

User experience directors: making game design more efficient

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Job specialization is spurring the need for consultants who can put teams on the same page.



Ubisoft's user experience director David Lightbown (Photo: Thierry du Bois/Cosmos Image/Ubisoft).

Ubisoft's User Experience:

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Video game companies put considerable effort into making sure players can use and navigate their games efficiently and easy. Like any piece of software, the user experience or the interface can often make or break the product. A wonky menu system, for example, can effectively kill a game, but excellent controls can help it shine.

So what about the tools that go into making the games themselves? Often created by programmers employed by game companies, the software used by fellow developers isn't always as simple and intuitive as it needs to be, which can lead to confusion, glitches and delays.

Game companies are creating internal troubleshooting roles as a result, or individuals who are charged with simplifying the technology that developers use in their day-to-day work. It's a consultant-like position, where the goal is to find more efficient ways of interacting with the software.

"I have an external view where I'll go in and watch people work," says David Lightbown, user experience director at Ubisoft Montreal. "We have to understand how the computer works, but we also have to understand how the brain works."

Games used to be easier to create, with only a handful of people working on a given title. But now, with teams typically numbering into the hundreds, there's a lot of specialization happening. Certain developers may be experts in physics, while others focus on artificial intelligence.

Ultimately, they have to use the same tools, so they need to know how to speak the same language.

Lightbown typically spends a few weeks on a certain game, although some projects can stretch to a couple of months. His job is to watch how the team members work, then suggest improvements.

The role involves knowing the software tools inside and out, which is where experience comes in. Lightbown has worked on games for 15 years, 12 of them as a technical director.

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It also involves the ability to step back and see things from a wider perspective. Developers can often get mired in their own specific piece of work and become oblivious to how their colleagues might need to interact with it. Lightbown's job is to suggest best practices and to steer team members away from developing bad habits.

"When you sit down and use the tools all day, it really changes their perspective completely," he says. "Making it simple is hard."



Rainbow Six Siege.

Lightbown's position is new, created only a few years ago. His baptism of fire was *Rainbow Six Siege*, a multiplayer shooter led by Ubisoft Montreal released last year.

One of the game's central features is the player's ability to destroy play areas, including walls and ceilings. Such "destructible" environments are relatively new in games – they haven't been easy to create because they've required considerable computing power.

Now, with the latest consoles supplying that capability, full destructability is becoming more common, but developers are still learning the figurative ropes. That's where user experience specialists come in – to get everyone on the same page. Lightbown helped Ubisoft's developers figure out and understand the new capabilities, which sped up the project.

"That translates into more iteration time and better games," he says.

Ultimately, while there is some overlap between the respective player's and developer's user experience, the two are driven by entirely different needs. Efficiency is vital for developers, but not necessarily so for players, where fun is the primary concern. Fun in games therefore rarely coincides with efficiency.

"If I were to make a Mario game that's efficient, I'd start Mario right next to the flag and he could pick it up right away," Lightbown says. "We want our tools to be the equivalent of that."

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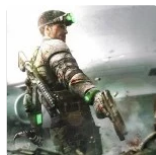
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