Sierra On-Line

Ken Williams
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Overview

- Quick Sierra History
- Ken's Rules for Game Development
- Sierra Today

Sierra Overview

- Founded in 1979
  - With Roberta
  - Ran for 20 years
- Initial focus Apple II
- Shifted in 1983 to PC
- Dominated PC entertainment (computers, NOT video games)
- When company sold in 1996 (I left in 1998)
  - 1,000 employees

Products

Adventure
- Police Quest
- Kings Quest
- Leisure-Suit Larry
- Gabriel Knight
- Quest for Glory
- Phantasmagoria

Simulation
- Red Baron
- Aces in the Pacific
- Aces of the Deep
- Pro Pilot

Home
- Print Artist
- Master Cook
- 3d Landscape Design
- Hoyles
- You Don't Know Jack

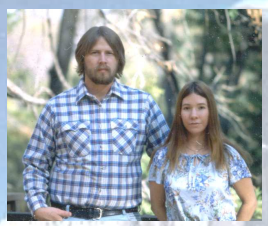
Action
- Half-Life
- Homeworld
- 3D Ultra Pinball
- Frogger
- Earthseige

FRP/Strategy
- SWAT
- Caesar
- Lords of Magic
- Lords of the Realm
- Civil War

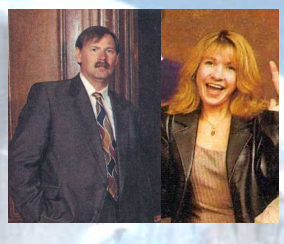
Sports
- Nascar
- Front Page Sports
  - Baseball
  - Football
- Trophy Bass

Divisions

- Sierra
- Dynamix
- Papyrus
- Coktel Vision
- Impressions
- Brightstar
- Sublogic
- Headgate
- Several more that I can't remember (Apologies!)



BEFORE



AFTER

Video: 20 ~~15~~ Years of History

Ken's top 17 ~~10~~ list

Game Development

Product Development at Sierra

- Regionally split into divisions
  - 20-150 developers
- Divisions split into "teams"
  - 5-50 team members
- Teams lead by two people
  - Project Manager
  - Designer
- The "Milestone" process

The 7 Second Rule

- Short Attention Spans
- Probably the single most important rule
- This is not film making!
- 7 seconds is too long!
  - Even then, give them something to look at (thermometer, load status, etc)

Rule #1

WOW Value

- My brother came up with this
- Goal is that if someone sees the game from across the room, they say "WOW!"

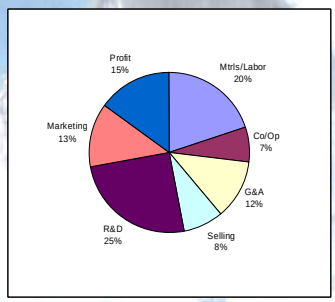
Rule #2

Build the Gameplay First

- Outpost
  - Nickname: Compost
- Sid Meier

Rule #3

Every Product Needs A Business Plan



Rule #4

Every Product Needs A Business Plan

		$20.00
Mtrls/Labor	20%	$4.00
Co/Op	7%	$1.40
G&A	12%	$2.40
Selling	8%	$1.60
R&D	25%	$5.00
Marketing	13%	$2.60
Profit	15%	$3.00
	100%	$20.00

Every Product Needs A Business Plan

- I used to express this as my "4 to 1" rule
  - Marketing must give a conservative net revenue projection at least four times the proposed R&D budget
- Divisional presidents rose and fell on this
- Designers lived or died by this
- Example: 300,000 units, at $20 net revenue = $6 million
  - Maximum R&D budget equal $1.5 million (all in: Overhead, development, QA, etc)

Every Member of the Team Must Be Passionate About the Product

- If the team isn't into the project, neither will the players be
- Look for "eyes that light up"

Rule #5

Lead, Don't Follow

- When you are in the leader's position, it is up to you to define the future of the industry
- Sierra as pioneers
  - First color packaging
  - First game with color graphics on Apple II
  - First commercial IBM PC game
  - First sound card support
  - First graphic word processor
  - First Basic compiler
  - First on CD-ROM
  - First with own magazine
  - First in multiplayer games
  - First Windows game , etc

Rule #6

Lead, Don't Follow

- Try games others won't
  - Experiment with new categories
  - Don't make "yet another" games
- We are in the entertainment business
  - Not the game business
  - Think entertainment, not games
    - Naptster is the best game ever sold

Video: INN

There is Money in the Niches

- The top 10 will do over half of industry revenue
- There are profits to be made with 50,000 unit sellers
  - If you work the economics right
- Sierra's slogan used to be
  - "Making fun is serious business"
  - To succeed long-term, you must be both successful AND profitable

Rule #7

You Must Have a Hook

- The market is flooded with product
- 10-20 games will do 90+% of all business
- How will you break out of the pack?
  - License
  - Sequel?
  - Niche focus
  - PR-worthy hook
    - Innovation
- A great plot and game play generally won't do it

Rule #8

Video: Phantasmagoria

Video: Making of Phantasmagoria

Shoot Your Own Dogs

- Kill dogs, don't ship them
- The cost of a dog reaches well beyond the one product
- Think of it as customer acquisition cost
  - $100's to acquire a customer
  - One dog to lose them
  - Re-Acquisition cost is an order of magnitude higher
- You're only as good as your last game

Rule #9

The First 10 Minutes Must Be Great

- In books, the first chapter tries to grab the reader
  - The same rule applies here
- Plus, for marketing reasons
  - Sales force
  - Store clerks
  - Etc.
- I even suggest an "attract mode" – something retailers can leave running in the store
- That said, hold some things back – don't give away the whole game in the first 10 minutes

Rule #10

No "Design by Committee"

- Every game needs one central person
  - Typically "the designer"
    - Key roles for chief engineer, creative director, music director, etc
      - But, one central guiding vision
    - Empower the designer, then shoot them if it doesn't sell
- The team must be strong and passionate
  - No turkeys, no whiners, no "it would be better if it were my way"
    - The top 10% typically does over half the work!
- Personal note: No fancy charts

Rule #11

Marketing Begins in R&D

- Viral Marketing
  - What can you do to get others playing?
    - Free multi-player levels
  - What can you do to get others talking?
    - Discussion boards
    - "Free Advertising"
      - Include audio files
      - "Making of" Video
      - Screensavers
      - Wallpaper
      - Clip art, etc.

Rule #12

Surprise the Player

- Hide lots of "surprises" through the game
  - Super Mario was my favorite at this
  - Hidden levels
  - Shortcuts to different levels

Rule #13

Don't Bite Off More Than You Can Chew

- Large projects never ship
  - Exponential product budget overruns as project grows
- Under-design, save time for polish
- Most projects are ruined because the money runs out before play-testing begins

Rule #14

Don't Copy!

- The first one to do something really new is the one who wins big
- Myst spawned 50+ Myst clones
  - Some great products
  - None sold well
- Only "follow success" if you can add significant value
  - Don't just do the same game in a new setting
- Exceptions
  - Doom/Half-Life
  - Kings Quest/Leisure-Suit Larry

Rule #15

Think Series or, Best of All: Perennial

- Can't make money on just one game
- Need to have a long-term view
- Leverage
  - Characters
  - Sequels
  - Add-on packs
  - Re-Use of existing code
  - Designer

Rule #16

Video: Al Lowe

Even if you win, You lose

- Bill Gates perspective on computer games

Rule #17

Final Thought

- Sierra succeeded because
  - We followed these rules (for the most part)
  - My background as an engineer
  - Respect for customers
    - Goal was to be a blend of Microsoft and Disney
  - Incredible customer support
    - Satisfaction guarantee
  - Amazing talent and passion

Thank you!

Ken Williams
Kenw@seanet.com