



So you want to be a Producer

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***pro-du-cer n.** 1. Someone from a game publisher who will be the liaison between the publisher and the game development team. 2. A furnace that manufactures producer gas.*

If you want to learn about furnaces manufacturing producer gas, this article's not for you. However, if you want to learn the basics of being a game producer, read on.

Producer careers range from the entry-level assistant producer position to executive producer. Here's a sample of recent job openings on GameRecruiter.com: producer, producer/director, associate producer/localization manager, senior producer, executive producer, online producer/webmaster, development director (executive producer), producer (external), producer (internal).

But becoming any kind of producer starts with making sure you have the right skills ...

Tools of the Trade

Were you the kid in school who actually utilized the organization features of your Mead Trapper Keeper? Are you the one who plans, schedules, and directs weekend game tournaments for your friends? While the rest of the world may, on occasion, get slightly annoyed by your Julie McCoy-your-cruise-director attitude, it's those very traits that could make you a star game producer. That's because virtually every game producer spot requires the following attributes:

- Great scheduling ability.
- Exceptional organizational skills.
- Excellent leadership consensus-building abilities.
- Ability to direct development of a project from start to finish while meeting deadlines.

As a producer, you will need to know how to utilize Microsoft Project, Microsoft Word, and Microsoft Excel, as well as common scripting languages. You also need a familiarity with the latest game systems. And, generally speaking, you should be an avid gamer.

Demonstrating Your Abilities

For the game producer, a well-organized résumé is a must. If you can't organize a simple résumé, how could you possibly organize the production of a game? Also, since meeting deadlines and attention to detail is key to your position, if you get the interview, make sure you're on time!

A good producer will also have the essential assets at his or her fingertips to make a solid single-level demo that features how the product works, controller configuration mapping, the key features, and a display of graphics and audio.

If you want to be a game producer, you need to understand the job fundamentals. From the initial game concept and how you "sell" the idea to management until the boxed game rolls off the assembly line, the producer is part of just about every aspect in the development of the game. Don't panic at the details in the following; this is just to familiarize you with what you'll tackle in your professional life.



The Devil's In The Details

It is important that your project begin with a solid foundation. In the case of a creative effort such as a development project, a solid foundation is the essential heart-felt vision or high concept that will serve as the "spirit" of the project. This vision will be the driving, motivating force that will spur you and your team on to its manifestation through the sleepless nights and the real world constraints.

As a producer, your initial job is twofold: (1) Conceptualizing or recognizing a concept that you believe in, and (2) Selling the ideas as a sound business opportunity to the executive staff at your company. Undoubtedly, you will be asked to present your concept as a business opportunity to management. This may be necessary, for example, to secure funding for prototype development of the concept.

The next step is evaluating the development team. Whether you are looking for a team to develop your concept, or a team has come to you with an intriguing idea, it is essential that the developer and team are thoroughly evaluated. Think of this as an interview. The company and team are, of course, just as important as the vision since they will bring the vision to life. Find out how the developer is financed. Is it going to be living paycheck to paycheck, or does it have some reserve cash?

It is also important to spend quality time with the team and individual members of the team. Know each member's strengths and weaknesses. What drives them? How do they work together? In getting to know the team, you can assess potential risks for the project. See that the team is passionate about the vision and have the skills to execute it. Technical considerations are significant as well. Will the team be able to use an existing engine to develop the game? Do they have adequate tools?

A key at this point is to define the roles for the team, including that of you, the producer. Good communication is more than essential. Each member of the team should have a clear understanding of who is responsible for each task on the project and who has authority in a time that a tough decision needs to be made. Discussing this up front and having this understanding will help to prevent conflicts throughout the course of development.

Pre-Production: Design, Technical Design & Playable Prototype

As budgets for game development have and will likely continue to increase, it is often best to consider one or two stages of pre-production before full development. In these stages, the full design, technical design, and playable prototype on target hardware should be completed and together define and prove the fundamental game play, character animation, and underlying technology. Not only does this phase of development give you -- the producer -- an opportunity to see if the team "gets" the vision, you will learn how the team works together -- can the team meet milestones, and is your targeted development budget and schedule realistic? Develop monthly milestones for the prototype phase to both track development and to get a sense for how the team interprets and responds to these milestones. This will facilitate the process of drafting milestones for full development of the project.

A full development schedule with detailed milestone descriptions should be drafted as part of the technical design in pre-production. The purpose of this document is to provide structure and a method by which to measure the development effort, not to be a detailed blueprint for construction. Consider a format that, for each milestone, defines: objective, design tasks, programming tasks, art tasks, music tasks, other tasks, completion test, risk assessment, due date, and payment due upon completion.



Tool development and core engine technology should be accounted for in the milestone schedule. It is also important that the core gameplay features and technology (those which may not have been proven in the prototype phase) be addressed early in the milestone schedule. For example, in an action/platform game, it is important to prove early on the basic mechanics and move set parameters of the main character, such as jump distance, so that levels can be constructed accordingly. It is best to take time early in the project to determine these details, rather than backtrack later in development. Once this has been achieved, development of other levels can be completed with relative ease. The milestone schedule needs to also account for work from outside vendors, such as FMV or music production. Signing music artists often takes a considerable amount of time. Account for this.

Development of demo versions, tradeshow versions, and marketing materials, as well as vacations, and the inevitable holiday and flu seasons are often overlooked but should be accounted for when drafting the milestone schedule.

Once pre-production is complete, and the game has been green-lighted by the executive staff for full production, the fun can really begin. Though there still is a mountain to climb, an important plateau has been reached.

Full Production At Last

Your game is now in full development. The spirit of the game is alive, the framework is in place, and it's now a matter of execution. However, as we all know, not all goes as planned. It is the role of the producer though to be the pillar of strength through the inevitable storms.

Good and frequent communication with your team will be your greatest asset. It is important that your team knows that you are there for them and that information is articulated as objectively as possible. Over-communicating is better than not communicating enough. Remember that the world is not as it is, but as one sees it. The way you see the world will undoubtedly be different from that of the members of your team, especially given that you are dealing with both extreme left- and right-brained people. As the producer, you need to always be aware and understanding of this.

Though payable milestones are generally due on a monthly basis, it is best to track progress regularly on a weekly basis. If you are working with an external development group, consider asking for weekly objectives on Monday and then reviewing progress on Friday. If the team is slipping, get to the source of the problem immediately. Encourage the team to work that extra weekend now to make up for a slip in the weekly schedule rather than to cram at the end of the month to make the milestone delivery. This will help to keep the development process consistent rather than one with peaks and valleys that ultimately contribute to fatigue and burnout. As necessary, update the design and development schedule. Make it known to the developer that this is an important task and a practice that is to be maintained regularly from the beginning of the project.

During development, respond to the needs of your developer with a sense of urgency. Whether it be a piece of equipment that your developer needs, or feedback to a payable milestone, regard it as a hot potato. Your developer is awaiting your leadership and feedback, often nervously, so better to relieve this stress to your team sooner than later to keep the team motivated and happy.

Keeping The Team Happy Through Good, Bad & Ugly

In running the project, you will need to keep the team, this living, breathing, organism that is realizing the vision, happy. Here are a few suggestions:



Praise. It can go a long way, if given sincerely and when deserved, especially when the team or an individual has gone beyond the call of duty. This positive feedback lets the team or individual know what you like, and the team will generally respond with more of the same.

Resolve conflict through open communication. Conflict is usually a symptom of miscommunication, or lack of communication. It could be that the lead programmer is irritated with a design decision that was made, for example, and as he is especially tired near the end of the project, he is not holding his feelings back. It is important to get to the root of the conflict quickly, without getting sucked into the conflict itself, so that matters do not escalate. You, as the producer, need to find creative ways to resolve conflict. This often requires some psychology on your part. Get into the heads of those in conflict. It may be that you need to give the programmer a day off to get some rest and regain perspective. Or it may be best to bring the designer and programmer together to openly discuss the issue.

Bringing in marketing, public relations, and sales. It is important to see these three groups as your allies throughout the development of the project. It is best to educate them from your perspective on all aspects of the game. It is just as important to consider their input on the product. Marketing, for example, can help in defining the main character for the target market. They should also be consulted to determine when demos and marketing materials will be needed from the developer. Marketing can also assist in providing market research and gathering data through focus testing. Sales can provide valuable feedback from retailers. The more educated and familiar these parties are about the product, and the more you consider their input, the better the chance for the success of the product.

Final Production: Alpha, Beta & Gold Master Milestones

Undoubtedly you will need to let go of some of those great ideas you had at the beginning of the project. Ideally, the milestones have been prioritized such that the ideas to be left on the shelf are not core elements of the game. At the alpha stage of development, it is time to reassess the remaining work to be done, give consideration to new ideas that have germinated over the course of the project, and incorporate them into the schedule if they are viable. This may help to motivate the team through to the end.

Just before or as your game reaches beta is also an excellent time to conduct focus/play testing. It's best to present your game and gather feedback from both game professionals (such as other gamers and testers in your company) as well as newbies in your target audience, from outside your company. Many excellent ideas and fine tuning is frequently provided by people completely outside of the game development team.

It is especially important that you nurture the team through the final phases of development. Final testing can be an especially difficult time. The bugs seem to never end and some are seemingly impossible to fix. The programmer may have some anxiety as to the integrity of a piece of code. As the producer, this is yet another storm to weather. Do so by facilitating in anyway possible. Consult with technical support, for example, to help solve technical problems. Send a care package to your development team, or better yet, to the families from which they have been absent of late. "Whatever it takes" should be your motto at this stage of development.

Passing The Test

It is important that the producer define a method with the developer for bug reporting. Developers often like to receive bugs as soon as they are found versus waiting a day or more for full testing of a version. With a proper procedure in place, this can be accommodated. Consider a live database that includes open, fixed, and waived bugs.



The producer should review the bug report and filter bugs before they are sent to the developer. The bug report should be well structured and easy to read. Descriptions of the bugs should be clear and concise. Avoid submitting redundant bugs to the developer. If there is any question as to the nature of a bug, try to recreate it yourself to understand it more fully so that you can convey it clearly to the developer. Know what bugs are important to fix and those that can be let go for the sake of time and sanity. Resist your temptation for perfection and accept excellence.

A Time To Rejoice!

When it's all over, remember to celebrate! Allow yourself and the team time to acknowledge the hard work and long hours, and appreciate the opportunity you have been given to do what you love to do.