February 9, 2015

Agenda:

- Article of the Week: "Everything is not fine, and that's fine" by
  Rami Ismail – Gamasutra
    - http://ubm.io/1ESHW0I
- Game Design Documents and Project Lead applications due
- Make sure teams are together
- T-shirt color w/design
- Reminders
    - Club dues: 2/16/15
    - T-shirt dues: 2/23/15
- Checkpoint Presentations
    - First Checkpoint: March 2nd
    - Second Checkpoint: March 30th
    - Final Checkpoint: April 20th

Everything is not fine, and that's fine
By: Rami Ismail

During an interview last year, popular games website Giantbomb asked me what I thought of the state of the industry. I responded that *everything is fine* – used in that way where every good friend would know not to ask again. We're not fine.

I've been told by friends wiser than myself to always add nuance to such a sweeping statement. Individual developers might be fine, certain segments of the industry might be fine, in fact – entire platforms might be doing well. But as an industry, I don't think we're fine.

Every segment of our industry has gloomy news for us. In mobile, user acquisition has never been as expensive as it is today – with the cost of 'acquiring a quality user' now often exceeding the revenue such a user brings in on average. The giants of this industry deal with ever increasing costs, and ever decreasing willingness to buy a sixty dollar game. The aspiring developers of today need to shout louder than swarms of no longer aspiring developers to get noticed at all.

Most major platforms have been pushing for independent development to be featured in a bigger way, but that helped as much as it backfired. While the developers that were gaining momentum in 2010 are still gaining momentum, what do you do about the developers that started last year? As platform developer relation teams reached their maximum capacity, they locked down or opened up – both with the exact same effect. The idea that either a choice for democratic curation or a choice for tightly controlled platforms will somehow fix the fact that there are more games being made than ever feels like a feigned hope.

You don't have to be an economy major to realize that there's a problem when the average revenue per sold unit goes down, the audiences don't grow and the budgets go up. The graphics have to be more realistic, the soundtrack more orchestral, the gameplay tighter and the price – well, many will just wait for a sale or bundle, after all. From what I understand from AAA revenue reports, the gaming audiences doesn't like buying anything that isn't paradoxically *new and improved* –– the promise of something familiar, masqueraded as something revolutionary. It doesn't help that expectations are higher than ever -
when *Assassins Creed* launched, the outcry over a massive gamble of that size not being flawless was a fraction of the disappointed response to *WATCH_DOGS*.

And what is there to gain on mobile anyway? The race to the

bottom has pushed the prices down so far that it's almost impossible to keep making games at all. The people that can buy seats on the gravy train buy more seats than ever, and those still believing you can board the gravy train after it passed their station are left with the illusion that they *simply missed the train*, instead of understanding that unless they got exceptionally lucky, there wouldn't have been seats for them anyway.

Then there's the cruel joke of Kickstarter – once touted as a way to circumvent the troubles of traditional publishers, a few people abusing the system has now turned everybody into a risk-averse cynic that'd make the most careful investor stagger. Early Access, a way of ensuring great feedback during game development, has been exploited for easy money often enough that on our current project, Nuclear Throne, the people that have added the game to their wishlist to buy it after launch is double the number of actual sales after a year of Early Access.

Or what about the fragmentation of the media landscape? Where before, you needed to keep tabs on magazines – then it was magazines and blogs, now it is magazines, blogs, and video content creators. There's such a high job turnover in those fields that you have to keep fulltime attention to all of them, and too many developers don't have access to the resources to do so well – and thus end up missing valuable attention for their work. Or the endless torrent of question I get about funding – people looking for less than what an investor requires you to ask to be taken seriously, but more than what a reasonable loan, grant or fund can offer.

We're trying, as an industry, we're trying so fucking hard to *just be fine*. We talk about our successes and our achievements, but we shun mentioning our failures. We talk about the funny bugs in a Ubisoft game for weeks, but take months to respond to harassment happening straight under our nose.

You know what is a failure? That our audiences still believe a game as *Destiny* is not a risky proposition. Five hundred million dollars, assigned to a project that is an entirely unproven property years ago, with a projected dependency on non-existent internet infrastructure, for consoles that didn't even exist back then.

You know what is a failure? That when I travel, a complaint I hear more often than not is that people around non-Western world feel excluded from not just the industry – but from the word *diversity*. While we always define what type of discrimination we face – be it sexism or racism or anything else - we're sloppy enough to not identify what type of *diversity* we mean when we speak of it.

You know what is a failure? That rather than pricing our games at the price we believe is right for our work, we price our games where we believe it'll sell. In our blind rush to make ends meet, we're continuously hurting both ourselves and others. The expectation of what you'll get for a dollar has gotten so out of proportion, that on mobile you can't even say 'what you'll get for a dollar' anymore, because that's too expensive already. Games launch in bundles, are fine with pricing down over three quarters of the value to get some eyes on the game and are made to bid against each other in terms of how deep we'll go for major sale events.

We don't talk about that. We want to – no, need to – let people to know what game development is like, show them what game development is like – but we're only willing to do it in the proudest possible way – we want to be Starbucks, not SpaceX. Coffee drinkers want to know what beans their coffee is made out of, whether it was prepared in an environmentally responsible manner and that the barista is a professional with a decade-long passion for the heavenly fumes of a perfectly prepared Grande Latte.

Of course, part of the problem with talking about failure and problems is modern culture, so hell bent on recognizing our

relative successes as the one unambiguous truth. An apology is a sign of weakness met with nothing but vitriol, a sincere complaint a reason to attack and bad sales figures are a deep personal embarrassment. We'd rather talk about our successes.
There are many victories to celebrate in our industry, and we celebrate them loudly. We talk about our *Papers, Please* and *Gone Home*. We cheer at *Grand Theft Auto V* smashing Hollywood sales records. Twine might be a new breakthrough in making interactivity achievable to anyone who puts their mind to it. Underneath a newly resurrected impenetrable layer of AAA studios, a thriving scene of people that are still without financial ties brews. The quality of student work continues to rise exponentially. Worldwide, the amount of people spending time on game development in some way, shape or form is on the rise. And they're making beautiful games. We are making beautiful games. The quality of games has increased so rapidly, in AAA, in indie, in mobile. Games are fine. *Games,* that what we're here for - games are just fine, and they're getting better every day. Game development is fine. Maybe as an industry, we're not doing great right this moment. Maybe, as a community of creators and enthusiasts, we're dealing with people that represent some of the worst distrust and hatred we've seen in the history of the medium. But the medium itself is fine.

I'm nothing but optimistic about the future of this medium, of this industry. It might not survive in its exact current form. It might not be all the same people. It might not be me, and it might not be you. Or we might be fine, or we might be doing something else. When people ask me whether the industry is headed for another 1983, I wonder where they were looking when we crashed over and over again in the past few years. Where do you think premium on mobile went? Did you miss the mid-budget console game go extinct between today and five years ago? There won't be the spectacular train wreck in slow motion that everybody seems to be expecting. We lose some things, and then celebrate other

things to ignore that and *just be fine.*

We're in a creative industry. Of all people, we should know the way we get better isn't through celebrating our successes, but by reflecting on our failures. We're in this industry because we see something special in this medium. We don't have to brag. We don't have to prove ourselves. We don't have to create heroic mythologies to justify our existence. We're here because we care. We need to acknowledge our failures so that we can learn.