels right in the short term, but is wrong, or just risky, in the long term. It's about the way we think, about the limits of human psychology, and processes help you deal with that. Again, less mistakes means higher productivity.

Examples of processes

- ✱ **Daily** builds and daily tests
- ✱ Content tests for **outsourced** content
- ✱ **Checklists** for new people
- ✱ Rules for **meetings**

Area 4

Work Environment

The next area you should pay attention to is the work environment.

Make sure the team has
the **environment** it needs
to be productive

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It's not difficult, but you have to do it. This is a classic producer responsibility – who else is going to worry about the work environment? Oh yeah, that one whiny artist who wants a better lamp.

Basically, improving the work environment gives you a ton of ways to remove distractions and make people's work go faster.

How **expensive** is your team's time?

Person	€/min for one	€/min for all
Coder	?	?
Artist	?	?
Designer	?	?
QA	?	?
Lead / Producer	?	?
Whole team	-	?

At the start of the project, take a couple of minutes and fill this out. You are probably thinking about a rough budget anyway, so this shouldn't be too hard.

This is a tool. Use it to remind yourself and others of the costs of inefficiency.

How much money can you save by improving compile times by just 1 minute? By giving all artists a second monitor? By installing a faster network architecture? By investing a month of work in improving your tool-chains and workflows? Do the math.

Is **your office** too hot? Too
cold? Too noisy?
All of the above?

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I personally like open plan offices, but I know not everyone does. I like sitting in the middle of the project room and knowing everyone can see my monitor. It keeps me honest, and everyone else too. You do have to make rules for keeping down the noise and enforce them like a tyrant. On the other hand, if you don't use open plan offices, you will have to work harder on information flow and other areas.

Is **your office** a productive
place? A creative place? A
happy place?
All of the above?

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Think about free drinks. Think about fruit. Think about an espresso machine.

Fight for a budget for taking the team out after a milestone. Or for ordering in food. Or even better: cook for the team, that's what we did when we were crunching at Rockstar. It's really good for morale, if you can cook.

On the one hand, this is a business and we're all here to do a job and we get paid for it. But on the other hand, jeez louse, what are you saying when you treat people like Dilbert? I call this grey carpet syndrome. We're in a creative business, let's not act as if we're working for an insurance company.

Does your team **agree**
with you?

Regularly ask your team (and watch your team) to see if they can work without distractions. Deal with the fact that someone will always complain. Keep improving.

Area 5 Culture

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This area is probably the hardest to affect as a producer. It's the most nebulous. There are no cool methods or tricks here. This is the area that relies on your strength of character. But this is also the place where you can have the biggest effect on productivity.

Like I said in the beginning, there are no short-cuts or silver bullets. But there are a thousand little things you and your team can do tomorrow and every day after that, to increase productivity and quality. The real challenge is to get your team into a productive and professional mindset, to create a culture of productivity.

This goes beyond introducing working methods into values. Let me give you some examples of bad values:

Bad Culture

- ✱ If you do something wrong, you're dumb
- ✱ If you don't understand something, you're dumb
- ✱ Being the producer's friend is good for your career
- ✱ If you're not typing code or moving vertices, you're not working
- ✱ If you work deep into the night, you're a hero

You can use the Rational Unified Process or SCRUM or be ISO 9000 certified, but with a culture like this, you won't get a good game out the door on time.

Here are some examples of productive values:

Good Culture

- ✱ If something is stopping you from working, talk to someone about it
- ✱ Everyone can have great ideas
- ✱ We do what we say we will do
- ✱ If something goes wrong, deal with it and move on
- ✱ Have respect for others and treat them like adults

Create a **culture** of productivity

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So the goal is create a team culture of productivity and quality, where people work, and communicate, and solve problems autonomously. How do you do that?

You have to know the values you want. And you need to live those values. You need to be totally convinced that being respectful, for instance, is highly important. That is the only way. And that is what makes producing hard. That is why experience helps, because it takes time for you to learn the worth of certain values and the negative effects of others, to really understand them so well that you can fully stand behind them.

Not only do you need to be deeply convinced of your values, you need the courage to teach those values to other people. And you need the persistence to keep doing it, day after day after day. You can't write an email to the team at the start of the project and expect that to stick for two years. You need to remind people again and again that it is not OK to laugh at others for saying something stupid, that it is not OK to sit around and do nothing when you have no assigned tasks, that is not OK to have a negative attitude.

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And you have to acknowledge when people do a good job, you have to give them positive feedback when they make a suggestion or ask a question or do a good job.





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Speaking of negative attitudes... this is one of my pet peeves. I don't want people to pretend they're happy when they're not, or to pretend everything is fine and there are no problems. But I dislike it when people only see the negative side of things, when they constantly complain about the same things without trying to solve them or putting up with them. Because it is terrible for morale. Back in the 90s I worked in a development department with maybe 20 people. And there were 2 people who had negative attitudes, and basically spent all of their day telling everyone why the company sucked and everything was bad. Instead of, you know, trying to improve things. Or quitting! People started getting more and more convinced that things were bad, and people were starting to quit, and after some time I realized I was the only one who was still optimistic. And that demotivated me so much that I quit as well. And then almost everybody quit and they had to rebuild the development department from scratch. What a waste of time and money and talent. So that is why as a producer I tend to be very sensitive to negative attitudes.

I discussed this with a friend, and he said team meetings were a great tool for dealing with this too. And it's true that we had no team meetings at this company, so things had time to fester.

Interactions of the previous areas and team culture

- ✱ Goals
- ✱ Information flow
- ✱ Processes
- ✱ Work environment

Interactions between previous areas and team culture:

- Do you get feedback from others when setting goals?
- Do people get only the information they really need? Or are you open with them about what happens?
- Do people need to get everything OKed by a superior? Or do they have a lot of responsibility?
- Do people work in a supportive environment?

Recruitment

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So maybe, when I talked about values and culture earlier, you were thinking "Omgod with some of the people on my team that would never work". Well, that is why as a producer you should pay a lot of attention to recruitment.

Get the right people **in** your team

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You have to make sure you are involved in deciding who joins your team. If you're going to pick one fight with upper management and the Way Things Are Done in your company – and we're going to get to that later – pick this one. Fight tooth and nail to control who can join your team and who cannot. That goes for internal recruitment as well: sometimes you get saddled with someone from another part of the company, and you know? That almost never happens because that guy is such a great guy. "Oh, this guy, he is a genius. Please take him" – yeah, right.

You want to check technical ability, motivation and fit.

You can leave the testing of technical ability to your leads. Your lead artist can grill applicants with questions about Max or Maya. What you need to do as a producer is to test work attitude. For me, work attitude always beats skill. I have worked with mediocre guys with great work attitudes and with absolute stars with lousy attitudes, and I know which ones got the job done. Test people's social skills. Go for a drink with them. Drinking is a great way to get to know people, this doesn't just go for recruitment. (You're laughing but I am serious. Also, I am not an alcoholic.) You need to find out if someone who is going to join your team shares your values. If they do not, they are going to cause trouble. That doesn't necessarily mean they're backstabbing psychos. It just means you are going to spend way too much time trying to make this person fit in. The return on the investment of your time and energy is just not going to be there.

Find out if you can communicate with them. Find out if they listen to you. You don't need to agree with them all the time. Don't get caught in that trap – don't create a mono-culture where everyone is like you. Diversity is good.

And make sure everyone else likes the new person as well, not just you.

Get the wrong people **off** your team

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Strictly speaking this is not recruitment... more like anti-recruitment. But it's still important.

What if someone is already on your team and they are causing problems? Talk to them. Find out their side. Find out what the real problem is.

Telling someone they should stop throwing their keyboard at people is easy, because it's clearly unacceptable. It's the borderline cases that are hard. People who are nice but just not competent enough. Or they are great at job A but their dream is to do job B. Or they have some annoying personal habit.

(I once had to tell a guy who worked for me that his jokes were too awful. No kidding, they were terrible. Not offensive, just... bad. He posted jokes in the company forums that were so embarrassing that people came to me and told me they would no longer read his bug reports. Luckily, he understood that not everyone "was ready for his jokes". Phew.)

And if the talking doesn't work? Get them off your team. The longer they stay, the more damage they will cause – even if they are not acting in bad faith and it is not their fault. This is difficult, but it is what it takes.

not-yet-adopted kitteh



tries harder

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I am not going to go in detail on the recruitment process. I will say that it's worth keeping in contact with whoever is responsible for recruitment in your company. Make them your best friend. Keep encouraging them to improve. Help them out. Bring them chocolates.

I am also not going to talk about companies' human resource strategies, except to say that if your company has one: good! And I don't mean just placing ads on Gamasutra, I mean identifying and attracting and especially retaining and developing talent. Very few companies do that, which is a pity.

You and your team vs the rest of the company

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If your company is small and has only one team, great, then your team culture is also your company culture. However, this is usually not the case.

There are usually people outside of the team who have a say in how your team works: development directors, managing directors. If you're in a matrix structure you get directors for each discipline, such as programming or design. Your company might have a department that is responsible for disseminating working methods, or for training people in a particular methodology.

How does this affect you?

- ✱ Reduced sphere of influence
- ✱ Company culture

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This affects you and what you can do on two levels:

Your responsibilities may be reduced or shared with another person or group. You may not be able to hire who you like, or get rid of who you don't like, or introduce the methods and tools you want.

This can be good or bad. Bad if that other person or group does not share your goals or approach or is incompetent or doesn't like you or it is committee hell.

Good if that other person or group is competent – it means less work for you! Also, it can help you introduce new methods. Convincing a director may make it easier to convince everyone else. For bigger changes having the backing from the managing director can help a LOT.

Company culture. If your company has a productive culture, great! If they don't, your life will be tough.

You may create a culture in your team where people know they can come up to you and talk about problems and not be ridiculed, but what if your development director or managing director don't do that at all? What if you reward people according to objective and transparent criteria, but the art director, say, is promoting people based on who he likes having a beer with? People will be getting mixed signals. You can still do a decent job. You can create a team culture that is better than the company culture. It's hard and a bit risky, but it's doable.

Gordon Walton said: "It's really hard to change a company culture, I find it best to create a team culture that is mostly congruent with the company culture, focusing on the best parts of the company culture."

Changing the way people work

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It is not trivial to change the way people work. It is always scary to move away from your known habits to something new and unknown. You can't change everything at once, you can never achieve 'perfection', so you have to live with the sub-optimal. Realizing what you can and cannot change is very important.

Never forget

- ✱ Every **team** is different
- ✱ Every **company** is different
- ✱ Every **project** is different
- ✱ Every **producer** is different

This is important to remember when you want to change the way people work. Nothing is fixed. You are a different person than you were a year ago, and your team is different than they were a year ago – even if they contain the same people.

Let's look at some questions you should ask yourself when you're thinking of introducing change.

Questions to ask yourself

- ✱ What is **right** for this team, right now?
- ✱ What will give the team **early positive** feedback?
- ✱ What is the level of **experience** of the team?
- ✱ How did the team **used to** work? Which methods did they use?
- ✱ How much change can this team **handle** right now?

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What is the biggest problem facing the team right now? What will get you the most bang for the buck? What will get people into a productive state as soon as possible?

What will give the team the feeling that improving the way they work works? What will give them the feeling trusting you works?

How professional are the people on the team? How familiar are they with thinking about productivity? With processes? With rules?

Some teams like very strict and rational working methods, others don't. If people just came off a completely chaotic project and it was a death march, you can introduce methods that are very 'carré', very organized. If people did well on their last project, they probably aren't screaming for change. I once joined a team that had tried several methodologies over the last year or so, and none of them worked. So they were a bit skeptical about changes.

Sometimes you can make radical changes; most of the time gradual changes are better.

Things to **keep in mind**

- ✱ Make sure you understand the **situation**
- ✱ Don't just push the solution, explain the problem - get **buy-in**
- ✱ Set a **trial period**
- ✱ Repeat, repeat, **repeat**
- ✱ **Enforce** the rules
- ✱ Check the **results**

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Introducing a method without understanding both the method and your situation and without follow-up and then hoping that something wonderful will happen: That is a like being in a cargo cult. You need to understand the situation.

Also, most of the time you cannot just go and say: Here's how we're going to do it. It is much, much better to get the input from everyone who is affected (usually your leads), and to pick the right decision in a group process. Even if at the end you all arrive at the decision you wanted.

If you think the change is risky: set a trial period. Set a legitimate point in time where you're going to look at the results of the change, and be prepared to change back if needed.

How do you introduce rules? You have to repeat them again and again. And again. You have to be relentless.

And you have to enforce the rules. If people start breaking a rule and there are no consequences, it shows that you can break the rules and nobody cares. And that is bad. This takes courage and dedication.

Finally, you need to see if the change is doing any good. Are the methods you introduced having the effect you wanted? Are they having any effect at all? Are there side effects? Don't assume that because you introduced a rule that everything is alright now.

You

Communicate **clearly**

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Everything you do is communication.

Written, spoken, one on one, to the whole team... all the time. Express yourself clearly. Write clear emails and documents.

Study. Practice. Ask for feedback.

Making things simple but not too simple is hard. You will notice this most when setting goals. Whittle it down. This is incredibly tough.

Delegate

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You are delegating things to your leads.

But also think of delegating to associate producers. They may appear to be less immediately productive than programmers or artists, but they can in fact cause big productivity increases.

Three key qualities

☀ Awareness

☀ Courage

☀ Integrity

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1. Be aware of what is really happening. Of what is needed, of what is going on. Because if you don't, who else will?

2. You need courage.

3. You need to do what you say you will do. Your team needs to be able to count on you. Be honest with your team members. If you don't, they will notice.

But even more important you have to be honest with yourself, and know your strengths and weaknesses.

Becoming a better producer means becoming a better person. This goes for any activity worth doing. And it never stops. That is why producing is hard.

*Um... is this still about
productivity?*

Passion

- ✱ Passion for games
- ✱ Passion for the project
- ✱ Passion for helping a group of people make something

Thank you for listening



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(Thanks to Daniel Miller and Tobias Sicheritz)

Secret bonus slides

	Producer	Lead	Artist	<i>etc.</i>
Set milestones	Do	Consult	Inform	
Define art style	Inform	Do	Consult	
Make an art asset		Approve	Do	
<i>etc.</i>				

Mystery grid. Contact me to find out what it is.

“There's five chefs today that we have working for us and I think what they share in common is [...] the **determination** to go in every day and do a little bit better than the day before. Continuously progress and evolve the philosophy and the **culture** that is so dear to us.”

- *Thomas Keller*