Igniting GameZombie TV:

A Longitudinal Autoethnography of a Student-Fueled Game Media Studio

By

Spencer Striker

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

(Curriculum & Instruction: Digital Media)

at the

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

2012

Date of final oral examination: 10/24/12

The dissertation is approved by the following members of the Final Oral Committee:
    Dawnene Hassett, Associate Professor, Curriculum & Instruction, (Literacy)
    Kurt Squire, Professor, Curriculum & Instruction, (Digital Media)
    Thom Gillespie, Associate Professor, Information Technology, (South University)
    Elizabeth King, Assistant Professor, Educational Foundations, (UW-Whitewater)
    Constance Steinkuehler, Associate Professor, Curriculum & Instruction, (Digital Media)
    Michael Thomas, Assistant Professor, Curriculum & Instruction, (St. John's University)

Contents

Acknowledgements

Gillian; you are my heart. Without you the SS is a miserable pile of marginally relevant marginalia. What I mean to say is: you complete me, elevate me, and make me happy—in my soul, in ways that words don't reach. Without you, there is no dissertation, since I am nothing. Babe, I really love you.

Dawnene; you are the most epically awesome advisor a guy could hope for. Our sun-drenched, wine-soaked tête-à-têtes on the glorious deck are near and dear to my heart. Not only have you provided me invaluable advice on my digital book application aspirations and my GZ dissertation, but you have also shown me how to be a mentor—in terms of listening, guiding, and most importantly, imparting genuine enthusiasm, which keeps the ember burning and the dream alive. You are a genius. Knowing you improves me.

To Kurt I extend my heartfelt thanks for your masterful feedback and unwavering support, and for letting me into the damned program in the first place. Thank you for recognizing the GZ project out of Indiana—with its parallels to Joystick101.org—and for seeing how we could forge a GLS/MAGD synaptic connection. Our stories showcase serendipitous synchronicity: we both hail from Indiana University; were launched by participatory media/video game startups (which we bullshitted into being); we both got our big breaks by covering GDC; and we both share a cosmic connection to that oracle of all things gaming, creativity, and the Midwest—Thom.

I'm not Jack Kerouac. But if I was, you'd be my Neal Cassady, because you are one of *those*: "mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn…" Hell, I'm not afraid to say it: the MIME program—which you built—reconstructed me. I had run out of juice in 2005. And in 2006, I was mad to live again—revitalized by the dream that was GZ. The interest-driven, constructivist learning environment of MIME provided me the opportunity, tools, and self-confidence to reboot. You're a true mentor, and one of my great heroes—in the canon of my grandfather, Alfred Santopietro, who fought in the goddamn war. Jesus Thom, you know what I'm trying to say.

Beth; you are a true teacher. You care in your bones. The world needs more like you. My deepest gratitude for your candid, detailed feedback on the various drafts—thank you for allowing me to siphon from your cerebellum your pure digital media and learning expertise. You're going to help lots of young people find their groove. Your passion for education and technology—that intersection—is obvious every time we talk. And it is inspiring.

Constance; the virtual worlds course I took with you in the summer of 2010 was my introduction to the field of video games and learning. And it stuck in my brain. To this day, I channel your smart Socratic teaching style in my UWW classes—your deep, free flowing analysis of text, which renders the process engaging, open-ended, and exploratory. Thank you for your always creative, wise, and practical advice throughout the years.

To Michael I extend my deepest gratitude for being my Obi-Wan—and coming through in the clutch. I have always enjoyed and been enriched by our free roaming conversations

about life, education, technology, GameZombie, TechZombie, and everything in between. Really: thank you for being on my PhD committee all the way from St. John's University in New York—I am inexpressibly honored by your participation.

And I want to thank the more than five hundred students who have worked on GameZombie TV since I first proposed the "goofy" idea in Thom's T570 Art, Entertainment, and Information class in the fall of 2006. They are more than the fuel of the project—they are its soul. Also, I must thank all the video game professionals who through their unpretentious, meritorious philosophy of work, took GZ seriously right from the beginning—because we took ourselves seriously.

And finally, I must thank my parents. Thank you, mom, for encouraging in me a restless curiosity. You made me into a geek—by that I mean, a person who cares passionately about ideas and learning, without which I could never have built an interest-driven digital media learning environment in the first place. Thank you, dad, for steadfastly supporting GZ; for the expert legal services; but most importantly for a lifetime of showing me the value of hard work—you are a true samurai.

Introduction and Overview

This dissertation is an autoethnography of GameZombie TV (GZ), a student-run business, project, and interest-driven learning environment that creates original media around the game industry. As a research project, I utilize the methodological tool of autoethnography to illuminate the unique elements that conspired to get students to *believe in a dream* and build a four-time Webby Award[1] winning game media studio from scratch. My narrative exploration sheds light on the uniquely productive combination of elements that can ignite when the teacher/project leader, technology/learning environment, and students come together in just the right way. In an age of budget cuts, attacks on teachers, and the expanding popularity of distance learning, I present a *worked example* (J. P. Gee, 2010) that shows how an inspired, interest-driven game media studio, like GameZombie TV, requires an actual flesh and blood teacher, and real meetings, where people interact in loud, messy, collaborative workspaces. My story of launching GameZombie TV at Indiana University sheds light on the timeless question: how does the instructor become a leader who motivates students to get inspired, kick some ass, and believe in a dream?

This project illuminates, in a general education sense, the elements that ignite passion and ambition in both students and teachers. Specifically, regarding GameZombie TV, I explore: 1. the role of the teacher/leader's own passion and ambition, and 2. the technological opportunities afforded by DIY Media in the Digital Age. This project defines GZ as a *new culture of learning* (Brown & Thomas, 2011) located within the digital media and learning movement,

---

[1] The leading international award honoring excellence on the Internet including Websites, interactive advertising and online film and video—what the *New York Times* calls the "The Oscars of the Internet."

and asks whether age old constructivist theories need to be deconstructed and reconstructed in a world of unprecedented technological change, and acceleration.

I describe what GameZombie is, exactly; the award-winning interest-driven, student-fueled game media studio that I started at Indiana University in the fall of 2006 and then expanded to UW-Whitewater in the fall of 2009. I then provide a broad overview of how GameZombie TV works in action—situating this description in the context that GZ's design was not preconceived, but was *emergent*—in other words, it took its form over time through trial and error, iteration, and solutions to real problems.

Next, I describe the methodology of autoethnography, which combines autobiography and ethnography, presenting the case as to why this is the ideal methodological lens through which to: 1. get at essential truths about GZ (which has been the work of my life) and 2. to present the most relevant, useful, and accessible series of reflections on interest-driven learning in action, which educational researchers and practitioners, both, will be able to leverage. I describe the limitations of autoethnography as a methodological tool—primarily, the fact that by relating the work of GameZombie TV as a subjective narrative there is no doubt that I will be presenting a biased look at events.

Inevitable Bias and Narrative as a Powerful Clarification Device

However, I argue that I—and therefore my subjective interpretation—am inseparable from this first major study of GameZombie TV, since I am the founder, designer, principle creative architect, head cheerleader, and in fact the keeper of the memories (the elder of the tribe). I am the only one who has been with the six year project from the first day till now—a

project that has involved over a thousand people, (including hundreds of students, game industry professionals, colleagues, and administrators), and two American universities. Just as Kurt Squire (2011) argues that bias in historical games, such as *Civilization*, can be their biggest strength—I argue that clarification through historical interpretation and narrative technique represents the best means to cut through the overload of multimodal data that is GZ's legacy to deliver the most relatable, comprehensible, and useful presentation.

Thoughts on Data Overload

After six years of nonstop work on GZ, the amount of accumulated data is enormous. There are over five hundred completed videos, (including over two hundred exclusive interviews with professional game developers); thousands of pictures and production stills; hundreds of original blog entries; thousands of tweets; hundreds of hours of raw footage; five terabytes of various media assets stored on cloud servers, (including 2D graphics, motion graphics, and original music and sound effects); many thousands of emails; and hundreds of business, publicity, and production documents, (some over one hundred pages in length):

THE STORY OF GZ'S MULTIMODAL DATA

> 500 completed videos @ 3 min ea = 25 hrs

> 2,000 production stills

> 1,000 hrs of raw footage

> 10, 000 emails

> 2,000 tweets

> 200 business, publicity, and production docs (some > 100 pgs)

> 300 original blog entries

6 yrs

> 5 Terabytes of media assets stored in "cloud" (including 2D graphics, motion graphics, original remixes, and sound fx)

GZ's Exponential Asset Growth in Terabytes
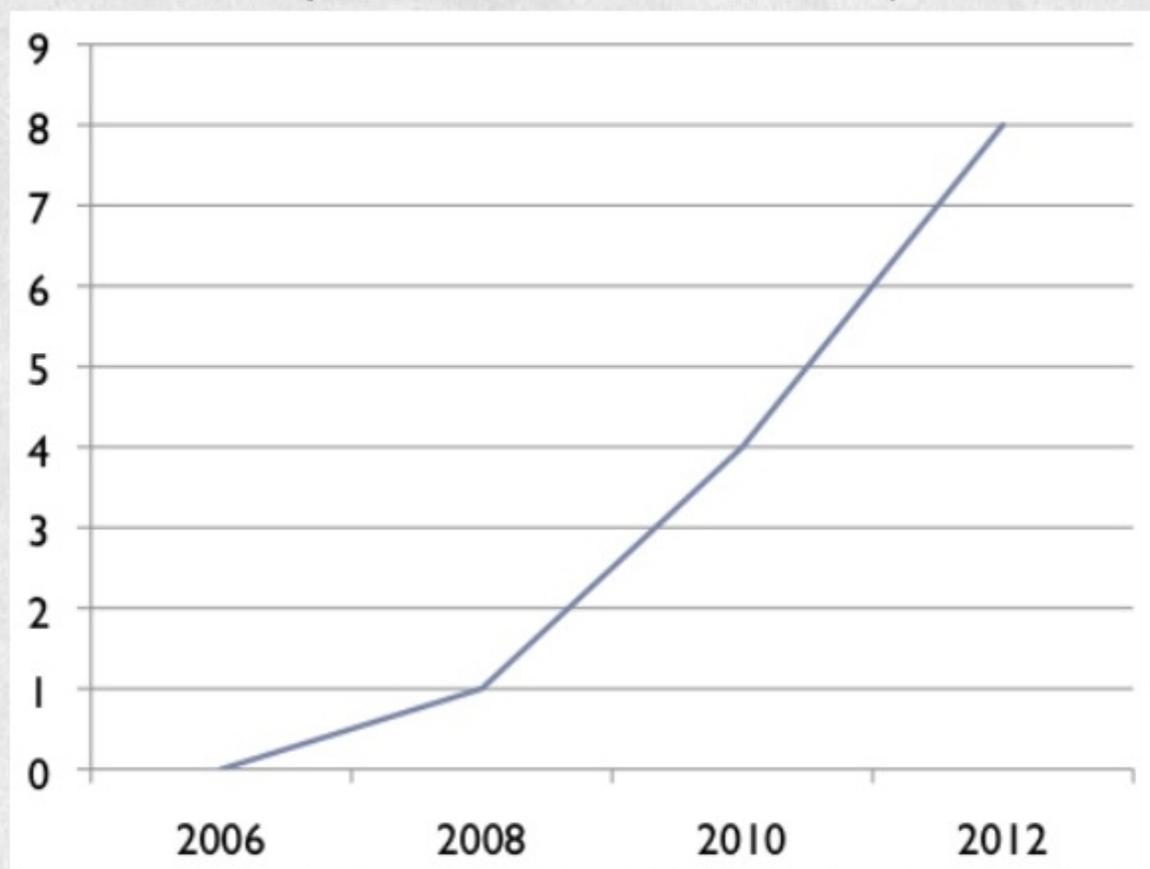
Therefore, as a way in, I made the decision to:

1. focus exclusively on the development of GZ at Indiana University

    a. with a focus on addressing a central goal of this project: illuminating the unique combination of elements that ignited GameZombie TV

2. utilize the tool of autoethnography to bring the past to life in narrative form balanced by exploration of emergent themes

    a. leveraging exhaustive research of the multimodal data that is the legacy of GZ's history, especially its early period, to stimulate my ability to evocatively recall thoughts, events, drama, and turning points

3. not do additional interviews because I had more data than I needed working with memory and production elements alone

    a. in future work with the GZ material, I probably will do interviews, but not for this dissertation; for this first major pass at the material, I leverage my unique perspective to make sense of the project's trajectory, the actors who participated, and its emergent trajectory

4. use *pseudonyms* in place of *all* student names; the only names that are not changed are those of Thom and me, since our roles are public knowledge

    a. also, the names of the universities involved are unchanged—Indiana University and the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater

Flashpoints and Emergent Themes

In the heart and soul of this research project—which I call "flashpoints" in GZ history—I utilize the autoethnographic method to bring to life the "magical" elements that conspired to ignite GZ's unlikely success at Indiana, (and later Wisconsin). In rich detail, both descriptively and analytically, I tell the story of GameZombie's development from the kernel of a "goofy idea" (Thom's words) to a juggernaut of student self-organization and productivity. I explore the characters involved at the beginning, the bottlenecks, the opportunities, and how precisely the operation got its legs. I describe the earliest videos; the total immersion in software; the beginning of a body of knowledge; the tactics of aggressive recruitment; the application of *soft power* (Nye, 2004); the early disasters; the first professional game conference covered and its catalyzing effect; the launching of what would become the city of Bloomington's largest internship program; the failure of GZ as a private business; but its success as an interest-driven learning environment—and why. Ultimately, *48 themes* relevant to educational researchers and practitioners, both big and small, emerge from my autoethnographic project, (just as GameZombie's operational structure itself was emergent from the constructivist process).

GZ as a New Culture of Learning and Constructivism for a World of Constant Change

I argue that the student-fueled game media studio, GameZombie TV, is an example of *the new culture of learning* (Brown & Thomas, 2011). By connecting GZ to the real world of web publishing and video games—by injecting *authenticity* into the program—unusual levels of motivation and creativity burst into being. Forging a synaptic connection between the opportunities of the new web and the video game industry with the personal interests of GZ

students ignited their imaginations, and pushed them toward the ultimate goal of 21st century education—*lifelong learning* (Collins & Halverson, 2009). I also argue that GZ is a constructivist learning environment, in terms of its history, design, operational form and function. Bearing this in mind, I describe the debate around constructivist learning environments, particularly the criticisms of Mayer and Kirschner et al., and the responses to said criticism, by Hmelo-Silver et al., (a controversy which incidentally was heating up in 2006-2007, precisely when I was developing GameZombie TV at Indiana University).

In the context of the debate around the effectiveness of constructivist, interest-driven learning environments—and the emergence of the new digital media and learning movement, exemplified by the work of such scholars as James Gee, Mimi Ito, Henry Jenkins, Kurt Squire, Constance Steinkuehler, and James Gee (Cooper, 2011)—I argue that education in the age of digital media occurs within a conflagration of institutions, ideas, and technologies radically different than those of previous historical moments (Popkewitz, 1998). The 21st century requires embracing change in a world accelerating *exponentially* (Brown & Thomas, 2011; Kurzweil, 2005). Accordingly, I present 48 emergent themes from my longitudinal autoethnography of GameZombie TV, highlighting moments of both triumph and defeat for constructivist, interest-driven learning—illuminating how learning in the digital age disrupts, remixes, and recombines established ideas. In particular, I focus on: 1. the influence of the leader/teacher's passion and ambition, and 2. the technological opportunities afforded by the DIY Media opportunity of the Digital Age.

8

GZ Dissertation as a Postmortem – A Useful, Worked Example

My goal is that my autoethnography of building of GZ will achieve verisimilitude, evoking in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible. The story should resonate as self-contained and compelling. I seek to authentically represent what it's like to build and oversee a constructivist, interest-driven, digital media learning environment, which is dramatically different from the didactic learning environments in which most teachers and professors work. I strive to make my story *useful*—my hard-worn experiences in the trenches of curriculum and project development should prove helpful and illuminating. Critically, I portray in descriptive, analytical detail the importance of the passion, and gritty resourcefulness, of the instructor/leader in getting students to *believe in a dream*, and achieve more than is typically expected of them, while leveraging new technological opportunities to make it so.

Research Project

Via an autoethnographic exploration of the origin of GameZombie TV in the Department of Telecommunications at Indiana University, I seek to illuminate the unique elements that conspired to get students to *believe in a dream.* My role as a teacher and a leader was an essential piece of the puzzle toward getting students to take charge of their own learning. I argue that the methodological tool of autoethnography represents the best means through which to put the early days of GameZombie TV under the microscope. Like the particle physicists at CERN, I attempt to replicate the conditions that were present at the beginning in order to locate something like what Nobel Laureate Leon Lederman called "the God Particle" (Aczel, 2010; 1993), the elusive key ingredient that will ultimately explain the structure of matter—or more importantly, how I got GameZombie off the ground at Indiana. Lederman added: "the publisher wouldn't let us call it the Goddamn Particle, though that might be a more appropriate title, given its villainous nature and the expense it is causing" (1993).

The Zombie Particle and the Frankenstein Flashpoint

Towards that end, I write GZ's origin story from the perspective of a mad scientist who has overseen an interest-driven learning environment (not the universe) for six years—at its best, worst, and everywhere in between. And rather than pursuing the God Particle (boring), I seek the *Zombie Particle*—the conditions under which an interest-driven digital media learning environment sparks to life, like space, matter, and time from "the nothing"(Ende & Quadflieg, 1983) of the drooling, uninspired abyss.

My autoethnographic exploration of the elusive Frankenstein flashpoint that got GameZombie going sheds light on the uniquely productive combination of elements that ignites when the concentric circles of the leader/teacher, students, and the technology/learning environment interact in just the right way:
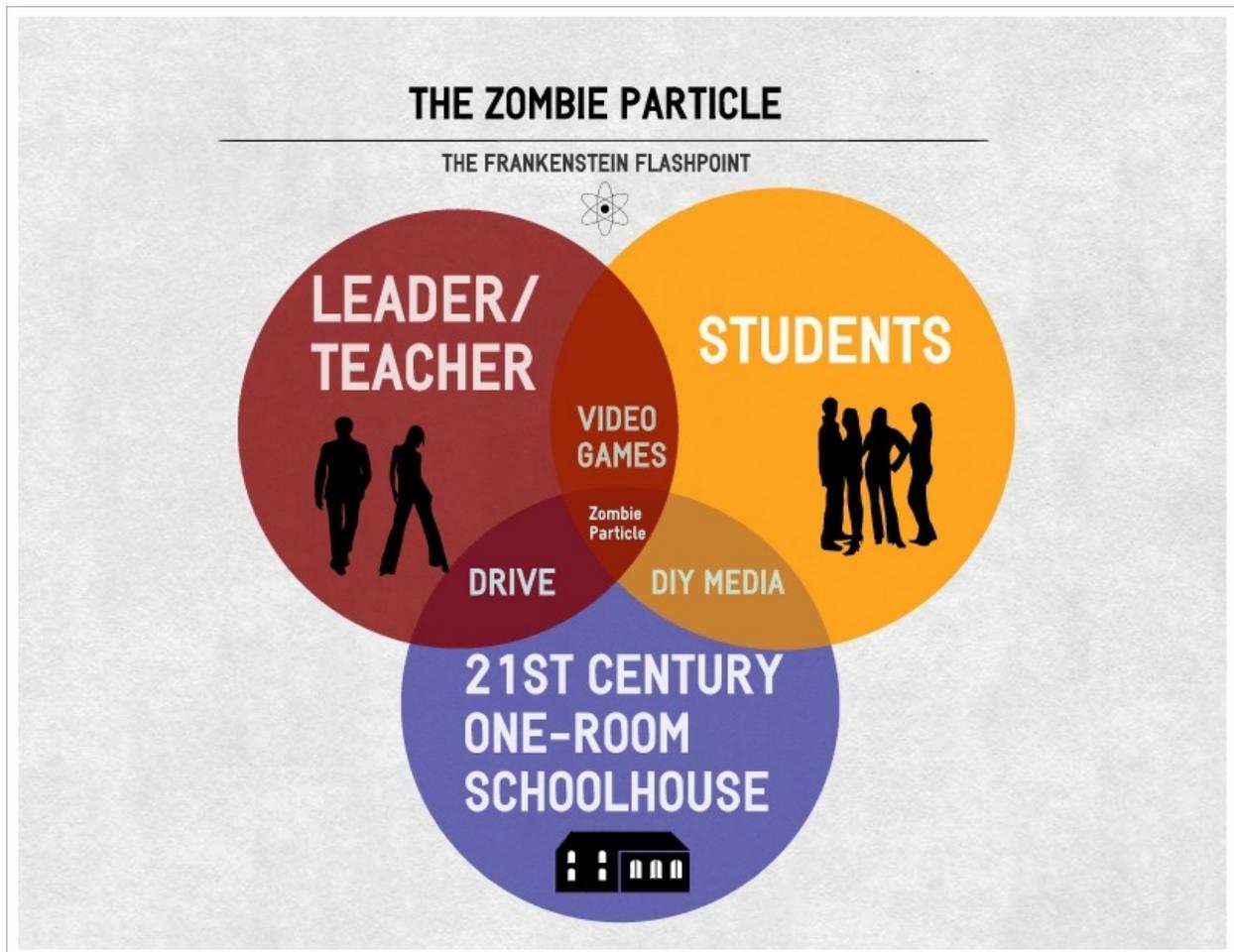
The Passion of the Leader/Teacher – Giving a Damn

Truth be told, the early days of GameZombie TV are characterized by my crazed desperation to get a successful project off the ground. In my reflections, I resurrect the spirit of the blast emails, the pitches, the propaganda, the big meetings, the tireless recruiting; the

bullshit, desire, and hard work. I led my troops from the front, held (almost) impossibly high standards, and gave my time to my volunteers, interns, and students with selfless abandon. But was I so heroic? In fact, they were all working for me! The project was my baby, and its success, momentum, and reputation were inseparably blended with the substance of my life—like two jars in a lab forever being intermixed. There was an underlying selfish initiative, an incentive to make everyone better. And I argue that there's a lesson here for teachers—to build into their interest-driven courses the opportunity to achieve accolades for successful leadership. In this way, the teacher becomes more like a *coach* (Squire & Jenkins, 2011) than an instructor.

But it's a bit more complicated than that, as I will explore.

Giving the Monster a Mind of Its Own

In retrospect, six years after its founding at Indiana University, I realize that GameZombie has achieved a powerful momentum. It will not die! The structures that I put into place in GZ's earliest days morphed into a culture and a self-organizing body of knowledge that: 1. survived for two years at Indiana University, after I'd left, under the leadership of a graduate student, William; 2. was successfully ported to the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater, where it has been going strong for over three years; and 3. even now, as I pull myself away from the needs of the project somewhat, the creature continues to move forward with or without me. In the course of this autoethnography, I attempt to unearth some of the reasons why the project has achieved this hardy resilience to death.

To get the monster moving, the leader/teacher must personify a newfangled blend between a digital media producer and a 19th century one-room schoolhouse teacher, as re-

envisioned for the 21st century. He or she must master empathetic leadership, incentivization, multidisciplinary digital media competency (but not necessarily mastery), and the ability to orchestrate controlled chaos—a mess of awesome that unleashes uninhibited creativity and productivity. Creative disputes must be both encouraged and resolved in real time. In the age of Facebook, where people increasingly prefer to be left alone with their screens (Turkle, 2011), students must be made to interact with one another—to *learn* from each other. Under the right conditions, the task of producing and learning can increasingly be given over to the students. But like a pilot who gives command to a novice co-pilot, the teacher remains essential; carefully observing, coaching, and providing the reassurance that there's a wise mentor in the picture.

In the interest-driven digital media studio of GameZombie TV, the teacher must constantly take the temperature of the room, striving to maintain a sustained level of high morale. This requires the art of good leadership—ranging from selfless empowerment of others to enlightened despotism to occasionally cracking the whip. In the course of this autoethnography, I recall the various techniques I innovated at Indiana to build morale and sustain it. The leadership strategy I developed centered around inclusivity and incentivization. I gave students the opportunity *to be great*—to excel at pursuits they found intrinsically motivating. But there's also the issue of how to deal with the kids on the edges. In this regard, I candidly recall how I dealt with underperformers, bellyachers, bad apples, and students with even more challenging issues. The maturation of my leadership style has drifted toward a kind of laissez-faire, which I call *chillaxed severity*—most of the time problems work themselves out, as long as the zombie keeps moving forward. You learn not to stay cool, and to be consistent. Negotiating the give and take of the power dynamic between the leader/teacher and the

empowered students in an interest-driven digital media learning environment remains an

ongoing, involved, and nuanced challenge.

GameZombie TV – defined

Just as MTV is a media studio that makes original media around the music business, GameZombie TV is a media studio that makes original media around the game business—only GZ is fueled by students. And unlike MTV, GZ is not run as a private business but rather as an educational environment. In other words, the students pay to take GZ as a class and in the process of creating game media for online distribution they get a first-hand experience of what it's like to work for a real media company. But it's not a *real* company—it's a simulation. If GameZombie was a pure business, we would have gone bankrupt many times over by now. Real businesses need to generate enough revenue to pay for salaries, office space, equipment, computers, software, travel—they have to keep the lights on. GameZombie by contrast gets to work with state of the art equipment and facilities, but everything is university-owned.

Compared to a real business, GameZombie has the distinct disadvantage that it does not have full time employees who build up expertise as they move up the corporate ladder. GZ balances against this disadvantage by having a massive standing army of student labor who contribute anywhere from a few hours up to as many as twenty five hours of work per week, (in the case of the true devotee). In a real business, employees stay on for a number of years—in some cases a lifetime—keeping the knowledge of how to run the business consistent and intact. In the case of GZ, the 40-80 students taking the course for school credit (or as volunteers) changes over dramatically from semester to semester, meaning that skills have to be retaught over and over again. And this, perhaps counter-intuitively, is how and why it succeeds as a prolific interest-driven learning environment. Its principle annoyance, from the

perspective of a real business, is the engine that makes it an engaging, sustainable digital media

production course concept. Students embark on a 1-5 semester cruise through GZ's trajectory

of participation, leveling up from total n00b to Zombie veteran in the process. And in the end,

they are promoted *through the roof*, so to speak—by becoming a GZ expert, they exhaust their

enthusiasm curve, and are ready to graduate and move on.

GameZombie TV – Successes and Challenges

The four-time Webby Award winning student-run game media studio, GameZombie TV,

has enjoyed a six year run. Developed at Indiana University in the fall of 2006 and officially

launched in March of 2007, the project expanded to incorporate the combined efforts of

students at Indiana with those at the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater. In the fall of 2009,

GZ's interest-driven digital media curriculum became a cornerstone of UWW's newly launched

Media Arts & Game Development Program, (of which I am a co-founder). To date, over 500

students have worked on GameZombie TV for school credit. In the media world, the students

have won international awards; produced one of the web's largest game developer interview

libraries; amassed over 10 million unique views; and leveraged the success of the project to get

competitive jobs in the media industry. In the world of education, the interest-driven learning

environment of GameZombie TV has served to stimulate creativity; discipline-specific passions;

interdisciplinary collaboration skills; as well as considerable digital media production and

management competencies.

Key Real World Accomplishments

Since March of 2007, GZ has produced over 500 original game videos for global webcast, garnering over 100 front page editor's picks on major video sharing sites, front page articles in 25 online newspapers, and competitive visibility on the world's top search engines. Official YouTube Partner status as well as promotion on many other web video platforms—including Metacafe, Dailymotion, Crackle, Revver, and Bebo—have pushed GameZombie's global view count over 10 million. GZ remains the only student-run media organization ever to win four consecutive Webby Awards. GZ's world exclusive game developer video interview series—more than 200 to date—features some of the biggest names in the interactive entertainment industry, including Peter Molyneux of *Fable 3*, Ed Boon of *Mortal Kombat*, and Cliff Bleszinski of *Gears of War 3*. In the fall of 2008, GameZombie launched *ButtonMashers*, an original gaming news show shot in a $2.5 million HDTV studio on the campus of Indiana University—the first season garnered view counts in the millions. The second season, eight months in the making, was released in the summer of 2009, outperforming the original. GameZombie's original live-action animated show, *Ultimate Challenge*, was an online hit in the fall of 2010. And in the spring of 2012, GZ Wisconsin launched a successful new game developer interview show, called *Couch.*

The Kids Are in Charge

At its best, the GameZombie TV curriculum is intense and demanding and students throw themselves into the work enthusiastically and with pride. They love the subject matter (video games), the sense of responsibility and ownership, the challenge, and that it's real. Their

work goes live on the web and competes on a global stage. Working on GZ prepares students for the rigor and excitement of full-time media work. GameZombie functions like a new media production house—*except the kids are in charge*. The interest-driven curriculum provides students a hands-on opportunity to produce a mass-distributed game video web series, while strengthening multimedia production skills, new media marketing savvy, and expertise in the most current topics in online media and the business of interactive entertainment. The curriculum provides the opportunity to enhance one's portfolio, industry connectedness, and global web presence. Students learn—in the trenches—how to workshop each other's projects and ideas in an energetic, creative, and collaborative environment.

GZ's style of production centers on a system of *peer mentorship*, emphasizing regular feedback and open channels of communication. Students often take GameZombie over and over—up to four or five times—leveling up in the process. One of the themes I develop in this autoethnography is the nuts and bolts of how I worked the system at Indiana to sustain the project's momentum. One of those techniques involved finding creative ways for students to take GameZombie for credit, over and over again. To date, students have taken GZ for credit under 15 different unique course numbers. The whole point of course has been to keep the *body of knowledge* alive. As students advance through the ranks (GZ's Zombified Participation Trajectory) to the role of Lead Editor, Producer, or Webmaster, they are expected to provide focused constructive criticism and valuable advice to students coming into the team. GZ Leads have been essential in carrying the project forward. But as challenging as the semester to semester changeover has always been, the continuous influx of fresh blood keeps the project oxygenated, continuously reinvigorating the project's collective enthusiasm curve.

Media Work Through GZ

Due to GZ's consistent, energetic engagement with both the worlds of web video and the video game industry, the student-fueled project has accumulated a network of professional contacts. According to HubSpot, in the fall of 2010 GameZombie's Facebook presence ranked amongst the Top 50 most influential in the world. Strategic contacts include: video game marketing and PR professionals, game developers, and video game and web video industry executives. The Executive Producer of G4's *X-Play* has hired GameZombie graduates on three separate occasions. Many of GZ's graduates have used their GameZombie portfolio to impress employers, distinguish themselves from other applicants, and secure competitive media work at such companies as G4 Media, ESPN, Blueline, the Indianapolis Indians, the Cartoon Network, 2B Games, High Voltage, and Garmin. Cumulatively, the more than 500 students that have gone through the curriculum has resulted in a "GZ mafia;" an alumni network—existing both in real life (IRL) and online through social networks like Facebook and LinkedIn—that can rely upon itself to assist members in projects like moving to Los Angeles and securing media work.

GZ and 21st Century Skills

The challenges of the globally competitive 21st Century require a workforce equipped with aptitudes for collaboration, communication, and complex project management (*21st Century Skills, Education & Competitiveness: A Resource and Policy Guide*, 2007). The learner-centered curricular approach of GameZombie TV improves the ability of students to work collaboratively to build and expand a complicated, ill-structured project. GameZombie's

interest-driven curricular model stimulates students to become self-directed lifelong learners

(Collins & Halverson, 2009) capable of thriving in the accelerating pace of the Digital Age.

Emergent Anatomy of GZ

GameZombie centers on an interest-driven educational philosophy. The current

organization of GameZombie—including three major teams composed of numerous sub-

teams—evolved organically, through trial and error. When I developed the project in the fall of

2006, I had no idea I would need to create such a structure, with specializations, and sub-

specializations. Interestingly, GZ's current paradigm echoes the historical pattern observed by

Richard Florida (2004) that through increasing specialization company research and

development became systematized in the modern era in order to render inventiveness and

problem-solving more efficient.

Upon entering the program, students self-select between three specialized areas of

focus:

1. Web Video Production

2. Web Design & Programming

3. Entrepreneurial Business Development & Social Media Optimization

Interdisciplinarity and Interest-Driven Gravitation

Students gravitate toward GameZombie TV from many different majors. In the past six

years, at Indiana (enrollment, 40,000), and UW-Whitewater (enrollment, 11,500), GZ has

enrolled students from Telecommunications, Electronic Media, Media Arts & Game

Development, Theatre and Dance, Studio Art, Visual Design, Computer Science, Informatics,

Entrepreneurship, Marketing, Journalism, and English, among many others. The glue that brings

students together from so many walks of life is an interest in some aspect of the project—be it

video games, media production, entrepreneurship, marketing, web development, journalism,

or some combination thereof. Each area has its own specialized sub-divisions with unique

duties, described below.

Web Video Production
(The biggest team)

The Writing Team, (focus = development, scripting, editorial)

Researching the video game industry and current topics in-depth; developing branded

game video show concepts; scripting and casting; producing engaging, regularly updated

content for various new media platforms, such as GZ's prolific Twitter account; syndicating GZ's

prolific blog, full of regularly updated posts, original editorials, and reviews of new titles.

Producing & Production Management

Overseeing a team of approximately 60-80 individuals with over 30 major projects in

various stages of development at any given time, averaging 10 completed original game videos

per month. Managing project and asset distribution, exporting, compressing, and uploading

completed videos for web streaming. Working closely with the Social Media & PR Team to

optimize popularity on Facebook, iTunes, Dailymotion, YouTube, GameTrailers, Flickr, Twitter,

and many other venues. Planning gaming convention shoots, including E3, PAX, GDC, CES, and

Comic-Con. Assessing strengths and weaknesses of team members, making managerial

adjustments, and optimizing work flow.

The Production Team

Field Video Production: shooting game videos, both documentary-style, (on location

at gaming conferences around the country), and in the studio. Achieving advanced lighting set-

ups, sometimes blue screened, (project-dependent), achieving clean game capture and asset

accumulation, and running quality control. HDTV Studio Production: producing shows, such as

ButtonMashers, as part of a 15-20 person team. Responsibilities range from directing to camera

to floor management to producing, lighting, and set design.

The Editing Team

Editing game videos to a high degree of professionalism using a broad range of

multimedia software, including Motion, Final Cut Pro, and AfterEffects. Implementing advanced

and stylish motion graphics, color grading, and sound design. (I should note that since GZ

started out as an editing crew, and since this is my primary software competency, the editing

team is often one of the biggest, best supported, and most successful of GZ's teams).

The Audio Team

Producing original soundtracks for GameZombie videos, as well as remixes of famous

game scores. Creating original sound effects for the editors, and overseeing sound design and

sweetening.

2D & Motion Graphics

Creating original web graphics, video assets, and artwork for posters and publicity. Creating motion graphics elements and sequences such as dynamic interstitial transitions and memorable, branded intros and outros. Utilizing Photoshop, Illustrator, Cinema4D, 3DS Max, and Maya.

Web Design & Programming

Enhancing the functionality of a four-time Webby Award winning website, including the speed and reliability of a proprietary, flash-based video loader/player and an advanced 3D-based profiles page, (past projects). Developing new applications for a high profile, media-rich site. Working with the 2D team to implement attractive web graphics, overseeing and expanding the online forum, and streamlining database code. Mocking up new versions of the site. (GZ is on its 8th major design).

Entrepreneurial Business Development, Social Media Optimization, and PR

Identifying fresh new media markets, streamlining and positioning the competitive branding of the series, crunching social media optimization and web analytics. Developing and enhancing strategic partnerships with web video and video game companies around the world. Forging and maintaining positive relationships throughout the international game community. Driving the global popularity of GameZombie's original series.

Assessment – Subjective and Team-Dependent

Students in GameZombie TV are given as many projects as they can handle, with an escalating level of difficulty. A student's grade is a subjective evaluation of how well they fulfill the duties associated with the specific role, be it Video Editor, Lead Editor, Webmaster, 2D Artist, Production Manager, or Head Writer, etc. Every job is vitally important to the success of the team, but each job has separate challenges, work flow, and means of fair evaluation.

Students self-select the team they want to work on and they are given great autonomy in deciding what projects they would like to build, and how. Students are graded specifically on their individual contribution to their self-selected project, as determined by their area of emphasis and assigned role. For example, the editor of a particular game video will be graded on the overall quality and effectiveness of the editing. Has the student applied stylish motion graphics and sound design? Has he or she taken the time to color-grade the footage to maximize its aesthetic appeal? Does the piece live up to or exceed the established quality of GZ's shows with regard to pacing, humor, or audio-visual dynamism? If a student puts the requisite amount of work into a project, the effort will be reflected in the finished product. Furthermore, the quality of student work is expected to improve with each successive production. The student's reward is enhanced multimedia literacy (Hassett & Curwood, 2009; Kress, 2010) and a strengthened portfolio. Students are encouraged to push themselves to improve and look for opportunities in projects to develop skill sets that *interest* them.

Educational Philosophy – Igniting and Sustaining Intrinsic Motivation

In practice, a C is a failing grade in GameZombie. Even though I am under great pressure at UW-Whitewater to keep my course grade point average down, I nevertheless tend to award quite high grades in GZ. That's because my educational philosophy, and that of GZ—the two being inseparable—is that student enthusiasm is the fuel that keeps the momentum of the project alive, and that the motivation to contribute to the project at a high level should originate from a place of intrinsic desire rather than fear of punishment. As I will explore, an assessment strategy based on encouragement and leniency requires both student maturity and preparedness, matched by a major time and energy commitment from the leader/instructor to work at a high degree of operational efficiency. When this situation is firmly in place, as it was during the early years of GZ at Indiana University, a harmony of trust, motivation, and productivity emerges from the collaboration of an ambitious teacher/leader, inspired students, and the opportunities afforded by a digital media learning environment.

Methodology

Autoethnography – Justification

Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*) (C. Ellis, 2004; C. Ellis, Adams, T., Bochner, A, 2011; Holman Jones, 2005). This approach challenges canonical, positivistic methods—a trend in educational research that Kurt Squire calls the *science fetish* (2011). In this project, I synthesize features of both autobiography and ethnography in order to develop an autoethnography of my interest-driven digital media learning environment, GameZombie TV. This methodological tool represents the most efficacious means through which to both explore and present my strenuous work on GameZombie TV since as a method autoethnography foregrounds the creative process and the thinking through of a past phenomenon—one in which I was more than intimately involved, I was in fact the motivator of change; the central architect.

Historically, scholars turned to autoethnography seeking new methods of producing meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience (C. B. Ellis, Arthur P, 2000). Autoethnography foregrounds subjectivity, emotionality, and the influence of the embedded researcher, rather than trying to control for these factors and inevitable bias. Toward this end, I acknowledge upfront that I am bringing certain assumptions into the autoethnography of GameZombie TV—but teasing out and analyzing these preconceptions has proven an integral part of the process of getting to the truth of what GZ is all about.

When writing autobiography, the writer must reflect upon lived experience and prioritize key moments in order to build an engaging narrative. As a person lives a life, they are developing a story, sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously (Campbell & Moyers, 1988). Regardless of how the tale unravels, it takes the work of an autobiographer to reshape experiences and events retroactively in order to compose a readable, accessible, compelling narrative experience (Bruner, 1993; Denzin, 1989).

Memory is imperfect. The autoethnographer utilizes a combination of data—such as GZ's multifarious videos, photos, emails, publicity, and production documents—in order to stimulate recollection (Didion, 2005; Goodall, 2006). In this case, GZ's huge body of multimodal data both looks *outward* (published to the world) and *inward* (behind the scenes), providing two separate viewpoints, or ways of perceiving the work. A simple glance at a GZ video, email, or production document brings to mind a flood of meanings and associations. Following an exhaustive review of six years of GZ data, in all its forms, I tighten the focus to the data from GameZombie's early days to help me resurrect the inspired, creative energy and decision-making as the project scaled and snowballed forward.

Epiphanies – Flashpoint Moments of Lived Experience

Autobiographers write about "epiphanies"—flashpoint moments in lived experience that awaken consciousness and force a reevaluation, both positive and negative (Denzin, 1989; C. Ellis, Adams, T., Bochner, A, 2011). Hunter S. Thompson famously reflected on the end of the 60s: "now, less than five years later, you can go up on a steep hill in Las Vegas and look West, and with the right kind of eyes you can almost see the high-water mark—that place where the

wave finally broke and rolled back" (1971). With the benefit of hindsight, the notorious pioneer of gonzo journalism could articulate the peak and the implosion of the phenomenon that was the great inspired energy of the 1960s cultural revolution. Epiphanies force existential crises, causing examination and analysis (C. Ellis, Adams, T., Bochner, A, 2011).

James Joyce originally popularized the term *epiphany*, developing its meaning in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). He was referring to those times in his life when a profound realization struck him, and he had a change of heart. Epiphanies, by definition, are intensely subjective. Nevertheless, "epiphanies reveal ways a person could negotiate "intense situations" and "effects that linger"—recollections, memories, images, feelings—long after a crucial incident is supposedly finished" (Bochner, 1984; C. Ellis, Adams, T., Bochner, A, 2011). The twentieth century might have been a different experience for a lot of people had not Stalin lost his wife when he was young. He is reported to have said at her funeral, "This creature softened my heart of stone. She died and with her died my last warm feelings for humanity" (Sebag Montefiore, 2008). The haunting statement reveals the power of epiphany to shape how we see the world—and our story in it.

By contrast to the pure autobiographer, the ethnographer becomes a participant observer in a socio-cultural event or phenomenon (Geertz, 1973; Goodall, 2000). Therefore, autoethnographers, retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies which have arisen through deep interaction with a culture—in this case GZ's sociocultural embodiment of the new culture of learning—but unlike with popular nonfiction writers, they are also required to think critically about events, analyze them, and extract meaning or lessons that will be of value to

their academic community. Toward this end, this entire dissertation builds toward *48 emergent themes*, culled from the retroactive mining of my experience making GZ.

Narrative Techniques as a Way of Showing

The autobiographer utilizes narrative techniques such as character, pacing, plot development, and an emphasis on the aesthetics of language in order to keep things interesting, relevant, and moving along (Didion, 2005; C. Ellis, Adams, T., Bochner, A, 2011). The autobiographer also demonstrates shifting perspective, as a person ages, encounters triumphs and defeats, and reflects on experience (Goodall, 2000). Since I started the project at twenty-eight, and am now thirty-four years old; I incorporate this perspective-shifting throughout. Autobiographers bring words to life by "showing" what has happened (C. Ellis, Adams, T., Bochner, A, 2011), evoking thoughts, emotions, and actions (C. Ellis, 2004). Writers utilize dialogue to present a portrait of verisimilitude—to imbue events with a sense of having been lived, thought, and experienced. Having a background in media production, history, and fiction writing, this methodological lens appeals to both my practical training, as well as my aesthetic instincts toward dynamically bringing the past to life.

Ethnographers seek to produce a "thick description" of a culture (Geertz, 1973; Goodall, 2000). The purpose is to help outsiders understand the complexities of a sociocultural group or event—like the founding of GZ—that is outside of their experience. Ethnographers inductively discerning cultural patterns, such as stories or events, as revealed through artifacts, interviews, and notes (C. Ellis, Adams, T., Bochner, A, 2011). I argue that GameZombie TV represents a sociocultural group and event, since it is a learning community centered on shared passions, *a*

tribe that epitomizes the new culture of learning, with its own unique customs and cultural patterns that have developed over time. In fact, last spring, GZ's lead editor, Blake, said jokingly to me that GZ was like a "cult." Of course, I knew what she meant. It's an inward-looking multimedia production team that is somewhat difficult to understand if you are on the outside. There's a process of indoctrination that occurs, and an aspect to which its momentum is sustained by proselytizing, and *believing in a dream*. In my exploration of the formative days of GZ, I shed light on how I put in motion these patterns of recruitment, indoctrination, and the forging of strong loyalty to the project.

Autoethnographers—combining autobiography and ethnography—seek to produce aesthetic, evocative, thick descriptions that combine the communication of *intrapersonal* with *interpersonal* experience (H. Gardner, 1983). The autoethnographer achieves this goal by first discerning patterns of cultural experience as revealed through data, (such as videos, pictures, emails, publicity and production documents), and then describing these patterns using narrative techniques such as the development of characters, engaging plot—including reversals and setbacks—description of settings, and consideration of narrative arc. The autoethnographer strives not only to make both the personal and cultural experience engaging but also, by producing an accessible text, the writer opens the material up to a potentially wider audience than just the academy, creating a stronger chance of affecting real change in educational practice (Goodall, 2006; Hooks, 1994).

Writing is a way of knowing, a method of inquiry (Richardson, 2000). Therefore, writing can prove therapeutic as writers write to make sense of experience—processing and thinking

through (Atkinson, 2007). Via the autoethnographic process, key themes concerning GameZombie—which were not yet clear to me—emerged, and *jumped in my face* (Hunter, 2007), as *Mad Men's* Don Draper predicts they sometimes do.

Writing personal stories makes "witnessing" possible (C. B. Ellis, Arthur P, 2006)—the ability for participants and readers to observe and, therefore better visualize, comprehend, and internalize an event, problem, or experience (C. Ellis, Adams, T., Bochner, A, 2011). Autoethnographers value narrative truth based on what a story of experience does—how it is used, understood, and responded to by writers, participants, and audiences (Bochner, 1984; Denzin, 1989). Autoethnographers also recognize how what we understand as "truth" changes as the representative experience transforms—such as the project's metamorphosis from an business pretending to be a student project into a student project simulating a business, (whose riddle is the central theme of Part Two of this dissertation).

Memory is an imperfect instrument. It is impossible to recall or evoke past experience with perfect fidelity—human memory and communication systems simple are not capable of perfect transmission. As portrayed in the classic Japanese crime mystery, *Rashomon* (Kurosawa, 1950), people almost always provide various accounts of what they witnessed, as the world is experienced and processed through the lens of individual experience (Tullis Owen, 2009). Therefore, the context and utility of concepts such as reliability, validity, and generalizability get reshaped when applied to autoethnography.

Reliability and Credibility

For the autoethnographer, questions of reliability refer to the narrator's credibility. Could the narrator plausibly have had the experiences presented in the story? Do we, the audience, believe this accounting is authentic? (C. Ellis, Adams, T., Bochner, A, 2011) In the case of my six year run at the helm of GameZombie TV, I have been involved in every key event, every development, setback, and turning point along the way. I take credit for the successes of the project, and the blame for its failures. In fact, I am the only person involved—with its ever-changing cast of a thousand characters—who holds all the memories. I am the *only* constant—the only one who could really tell the tale of GameZombie TV.

Validity and Verisimilitude

Closely related to reliability are issues of validity. For autoethnographers, validity means that a work seeks *verisimilitude*; it evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible—that what has been represented could be true. In other words, the story *works*—it is self-contained and compelling. "What matters is the way in which the story enables the reader to enter the subjective world of the teller—to see the world from…his point of view, even if this world does not 'match reality'" (Plummer, 2001). Readers can also judge an autoethnography in terms of whether it helps them comprehend an experience different from their own. For professional educators interested in what I have done; I authentically represent what it's like to oversee an interest-driven digital media learning environment, which is dramatically different from the didactic learning environments in which most teachers and professors work. There are many moving parts, unpredictable negatives, and

unanticipated payoffs. Readers can judge an autoethnography on the basis of whether the

narrative provides insights into ways they might improve their work, since successfully

implementing a self-organizing, interest-driven digital media learning environment offers many

rewards. The writer and reader of an autoethnography can ask—*how useful is the story?* (C.

Ellis, Adams, T., Bochner, A, 2011). And in this work, I strive to answer that question

definitively—my hard-worn experiences in the trenches of curriculum and project development

will prove helpful and illuminating.

Generalizability and True Experience

Generalizability is also important to autoethnographers, though not in the traditional,

social scientific sense that applies to large random samples of respondents. In

autoethnography, the focus of generalizability moves from respondents to readers, and is

always being tested by readers as they determine if a story speaks to them about their

experience or about the lives of those they know; it is determined by whether the (specific)

autoethnographer is able to illuminate (general) unfamiliar cultural processes (C. B. Ellis, Arthur

P, 2000). Readers provide validation by comparing their experience to the one communicated.

They decide whether the narrative reflects their sense of true experience, how the experience

conveyed is a departure from what they are used to, and whether the story told has reasonably

informed them about new ways of living, being, and doing work (C. Ellis, 2004).

GZ Dissertation as a Worked Example

I intend this dissertation to serve as an evocative illustration of a digital media and

learning phenomenon that I lived and breathed for six years. Unlike in the video game industry,

education technologists rarely make their work available for others to critique, let alone build upon (Squire & Jenkins, 2011). As a remedy to this endemic oversight, this dissertation serves as a *worked example* (J. P. Gee, 2010) whose lessons educational practitioners and researchers can learn from and apply to their own projects. Like a *postmortem* in the video game industry, the sharing of my lessons learned is meant to move our whole community forward, as educators interested in the new culture of learning (Brown & Thomas, 2011) can see what I have done—both my successors and failures—internalize GZ's emergent themes, and then pioneer new innovative projects, building on the experience of GameZombie TV.

As a creative project, this dissertation embodies Seymour Papert's exhortation to view educational technology as a creative endeavor; rather than simply studying it, we must go out and create the future of learning (Squire & Jenkins, 2011). Fascinatingly, a central riddle of GZ is that it succeeded so powerfully as a self-organizing interest-driven learning community precisely because it started out with no such intention. Originally, GZ was a new media startup and an interdisciplinary production project that combined the exciting elements of video games and DIY media. Then, these elements combusted into an action-packed collective centered on shared passion and ambition. Finally, a university curriculum emerged, after the fact, from students *giving a damn.* My dissertation sheds light on how learners self-organize around a rallying cry and leverage a learning community to further their individual interests and passions—to both improve themselves and to make an impact on the world. This is a story of empowerment, and the unlocking of potential. Educators will be inspired through visceral observation of my experience to create their own learning communities ignited by their own students' desires to explore their passions.

Limitations

Autoethnographers can be criticized for doing too little fieldwork and for observing too few members for too little time (Buzard, 2003; Delamont, 2009). To this potential criticism, I argue that having spent six, fully embedded years on the project, thoroughly entangled with its hundreds of actors, my problem is precisely the opposite—I have an overwhelming amount of data to call on. Therefore, my goal is to use narrative tools to sharp focus on the essential themes.

By relying upon personal experience, autoethnographers are open to the criticism that their data is biased, (Anderson, 2006), because they are self-involved narcissists who don't fulfill scholarly obligations (C. Ellis, Adams, T., Bochner, A, 2011). Sensitive to this potential criticism, I have tried to only involve my personal story as it relates directly to one of the core purposes of this dissertation—that is, the role of the passion and ambition of the teacher/leader in igniting an interest-driven learning environment. So, there are times when I tell my story, but it is *always* with this purpose in mind.

As part autobiography, autoethnography can also be dismissed as being insufficiently aesthetic and literary. Critics assert that autoethnographers disregard the literary, artistic imagination (Gingrich-Philbrook, 2005). Toward that end, I have tried to make the story of GZ as lucid and entertaining as possible, utilizing numerous nonfiction creative writing techniques, including character development, pacing, and plot trajectory. Importantly, I have injected the entire story with a theme of pop-cultural references, for three reasons:

1. as a true blue media geek—a member of a generation that grew up glued to screens, first TVs then computers—this is authentically how I think. Everything relates to some piece of media I've absorbed along the way

2. by extension, I hope these references will help educators see how they can make lessons more relatable to students, by pulling in snapshots of pop culture here and there, and

3. my use of diverse and serendipitous media references speaks back to the 21st century theme of a shared co-presence and a *networked imagination* (Brown & Thomas, 2011)

Criticisms of autoethnography often erroneously position art and science at odds with each other, a mistake that this method seeks to correct (C. Ellis, Adams, T., Bochner, A, 2011). Autoethnography, as a methodological tool, challenges the binary of science and art. Autoethnographers value the need to write and represent research in evocative, aesthetic ways (C. Ellis, 2004; Pelias, 2000), and in so doing ask: who is reading the work, how are they affected by it, and how does it stimulate conversation? (C. Ellis, Adams, T., Bochner, A, 2011). In a world of constant change, autoethnographers seek to produce accessible texts that change readers and society for the better (Holman Jones, 2005).

Flashpoints in the History of GameZombie TV
In which the dramatic story of GZ's Rise and Fall unfolds via some defining moments

Major Characters

Spencer: your humble narrator; driven, neurotic, rarely perfect; the elder of the tribe, the keeper of the memories; the founder of GameZombie TV

Thom: jovial, bearded man of the world; indefatigable champion of creativity; sage giver of Yoda-like advice; the godfather of GameZombie TV

Vladimir: Russian-born, natural entrepreneur; Director of GZ Biz Dev and business partner

William: Big time talent; Lead Motion Graphics; winds up running GZ at IU for two years

Vanessa: GZ's first great producer; organized, reliable; well-liked even as she gets her way

Vincent: GZ's original Lead Web Graphics; produces professional quality work; super valuable recruit whose loyalty is maintained by giving him the opportunity to be great

Kelly: GZ's first great on camera host; electric; interviews the game industry's biggest stars; jealously guards her position like the Dark Lord of Mordor

Cy: GZ's first really talented Web Master; quiet, trusted, strong-willed, dangerous

Howard: Director of IU Career Services; stands between GZ and the obtainment of the biggest internship program in the city of Bloomington

Bruce: Commands IU Telecom's production arsenal; formal, militaristic, bullshit-intolerant; GZ's Cerberus—the snarling gatekeeper guarding the "ultimate boon," the $2.5 million HDTV studio

Bradley: Short-lived Head Writer and Lead Talent for our in-development Gaming News Show; promoted too far too fast; the nobleman who got stripped of his lands and titles

Arnold: Bloomington local; strong motion graphics artist; enthusiastically recruited; melts down

Bill: owner of Bloomington's Option Six; wealthy angel investor; interested in GZ

Craig: owner of the successful independent game media studio, ScrewAttack; our rival samurai

Mel: Marketing Director for Reverb Communications, in charge of the *Darkest of Days* advertising budget; considering a big bet on GZ

Part 1: Igniting GameZombie TV – Flashbacks & Premonitions

> *Frankenstein: "Look! It's moving. It's alive. It's alive... It's alive, it's moving, it's alive, it's alive, it's alive, it's alive, IT'S ALIVE!"*
> *Victor: "…In the name of God!"*
> *Frankenstein: "Oh, in the name of God! Now I know what it feels like to be God!"*
> *- Frankenstein (1931)*

Tales from the Trenches – Let's Do This

In the course of this autoethnographic project exploring my experience building

GameZombie TV from scratch, and establishing its self-organizing momentum, I unearth a

number of themes that I have encountered in the trenches of my interest-driven learning

environment. I accord equal measure to things that have *worked*—such as the subtleties of the

application of soft power toward igniting student creativity—as well as to things that have *not*

worked, and blown up in my face—such as the diplomatic failure of the former, resulting in

empowered students rebelling and threatening to "burn down" the whole project. I relate

these tales and themes in a straightforward way, using an accessible, (pop culture-influenced

writing style), so that what I have to say can be read by the widest possible audience of

professional educators interested in developing constructivist, interest-driven, digital media

learning environments—an educational strategy often celebrated rhetorically by champions of

21st Century skills, but less often successfully implemented (Mayer, 2004). Furthermore, I utilize

nonfiction narrative techniques, as defined by the autoethnographic method, to illuminate a

verisimilitude of dynamic, historical events, as they occurred, making possible what Carolyn Ellis

calls "witnessing" (2011) for those who were not there.

The Irish Lion – Cold Open

On the night of March 22nd, 2007, in the city of Bloomington, Indiana, in a classy bar

called the Irish Lion—known for strong scotch, leather-backed chairs, and a smell of rich

mahogany—a fateful meeting occurred that would change the course of history, forever. While

most likely not ripping a hole in the fabric of space-time, or making a dent in world history for

that matter, it was a pretty big deal in the life story of GameZombie TV.

I had called our first big meeting, and I was nervous:

Greetings Zombie Slayers,

*Well, why don't we meet at a bar downtown at 9pm on Thursday night--it
will be a good opportunity for all of us to touch base and discuss our various
initiatives…so will 9pm on Thursday work for everybody? You guys name the
place since you know the downtown scene in Bloomington a bit better than
me -*

*In other news: J.D.'s been working his ass off to cut Zelda, a rough cut is up.
We're gonna meet, polish, and upload it tonight at Wells. Also, Khalil's got
the Trauma Center material and Russell's got the FFXII material and they'll
be getting those cuts done by the end of the week—so we should have five
video reviews by week's end.*

*I think our biggest hole right now is the nav structure/right hand bar that
Mason's been prototyping. I like the posted, ripped paper concept—with
blood and burnt edges. If we put that above the journal links as we discussed
that will look cool. (With the journals on their own piece of overlapped,
ripped paper right?) Basically, we need a way for people to quickly access*

our 'top rated' videos and the various cool content that we want to be immediately accessible—celebrity interviews, video reviews, and stylish zombie narrative material.

I'm planning a zombie narrative series: I want a stylish video tale that tells the story of how each of us escaped, Carlos and myself are accounted for. That leaves Carter, Russell, Jack, J.D., Vincent, Khalil, Mason, and Pete. Why don't you guys throw out some ideas and I'll conceptualize video pieces based on the journal entries and whatever else I can come up with... For example, Jack was living in the woods, so do we shoot his alone or do we have him potentially get rescued by Carter? This will be fun. I think all the pieces should have different tones—Carlos and mine is very dark, end of the world. But another could be shaun of the deadish, another die hardish... That way we leave our tone open-ended and changeable--

Great work so far guys, excited by all the work everybody's been doing -

Let's rock,

SS

For the previous six months, beginning in October of 2006 through to this meeting in March of 2007, I had been emailing the burgeoning GameZombie TV team relentlessly, always pushing, always escalating the pressing nature of the project. I wanted everybody involved to go to bed at night and wake up in the morning asking themselves—*what have I done for GZ lately?* Throughout this period, I was not particularly reflective about who I was or why I was doing this. In retrospect, it's clear I was neurotically driven by my perceived failures to make good after film school—either to break into filmmaking and grab a foothold in Los Angeles, or

otherwise to publish novels and get something going there. I was already twenty-eight years old and had never done a damned thing in my life.

Ambition, Impatience, and Romnian Severity

For nearly five years I had pursued, like an increasingly maddened Captain Ahab, the ambitious quest to become the creative architect of a secondary world storybook franchise in the manner of J.K. Rowling, Tom Clancy, Michael Crichton, or George Lucas. My vision was uncompromisingly grandiose. It was not simply that I wanted to publish works of fiction—it was that I saw the book as the story-core of the *transmedia* (Jenkins, 2003) franchise from which you could break off and reinterpret its pieces for various media markets, such as comic books, movies, video games, TV series, and so on. Like Bruce Willis in *Die Hard 3 (1995)*—that's right, *With a Vengeance*—I found myself locked in a cruel race against a ticking time bomb, mercilessly counting down toward my irrelevance. My creative heroes were big showoffs like Ernest Hemmingway, Stephen King, and Alex Garland, all of whom had published their first novels by the age of twenty-six. There came a moment of truth—would I double down on this thus far fruitless dream, or would I change course and pursue more pragmatic opportunities?

At the same time, the years I had spent writing novels in exile—in Costa Rica, Honduras, Brazil, Providence, Huntington, New York, Los Angeles, and Austin—had made me stronger. Like *Conan the Barbarian* (1982) at the Wheel of Pain, the trials had not broken me, but instead shaped my identity. Getting up every day to thanklessly develop and write books that nobody gave a damn about had strengthened my persistence, the micro-traumas of disappointment casually coarsening my resolve (Seery, 2010). When I had applied my willpower to long-form

writing, I had seemingly gotten nothing in return—at least nothing sufficiently immediately gratifying for this media geek, who's spent most of his life staring at screens.

But when I began to apply this same energy and will to the collaborative project of GameZombie TV, *things began to happen*. Feeding off the positive reinforcement, every day I pushed a little harder. Fear of inaction both haunted and inspired me, like the monster in John Garner's *Grendel (1971)*, scaring me to glory! I wanted to be a man of action, like Balzac's Vautrin, whose revelation as Jacques Collin in *Old Goriot* (1994) impressed me for his larger than life vitality: "In one moment Collin became the poet of the inferno, wherein all thoughts and passions that move human nature…find a place." Whatever that meant, it sounded cool.

From the earliest days, therefore, GZ has been motivated by what Mitt Romney might call a "severe" (Trinko, 2012) focus on completing projects, not just talking about them. This iron-willed emphasis on completion and moving forward is one reason why the projects we cranked out during the early days were so often dreadful. The idea was to build *momentum, confidence, fellowship, and shared identity*. What survives from this period is a culture of productivity, and failing upward. Over time, the quality of the work would get better and better, but the rate of productivity pretty much stayed the same.

A Project Hungry for People

Bloomington's Irish Lion—located in a restored historic 1882 vintage brick tavern, with cast iron columns and stained glass windows—featured hundreds of whiskeys, Irish Meade, and food from the old country, like corned beef and cabbage.

It was a good place for a nerd gathering.

I had blasted out invitations and reminders persistently throughout the week, and was hoping for maximum "Zombie Slayer" turnout. GZ was inclusive then, as it is today. A talent magnet, the project has always been *hungry for new people*, of more and diverse competencies. GZ's aggressive inclusivity has been both its source of prolonged strength, and the cause of a number of its most awkward and dramatics incidents, including the webmaster meltdown of December 2008, the motion graphics artist freak out of the summer of 2009, and the VJ embarrassment of March of 2010, the gory details of which I'll mostly confess in due course. Having said that—as Larry David is apt to say—when you run an intensive, collaborative project that includes over five hundred unique students over the course of six years, perhaps a certain number of *meltdowns, freak outs, and embarrassments* are a statistical certainty?

I arrived at the Irish Lion a bit late since I had no idea where it was. Though Bloomington is small, the city has always confused me. Like Bilbo Baggins, this intrepid traveler seems to get lost the moment I leave my front door.

The So-Called Council of SS

Bolting up the stairs, I found the large GameZombie party on the second floor seated around a huge oak table. Modestly, and with feigned reluctance, I took my place at the head of one end of the cartoonishly large dining room table—think Belle in *Beauty and the Beast*. My conflict was that I wanted to *be the boss without appearing to be the boss*, and that, I have come to learn, is hard to do.

Seated opposite me, on the far end of the great oak table, looking like Hrothgar in *Beowulf*, was Carter—merry, plump, and engaged in idle conversation. The sweetest and most laid back guy, Carter would become my nemesis at this meeting. The problem was not that he wished to wrest power from me or sabotage the project, but rather something more sinister and slow-burning. Carter just didn't get it. Unlike Mitt and me, he wasn't sufficiently "severely" interested, and by treating the whole thing as a blow-off party, was threatening both the *culture and the momentum* of the GZ project.

I had been there about ten minutes when conversation began to quiet down, and people began to look at me like, "ok, what now, boss?" I felt acute pressure to man up, and take charge of the meeting. But like in a dream where your legs won't work and you can't stop crawling, or like Elrond unable to keep order amongst his diverse guests at his own damned meeting, (the so-called "Council of Elrond" (Tolkien, 1954)), I did not yet possess the gravity of true confidence. Self-consciously, and with a shaky voice, I spoke up:

"Ok," I said, clearing my throat, "Ok. I think it's time to get started." Everybody was eating and drinking booze, and most kept talking. I wasn't drinking because I wanted to stay focused. My teetotaler's iced tea shook in my hand. Then J.D., with his Midwestern night watchman charm, pierced the muddle:

"Guys! *Spencer's talking*!"

Embarrassed by the attention, but glad he'd done it, I persevered, "ok, guys how bout we get started? J.D. will you take notes?"

"Ready," said he, like a good lad, his cheap Bic pen in hand, his crumpled sheet of paper (see Appendix C) prepared to transcribe history unfolding.

Though J.D. would become increasingly useless as time went by and the team grew stronger, he truly was invaluable in those early days, both for his unwavering loyalty and his infectious good nature. It was critical not only to launch the technical aspects of the project, but also to articulate the culture, which would be one of laidback friendliness, balanced by Romnian severity—*chillaxed severity* is one way to describe it.

"Let's talk about the story," I said.

Every Creation Myth Needs a Zombie

It's interesting in retrospect to consider how important the narrative back story was to us in those early days. Over time, as the technical professionalism of the project increased, the story wound up getting phased out more and more, until one day, it was gone. Perhaps it was too "goofy" as a wise man once said. But during those embryonic days of speculative creativity, we thought it was ingenious.

Nobody was doing that—using a story to bind together a video game review site; *narrativizing it*. To have pulled it off, long-term, we would have had to have remained committed to integrating it, and making it work. And I just never believed in it enough, and so I slowly let it die. Though it transmutated into nothing more than a vestigial organ recalling the project's murky origins, the narrative story served an important purpose in the earliest days of GameZombie—it became the focus for camaraderie, and a *we're in it together* type mentality,

which helped to bolster GZ's stickiness. After all, zombie stories are really survivor stories (Hoade, 2010) about small, randomly assembled groups of people who become bound together in a moment of great crisis and must learn to cooperate in order to overcome adversity, or otherwise die.

Bearing this in mind, the tale of how I conjured this state of collective emergency—this zombocalypse—recedes even further back in time than this momentous meeting; indeed, the dark ages of GameZombie get darker still.

The Even Darker Dark Ages of GameZombie

Thom Gillespie is a jovial, bearded, man of the world as beloved by his students for his eccentricities—such as his insistence on serving atrocious waffles at grad student get-togethers—as for his generosity of spirit, interpretable Yoda-like advice, and indefatigable championing of creativity.

Known to everyone simply as "Thom," universal mentor and friend to his graduate students, he founded the Master's in Immersive Mediated Environments (MIME) program at Indiana University in 1999. While not officially a degree program, it was more like a production-focused emphasis you chose as a grad student pursuing a Master's in Telecommunications at IU. It was really a gem of a new media production program that offered a full scholarship M.S. degree. Having done exhaustive research in the summer and fall of 2005, I can tell you that few comparable digital media programs in the country made the same generous offer—for example, both Georgia Tech's M.S. in Digital Media, and Carnegie Mellon's Master's of Entertainment Technology (MET) Degree, required student to pay their sizable tuition costs out

of pocket, or via student loans. The Indiana offer made me feel loved. As Don Draper (2007) says, it's easier to sleep "on a bed made of money." Well, let's not get ahead of ourselves—it was a tuition waiver, plus $1,100/month salary to T.A. one course per semester. But it was more than that—it was my ticket to the get your shit together ball, and I was Cinderella, a touch late perhaps, but ready to rock.

IU's MIME Program - a Project-Based Think Tank

And so I entered the MIME program in August of 2006 with a fire under my ass to get something going. More than anything, I saw grad school as an opportunity to do two things: 1. achieve respite from the financial pressures of the real world (by re-entering the university bubble), and 2. work with talented student colleagues who shared my passion for multimedia production.

Thom set up the program like a project-based think tank. There were resources and creativity exercises, but the real question was: what project were you going to develop, and who could you talk into working on it? It was a competitive environment. Initially, my goal was to develop my dark, savage secondary world, *Bad Blood Born*, as some kind of interactive book experience. Naturally, I had no idea how that would happen, but I had faith that through Jobsian "magical thinking" (Isaacson, 2011) I would find a way. Meanwhile, I had another idea.

Back in Austin, about six months before grad school, I had begun watching video-based video game reviews on GameSpot.com, realizing three things at once:

1. I preferred video over text-based coverage of video games

2. The production quality of these video reviews was weak

3. These videos were getting hundreds of thousands of views on the web

I felt that the game analysts came across as pompous; the pacing was indulgent and ungenerous toward the audience; the producers paid no attention to lighting, motion graphics, choice of camera angles or shot variety; music and sound design was either non-existent or slapped on as an afterthought; and the game capture seemed lazily integrated.

In a word, I thought: *I can do better than that.*

In the Darwinian, survival of the fittest idea learning environment of Indiana's MIME program, my idea for a video game review show won out, and my idea to develop my dark, cruel secondary world did not. I pitched *Bad Blood Born* hard for a few months, but only a handful of students wanted to work with me. By contrast, the video game review show idea *got people excited*. And at that point in my life, the prospect of launching a collaborative multimedia project was what I really wanted. After nearly five years of writing in self-willed exile, I was eager to be at the center of a project with momentum. At the core of the germinal GameZombie project concept were two timely themes that worked—the first was *Do It Yourself Media* and the second was *Video Games*.

Do It Yourself Media

Do It Yourself Media was breaking all over the world. *Web 2.0* (O'Reilly, 2005) and *participatory culture* (H. Jenkins, Clinton, K., Purushotma, R., Robison, A.J. & Weigel, M., 2006) hit the mainstream in 2006 like gangbusters—or better yet, like teenyboppers to an impromptu

Justin Bieber performance at the local mall. YouTube, Facebook, MySpace, and Digg rose to

Internet supremacy, along with all the other sites that were nothing more than elegantly coded

blank slates upon which the energy of the people would create the content. Time Magazine's

Person of the Year was *"You."* (Grossman, 2006) The zeitgeist flipped the script and the

consumers became the producers. The user-enabled web liberated audiences from the mind-

numbing banality of 20th century top down media content, unlocking untold gazillions of hours

of previously untapped human creative energy—a resource Clay Shirky calls "cognitive surplus"

(2010). Meanwhile, the tools of heavy-duty media production became increasingly

decentralized, and democratized, as Henry Jenkins (2006) lucidly explained. As recently as the

late-1990s, an aspiring (digital) media producer needed access to an expensive, cumbersome,

proprietary Avid editing lab in order to do serious postproduction work. The costs were

sufficiently onerous to scare away casual content producers.

By the early 2000s, however, the success of Apple's Final Cut Pro nonlinear digital

editing suite became what Harvard business professor Clayton Christensen calls a "disruptive

innovation" (1997). Just as the rise of the automobile signaled the death knell for the horse

drawn carriage, the telephone rendered the telegraph a relic, and the USB port made floppy

disks edgy no longer—once the rules get changed, the game can never be played the same. The

very success of established industries, with massive infrastructures mobilized to squelch threats

to their advantage, becomes a liability (Wu, 2010) when the pace of media, information, and

technological innovation becomes too fast for them to stay on the bleeding edge.

In 1965, Moore's Law predicted the counter-intuitive exponential growth pattern in the price performance (Kurzweil, 2005) of digital media hardware:

Microprocessor Transistor Counts 1971-2011 & Moore's Law
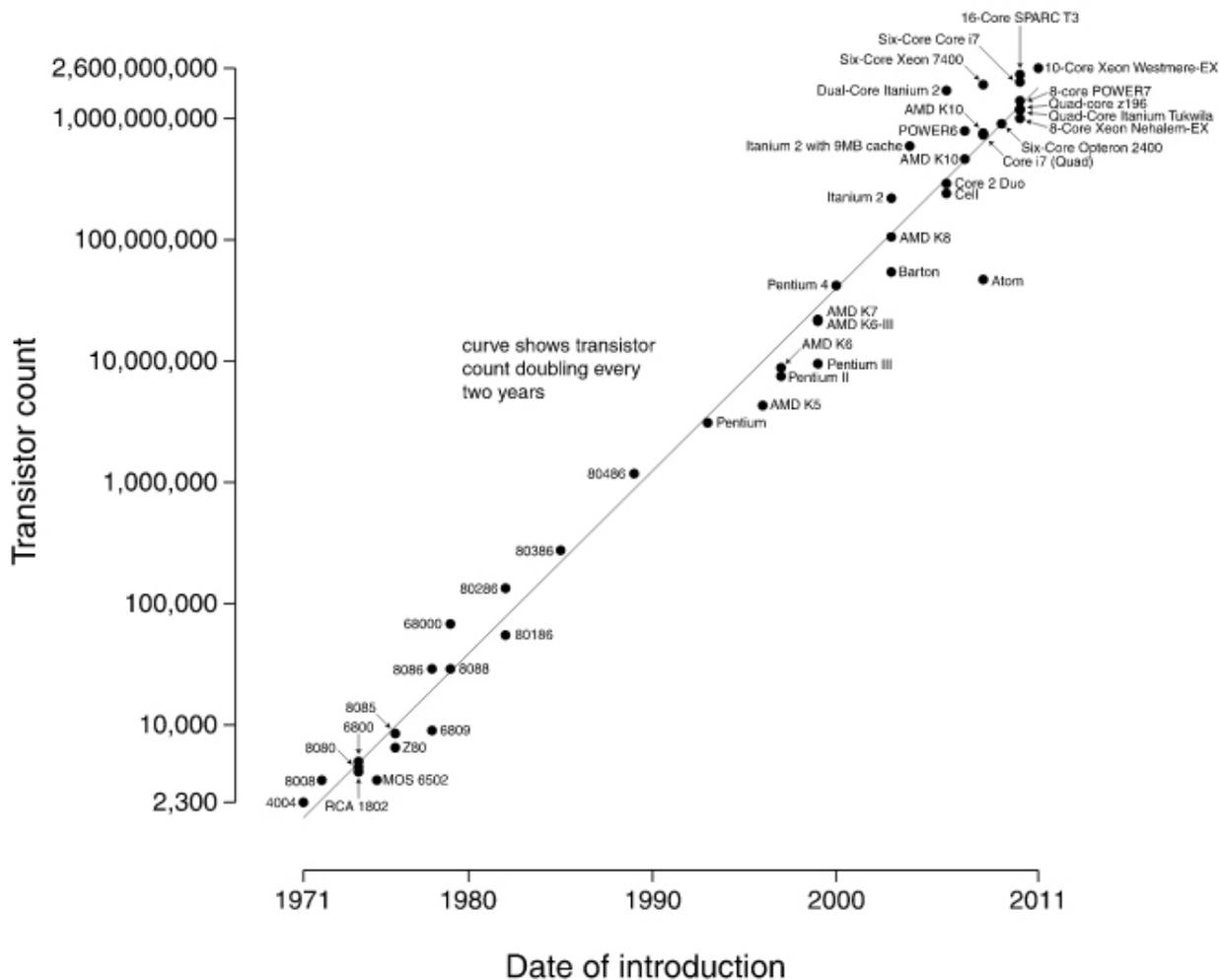
The 2000s saw the rise of increasingly high quality *prosumer* (a hybrid of "professional" and "consumer") grade cameras, (such as the Canon GL2 that I used to build GZ), and powerful machines, (such as the MacBook Pro, of which we had access to hundreds), armed to the teeth with central processing units (CPUs) capable of rendering intensive, complex video and motion graphics. Consider that Bill Gates, in 1971, as an irrepressibly curious and motivated sixteen

year old geek of singular proportion, had to sneak into primitive computer labs in the physics

department at the University of Washington between the hours of 3am – 6am to get free

computer time (Gladwell, 2008). Thirty five years later, in 2006, my entire team had virtually

unlimited access to computers orders of magnitude more powerful than the clunky mainframes

of Gates' day.

GameZombie TV was uniquely situated to take full advantage of a technologically

disruptive moment by leveraging the newfangled opportunities of Web 2.0 websites combined

with the game changing ubiquity of digital media production software and hardware.

Video Games

The second idea that clicked was video games. Just the thought of the video game

business elicits powerful intrinsic excitement in young people. Much more so than film or other

media industries, students seems to feel an ownership of the game business, a visceral

proximity and potential for impact.

In video game communities, the players become the content, drawing a direct corollary

to participatory media culture (Squire & Jenkins, 2011). There exists a deep affinity between

games as a participatory medium that players co-create and the logic of participatory cultures

in which participants co-create the organizations themselves. As with DIY Media, Will Wright's

The Sims encourages players to be consumers and producers (J. Gee & Hayes, 2010). Players

often customize their user interfaces, and in some cases even develop mods, following a

trajectory of participation that starts with using user-generated-content and develops into

contributing user-generated-content (Steinkuehler & Johnson, 2009).

Students don't just get excited about the content of a game; instead, the game gets them excited about a topic. There's a meta-investigation going on here—students' curiosities get piqued and then they peak behind the curtain. As possibility spaces, games are deeply social (Squire & Jenkins, 2011). And it is the players, not the designers, who often publicize possibilities through sharing stories, formal and informal apprenticing, and group activities (Steinkuehler, 2006).

Elizabeth King (2009) of Madison's Games, Learning, and Society collective has put together an extraordinary infographic that demonstrates the complexity of the emerging video games and learning field, as well as it where it aligns with 21st century skills:

Table 1: Games and Media Literacy Articles Aligned to 21st Century Learning Skills

21C LS	Descriptors	Related Games & Media Literacy Authors
Inter-disciplinary Themes	Global Awareness	Steinkuehler, 2006; Squire, 2008; Beck & Wade, 2004
	Financial, Economic, Business & Entrepreneurial Literacy	Castronova, 2001; 2003; Dibbel, 2006; Simkins, 2009; Johnson, 2009; King, 2008 & 2009; DeVane, 2009
Life and Career Skills	Flexibility & Adaptability	Gee, 2003 & 2004
	Initiative & Self-Direction	**Self-Directed Learning:** Gee, 2003 & 2004; Hayes & King, 2009; Hayes, King & Lamers, 2009; Steinkuehler & Johnson, 2009 Ito, et al, 2008; Jenkins, 1992
	Social & Cross-Cultural Skills	**Social Skills:** Boyd, 2007; Ito, et al, 2008; Ba, Tally & Tsakalas, 2002 **Cross-Cultural Skills:** Steinkuehler, 2006; Beck & Wade, 2004; Squire, in press
	Productivity & Accountability	Beck & Wade, 2004; DiMarco, Lesser, Odriscoll, 2007
	Leadership & Responsibility	DiMarco, Lesser, O'Drisoll, 2007; Reeves & Malone, 2007; Beck & Wade, 2004; Steinkuehler, King, Chu, Alagoz, Bakar, Oh & Zhang, 2009
Learning and Innovation Skills	Creativity and Innovation	Brown & Thomas, 2008; Hagel & Brown 2009; Hayes & King, 2009; Squire, in press; Squire & Durga, in press; Seinkuehler, 2007; Steinkuehler & Duncan, 2009; Steinkuehler & Johnson, 2009; Jenkins, 1992; Kafai, 2000; Subrahamnam & Greenfield, 2008
	Critical Thinking and Problem Solving	**Critical Thinking:** Beck & Wade, 2004; Brown & Thomas, 2008; Steinkuehler, 2007; DiMarco, Lesser & O'Driscoll, 2007 **Problem Solving:** Brown & Duguid, 1991; Steinkuehler & Duncan, 2009 **Systems Thinking and Model Based Reasoning:** Gee, 2009; Steinkuehler & King, 2009; Steinkuehler & Duncan, 2007; Squire, in press **Risk Taking:** Beck & Wade, 2004; Squire, in press
	Communication and Collaboration	**Communication:** Boyd; Ito et al, 200 **Collaboration:** Steinkuehler & Duncan, 2009; Ducheneut, Yee, Nickel & Moore, 2006 **Communication Literacies: Reading and Writing Literacies** **Reading:** Gee, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Steinkuehler, Compton-Lilly & King, under review **Online reading comprehension:** Coiro, 2003 **Composition:** Jenkins, 1992; Steinkuehler & Black, **New Literacies:** Gee, 2003 & 2004; Lanksheer & Knobel, 2006; Steinkuehler, 2007 & 2008
Information, & Technology Skills	Information Literacy	Brown, 2006; Ba, Tally & Tsikalas, 2002; Ito, et al, 2008
	ICT (Information, Communications and Technology Literacy)	**Tech-Skills:** Brown, 2006; Hayes & Games, 2008; Hayes & King, 2009; Kafai, 2000; Steinkuehler & Johnson, 2009 ElNasr & Smith, 2006; Cassell & Jenkins, 2000; Margolis & Fisher, 2002

Fail Early, Often and Upward

I spent the fall semester of 2006 in a period of intensive development, aggressively

recruiting fellow grad students to the project and doing a lot of talking about what the project

could be. I was relentless. I crushed everybody's inboxes with an endless stream of blast emails, and pressed the issue.

It's probably my good fortune that my colleagues were Midwesterners, because they were too polite to tell me to back off, slow my roll, and check myself before I wrecked myself. But I think they liked it. *Enthusiasm is contagious*. And the beginnings of things can be exciting times. For me, what really mattered was actually getting something done. I did not want to talk about a project; I wanted to *make* a project. And this idea has remained at the core of GameZombie—stop talking, start doing, *fail early, often, and upward* (J. P. Gee, 2003; Squire & Jenkins, 2011). My previous implosions are at the root of this philosophy.

The Training is Nothing - The Will is Everything!

At the time I was getting GZ going, I was acutely haunted by the memory of my inability to produce a short film in my senior year at UT, called "Strawberries of Elysium." I had spent months writing, recruiting, auditioning, rehearsing, and securing equipment, but in the end, I never completed the movie. The whole operation disintegrated before my very eyes. As universal mentor, Liam Neeson, playing—spoiler alert—Ra's al Ghul, (not Henri Ducard), tells Bruce Wayne on the frozen bluescreen lake, "the training is nothing, the will is everything!" (Nolan, 2005) What Liam was really telling *me* is that I experienced a collapse of *grit*, that positive, non-cognitive trait expressing an individual's passion and motivation to achieve a long-term goal (Duckworth, 2007), which is, in my humble interpretation, the characteristic most consistently correlated with student success in GZ.

I hated that narrative—of being a person who talked a big game but didn't deliver. If you have not already guessed, faithful reader, I will presently confess to a gloomy touch of negativity bias, and, as my wife would gladly confirm, a stormy tendency to dwell. It was in this insalubrious context that I built GameZombie—I was miserable and had a lot to prove.

Interestingly, this wild-eyed desperation attracted likeminded adventurers.

The Gathering Storm of Likeminded Crazies

Beginning as early as September of 2006, I recruited the shaggy-haired, warlock-ian, Carlos, and we shot some self-conscious video reviews in my apartment. The footage was terrible and unusable, but the key was forcing myself, and my proto-crew, to do something, to *make something*. Like Paul Ryan, we needed to put something out there to critique—even if it was shit, and half the country hated it. Archived in email threads and a Google Group that I started, is an inspired brainstorm about what the project could be (see Appendix C).

We openly debated what to name the show.

Throughout this, I kept trying to get *buy in* from everyone—delicately, persistently encouraging my colleagues to feel like this was their show too, and that their ideas were being heard. I wanted "GamerInferno," I think, but it was my future Web Designer, Vincent, who came up with "GameZombie." When we found that GameZombie.com was parked, Vincent suggested GameZombie.tv, which I immediately thought was better. .tv, the Internet country code top-level domain for the flyspeck Polynesian island nation of Tuvalu, had become a trendy

solution for video-based sites by 2006, (since it looked like the abbreviation for television) (Cave, 2000), and so made perfect sense for our branding.

Survivors of the Zombie War

Building on the zombie theme, I suggested that we could create a *narrative backstory* to our video-based, video game review show. Absurdity notwithstanding, it seemed that to develop a narrative about a team of zombie war survivors into the alternate reality backstory of a game video site opened up a lot of creative possibilities. Games were cool; zombies were cool—so why not combine them? In retrospect, the zombie theme was helpful in terms of *defining a style* for the series—dark, gritty, slick, cool, intense, urban, punctuated by levity. It helped us to focus asset development around color palettes of blacks, reds, and whites, mood lighting, and dark, electronic, music themes. The whole preposterous idea was that the principle reviewers were actually holed up in a bunker in the aftermath of a zombie apocalypse, still broadcasting video game reviews to fellow survivors out there in the world.

We brainstormed, and I later scripted, detailed narrative sagas for our characters and sketched out a history of our tragic alternate reality, surviving, as it were, in the aftermath of a prolonged, horrific zombie war (Appendix C). Ultimately, the zombie narrative was doomed like a wounded "walker" lumbering toward the outstretched .357 Magnum of the *Walking Dead*'s sanctimonious Rick Grimes. In other words, the backstory never gelled—it didn't make enough sense.

Ultimately, the zombie war survivor backstory exerted two net positive effects:

1. creatively, it provided the team with a clear vision that helped accelerate asset development, and

2. perhaps more importantly, the concept, as I previously alluded, inspired a playful, childlike, fantastic "*us against the world*" camaraderie, which helped marshal loyalty to the project.

The Escape of Carlos and Spencer – The First Win

In December of 2006, Carlos and I completed our eponymously titled *The Escape of Carlos and Spencer*, a one minute twenty second paranoid, strenuously edited alternate reality dramatic episode, subjectively documenting our escape from the undead horde, (with an armful of video games, mind you), into the basement dwelling that would become our bunker, central headquarters of the GZ resistance, and our web cast point of origin. We slaved away on the outrageous creation like we were trying to cure cancer. For me, it was *everything*. It was why I was there. It was my shot. And then, miraculously, at our end of semester final project screening, the video proved a hit, a homerun—an epic win. After so much brainstorming, big talk, and making of lesser casts, we delivered a product that was pretty damned close to what we'd promised.

The terribly self-serious *Escape* video represented a transitional step in the history of the GZ project because it accomplished three things at once:

1. the inspired, creative energy of the video helped to rally greater enthusiasm from my grad student colleagues, (the Mimesters)

2. a successful visualization of everything we'd been talking about served as a huge confidence boost that we could actually *do this*, (a genuine adrenalin shot to my recruitment program), and

3. it got me excited about editing again

Long Hours and Sleepless Nights in Wells Library

As of January of 2007, our game video site had neither game videos, nor a site. I needed to banish that glaring oversight forthwith from the Kingdom of Rohan, if you know what I mean.

In that very month, we shot our first round of video reviews in my Bloomington apartment, which was situated in the stern, forbidding, steel and concrete eyesore called Evermann, a grotesque relic of 1970s architecture—appearing like it was designed to keep the crazies in more than to keep them out. That chilly winter night, we initiated a process that would be repeated for all GameZombie shoots for the next eighteen months. I would email and/or text message and/or call all of the people associated with GZ and ask them what they were playing and what they were ready to review. We'd discuss the games and the potential creative directions to take with the material. Then everybody would show up to my Evermann apartment—which I transformed into a soundstage, with alternative bluescreen and blackscreen backdrops—and the shoot would be like a big, nerdy party focused around production, video games, and tragically cheap beer, (yes, we're talking cases of Natural Light), and afterward, all of the analysts and performers would go home and then the real work would begin for those left holding the tapes.

Ultimately, we would shoot hundreds upon hundreds of standard definition digital video tapes, shooting them over and over again to reduce how often I needed to buy new ones.

Assets Accumulate

To provide a sense of proportion: every sixty minute standard definition digital video tape translated to about twelve gigabytes of raw data when captured to the computer. We usually recorded between two to four hours at every Evermann GZ shoot. And I orchestrated such in-house shoots about twice a month, from January of 2007 until I obtained HDTV studio access in September of 2008, i.e. twenty-one straight months. In addition, we contemporaneously covered every major gaming conference, (e.g. GDC, E3, and PAX), recording as much as twenty hours of footage per show. By the spring of 2008, I personally had thirteen external hard drives completely maxed out on space. Many GZ lieutenants and foot soldiers had their own external hard drives, and even these were beginning to push the limits. To intensify matters, in that same year, 2008, we transitioned to high definition video production, which is five times as data intensive as its standard counterpart.

Given these new technological demands, we reached out in the fall of 2008 to community-shared cloud storage solutions, with certain fascinating, nearly traumatic consequences—which, if you stay with me, I promise to ultimately, therapeutically, divulge in Part 3 of this dissertation.

MK Armageddon – Chained to the Mac

The *Mortal Kombat (MK) Armageddon* video review we shot that January night in 2007, featuring Vincent, (who was to become, in addition to GZ's original web designer, one of my most valued early contributors), ultimately became our first, true, kind of-sort of professional game video. Its *shameless overproduction* foreshadowed a stylistic conceit of GZ videos. Unlike

a real company, GZ has remained a *creature of the university*, and therefore, the videos have

forever served as tools for students to learn production techniques. For this reason, among

others, they sometimes suffer from egregious over-emphases on effects editing and

reprehensibly ostentatious stylization.

For this first piece, Vincent's *MK Armageddon* video review, I chained myself to a

multimedia Mac workstation in IU's 24 hour Wells Library, unaware that I'd sealed my fate.

Since I am a creature of the night, and since this library embodied the beating heart of the

university, it made for the perfect improvised headquarters for a nomadic, rebel general, like

me. *I lived there* for the next twenty one months. In that opening battle—memorable as

Lexington, momentous as Concord—I wrestled grievously with the Final Cut Pro Editing Suite,

seeking to capture a dark, gritty, horror-themed basement look, accented by a fall-off to black,

Charlie Rose-style use of hard lighting and sharp contrast. The video experimented with a sort

of ADHD, MTV-informed editing style, cut to a bass-heavy loop lifted from the game capture.

Looking back, the piece is amusingly self-important for a meditation by a nerd on the

pros and cons of the latest *Mortal Kombat* game. But it represented the beginning of a

production philosophy and a *body of knowledge* that would be passed down to future GZ

sprouts, from generation to generation, like the secret to grandma's tomato sauce, or the

correct way to cut and time a motion graphics intro.

I spent so many long hours and sleepless nights in Wells Library working on that

mediocre *MK Armageddon* edit. In the process, I awakened in myself an obsession with

nonlinear digital editing, and an awareness of the potential of *software auto-didacticism* (C.

Thompson, 2011) in the open world of the ubiquitous, never-ending new web. The work on

that video represented the beginnings of both:

1. a common pool of assets and

2. specific style guidelines for the project moving forward

The expertise that I developed editing the original GameZombie videos using Final Cut

Pro became the basis of the entire body of knowledge that has surrounded the project, ever

since. But the *unreasonable obsessiveness* was important too. My neurotic obsessive qualities

attracted neurotic obsessive people, distilling their latent workaholicism, and bringing it to the

fore. Inside of every GZ recruit, there was a mildly masochistic mini SS trying to get out. Let's

face it, fifty hours of postproduction on a video review is not normal. But over the next six

months, a larger and larger team would grow around the project willing to pour their hearts

into the edits, just as I had. What was driving them? Did they want to get better? Did they want

to be a part of something successful? Did they believe in a dream?

Now GZ had two videos.

Incentivizing Talent – Give People the Opportunity to be Great

It really helped that one of our first two original videos featured Vincent.

I needed him. A fellow grad student in the MIME program, Vincent had a quiet, focused

demeanor and a deeply appreciated reliability. He worked steadfastly on his own time to

develop his skills for 2D web graphics, and had made himself into the strongest Photoshop

artist in the program. A touch nerdy—without going full dweeb—and often awkwardly taciturn

in conversation, I did everything I could to pull him into the vortex of the project. Usually it was me talking his ear off, while he nodded and listened, until I could bring him around to the mutually agreed upon conclusion that he would render unto GZ a series of digital graphic assets within the next few days. But I was always seeking buy in.

And this is one of the core themes of the project—everyone had to feel that they were *gaining something* from participation. In Vincent's case, he was awarded tremendous creative control. That was fine with me, since everything he made was great. I gave him the title of Lead Web Designer—(I needed him so desperately; he could have negotiated for the Louisiana Purchase). And I consistently urged him to be on camera to do video reviews, which gave him web presence and an embodied investment in the project. I gave Vincent *the opportunity to be great*; to *do what he wanted to do* at a high level, for a *project with momentum.*

That was the hook. That was it. And like so many other students—though, admittedly, not always quite so talented—he bought in.

Three Horns Don't Play With Long Necks

Beginning in the spring semester of 2007, as a Teaching Assistant (TA) in Professor Mark Deuze's T101 Age of Information class, I began to talk up GameZombie to my undergraduate students during the labs I ran on a weekly basis. My first forays into recruiting undergrads were more modest than messianic, mind you.

Between showcasing random film examples to complement themes from Deuze's lectures, I would talk off-handedly about my new project, GameZombie TV. As is par for the

course, most of the students didn't care. But a few found what I was saying to be extremely interesting. They were of course the card-carrying video game, media, and production geeks, who recognized in me a glimmer of authentic enthusiasm, which is *the good stuff*, (and sometimes bad), where religions, crusades, and sometimes even student-fueled game media studios are born (De Botton, 2012; Godin, 2008). In retrospect, I don't think I ever explicitly asked any undergrads in my spring 2007 lab to join my cause. Rather, in a potent example of the Force within me, I employed a Jedi mind trick—my first undergrad disciples approached me.

J.D. became the first of many to become ensnared in my ever-widening web of ambition. J.D., a well-spoken, laid-back, plump Indiana boy, shyly introduced himself to me after class, saying:

"So this GameZombie thing sounds cool. How can I get involved?"

Strange though it may seem, since I would steadily transform GZ into a recruitment machine, I wasn't expecting this overture. What could he do, indeed?

GZ was a grad student project, and as the neotenous Triceratops, Cera, says in *The Land Before Time*, "three horns don't play with long necks" (1988). I belonged to an elevated social stratosphere; and looking around from my rarified perch, I didn't see any of my grad student colleagues working with undergrads. Were they not "beneath me" (2010) as the Roman Magistrate, Titus Calavius, vomits in his final bitter words of blood and bile?

"We'd love to have you join the team," said I. "This thing is blowing up!"

Undergrads Ignite

Of course I wanted undergrads on GameZombie TV. Initially, I hesitated a bit at the implications of the power dynamic. While it was easier to tell them what to do—and meanwhile they accepted being told what to do, more easily—it took some time for me to grow into the role of big boss man. Not that much time, though; within that very year GZ became the most popular undergraduate internship program in the city of Bloomington. Undergrads were less egotistical than grad students, harder working, and more reliable. It's the success story of GZ's formative years—once we went undergrad, we never went back.

Soon thereafter, J.D. introduced me to Russell, a Haitian-American guy, who wore island hats, had a big gummy smile, and was a true video game completionist, i.e., he completed every damned objective on every damned game, and had the screenshots to prove it. He'd wrack up over a hundred hours playing through a role-playing game (RPG) space opera like *Rogue Galaxy* or *Mass Effect*, and in the process accumulated an encyclopedic knowledge of the game world. In addition to his passion for games, Russell was also excited to write and perform solid video reviews, and demonstrated the tenacity to edit them too. He was scrappy, and willing to do the hard work with me during those thankless dog days, when noble struggle was its own reward. And he became my good friend. There's something about long hours of video production and editing work that occasionally gives way to fits of uncontrollable laughter. Like sailors afflicted with sea madness, Russell and I spent many a moment practically asphyxiating from the manic hysteria induced by not being able to get a line right, or from playing an unflattering clip over and over again, ad nauseam.

As a reward for this loyalty and work ethic, Russell became GZ's first official Lead Video Editor, and wound up training a great many noobs in turn.

The First Triumvirate – GZ Rises

And though J.D. proved to be one of my most consistently mediocre recruits—perpetually frustrating me like a listless child who refuses to live up to the family name—he earned his salt the day he introduced me to the single most important person during GZ's formative stage, Mason, the self-taught web programmer.

An Essential Team – Lean and Mean

When J.D. brokered my meeting with Mason, in February of 2007, I learned the lanky code monkey had just graduated from IU, and was now working at the Wells Library computer lab (my office, remember), as a lab tech, and was looking for projects to occupy him while he avoided the dread of job hunting. What sweetened the deal ever better was that Mason assured me he could code GZ while working at Wells, with nary a raised eyebrow—a promise he fulfilled. I had the project, he had the skills, and so it became a shotgun wedding just like the movie. I talked Mason into becoming the Webmaster, he talked me into giving him Co-Executive Producer status, and with the formalities out of the way; we straightaway began to build the original site. Truth be told, Mason was a boring son of a bitch. And he and I never had real chemistry. But like two lucid, practical adults locked in an arranged marriage, we made it work. And despite his tedious drabness, he was loyal and reliable, and he got the work done. For the second time in GZ's raucous history, after my short-lived creative partnership with Carlos, (with whom I made the original GZ video), I had acquired a right hand man in Mason.

And though I have had four senior partners on GZ over the years—first Carlos, then Mason, and later, Vladimir, then William—I find myself, as I sit here writing this in the summer of 2012, once again, back where I started, in sole charge of the project. I am become Charlton Heston, the omega man, the last man standing against the ghouls.

That February of 2007, the first GZ Triumvirate was born. As Apple Computer's legendary product evangelist, Guy Kawasaki, coaches in his Silicon Valley entrepreneurship primer, *Reality Check* (2008), we were *lean and mean*, with the right people in place to make it happen, and nothing more. 1. We had somebody who could *code* the site (Mason), 2. somebody who could *design* the site (Vincent), and 3. somebody who could *run* the site (me).

There was only one problem—we had no content.

You Guys Should Cover GDC!

Then one day in late February of 2007, Thom said to me:

"You guys should cover GDC. You should apply for press passes."

My first reaction was that it was too late and that we weren't real press anyway. But then I reconsidered this droopy instinct—what the hell, I thought, let's go for it. What I did not yet realize was that covering GDC as official press would prove to be one of the *key accelerants* to ignite the project.

First held in 1988, the Game Developer's Conference (GDC) takes place annually in San Francisco's Moscone Center and is the largest annual gathering of professional video game developers. As a game media organization, we cut our teeth on GDC, and GameZombie would

go on to cover the event in 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, and 2011. But in February of 2007, I could

never have imagined that would be the case. I wasn't sure we could even qualify as media. The

press team required three legitimate, syndicated pieces of game journalism published in the

last few months. Mason, Vincent, and I worked overtime to get the first iteration of the

GameZombie.tv site live just in time for the deadline, and we showcased the *MK: Armaggedon*

review front and center, as a YouTube embed. Then we pulled together two written articles J.D.

and Russell had published earlier in the *Indiana Daily Student*, and threw those up on the site to

appear as earlier blog entries.

Another requirement was an executive order from the publication's editor, on official

letterhead, instructing the press team to cover GDC.

Order to Self – Cover GDC!

Thus I found myself in Wells Library in the eleventh hour, on the eve of the press

application deadline, emailing Thom with detailed instructions on how to write and format this

official letter. As the hour grew late, I made one of the countless scrappy decisions I've made

throughout the years to keep GZ going—*I wrote the letter myself*. Thom, the GZ Godfather, is

blameless. Mine was a last second and tedious request, and no doubt he would have fulfilled it

given appropriate warning. But the memorable lesson I internalized was the value of self-

reliance and resourcefulness. Sometimes you've got to go off the script, and improvise. And

since they asked for yet another thing we didn't have—scanned copies of everyone's business

cards—I photoshopped half a dozen of those to boot. That's right; I requested a grand total of

six press passes for our mostly imaginary outfit to cover the conference.

And then we waited. Would our little ruse pass muster?

Two days later, Teresa Tyndorf from 47 Communications wrote me back with the sad news that due to the tightening of the press passes this year, our small outfit would only be awarded *two full press passes* to the 2007 Game Developers Conference in San Francisco.

"Victory!" I cried, like Tarvold from the metafictional *Viking Quest*.

I was ecstatic. The request for six had been a total bluff. I wasn't sure we deserved any press passes at all. But here another theme emerges from the project's clamorous origin story—that of *strategically overreaching*. Audacity, it seems, is sometimes rewarded.

Meritocracy and Glorious Golden Rewards

Now I had the unanticipated dilemma of having to give out the other press pass. Like Rod Blagojevich, I suddenly had this thing, and it was fucking golden. This became the first of many times I have had to distribute the all-valuable all-access media badges (whose monetary value is in the thousands of dollars) to only the *most deserving* members of my team— assessing their overall, and relative, contribution to the organization, as balanced against how much they wanted to go, versus how much I personally liked them, and could potentially stand their unending night and day proximity for a week in a faraway city. It's a usually interesting, somewhat magnanimous, always painful process. Most times I get it right. But on occasion—as with Gordon at GDC 2009, or Vicky at GDC 2010—I get it wildly wrong.

For the honor of accompanying me, (yes, one of the two passes was undoubtedly going to *moi*), to that first conference in March of 2007, various members of the proto GZ crew

petitioned me, and like a harried Caesar on his way to the forum, I heard their cases. Some of

the grad students associated with the early GDC team, (including Carlos, Vincent, Carter, and

Jack), were already going as volunteers, so they didn't need the media badge. But what I did not

yet know was that the GDC press pass is so much more valuable than a generic volunteer pass.

The official media badge grants unlimited access to every aspect of the show, and facilitates

everything—from getting to the front of any line to getting invited to the exclusive industry

parties. In the end, it was obvious who I had to take. Mason, despite being blander than a

corkboard, had done more work than anyone else to help me get the site live, and to get the

project off the ground. He deserved it. He earned it.

The other press pass was his.

GDC 2007 – A Zombie Sparks to Life

I worked so hard at GDC 2007 that by the third day, I had all but lost my voice—I

sounded as hoarse as Doc Rivers screaming at the Celtics in the huddle. I was a total phony and

had no idea what I was doing. But I was inspired, and desperate. In four days' time, we shot, in

addition to various assorted coverage, seventeen exclusive interviews with professional game

developers, as follows:

Dylan Collins of *DemonWare*

Eric Zimmerman of *Diner Dash*

Jon Mak of *Everyday Shooter*

The Bit Blot team of *Aquaria*

Kelly Santiago of *Flow*

Aaron Lanterman of Georgia Tech

Ben Sawyer of Digitalmill

Daniel James of *Puzzle Pirates*

Douglas Whatley of BreakAway Games

Greg Costikan of Manifesto Games

Richard Dorton aka MoCap Man

Phillip Rosedale of *Second Life*

Jonathan Mann of *GameJew*

Harvey Smith of *BlackSite: Area 51*

Alexey Pajitnov of *Tetris*

David Jaffe of *God of War*

Raph Koster of *Star Wars Galaxies*

I was doing my homework on the go, learning the industry in a trial by fire.

Alexey Pajitnov – the Russian Designer of Tetris

I ambushed the great Alexey Pajitnov, the Russian designer of *Tetris*, on the street, and interviewed him about his childhood as we walked through downtown San Francisco (Striker, 2007b).

"And so what was your initial inspiration for *Tetris*?" I asked awkwardly, shoving a camera in his face. "It's made a lot of people happy…it's a treasured game."

"Yes, yes," he replied like a kind old computer science professor, practiced in patience, having waited out the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the fall of the Iron Curtain. "It was a puzzle, a board puzzle, which I really enjoyed, called pentominoes. It's like a mathematical version of jigsaw puzzle."

"Uh huh," I contributed.

"They take twelve different shaped pieces and there are lots of way to put them together into the holes."

"Mm, hmm."

"It's very popular, still now, and I want to take those pieces, this set, and make two player game out of it."

"When you were a child, did you play puzzles?" I asked, heating up.

And so continued our weirdly intimate, perambulating dialogue along 3rd Street, drifting toward Moscone.

Daniel James – CEO of Three Rings Design, Maker of Puzzle Pirates

In another instance, even more preposterously situated, Carlos, Jack and I cornered Daniel James, the CEO of Three Rings Design, makers of *Puzzle Pirates*, at his own mad scientist/swashbuckling hybrid themed party. Looking like a cross between Captain Morgan and Dr. Frankenstein, with his goggles pushed back on his head, Daniel untangled the mysteries of the indie game business for we inspired amateurs (Striker, 2007a).

"Right now…if I was going to do it, and let's say, the world didn't exist, and I didn't work for Three Rings…I would make a multi-player flash game and sell it, license it, like with a royalty stream, exclusively to one of the major portals."

"Such as Xbox Live Arcade?" asked Jack innocently, with his signature Jack Sparrow slur.

"No, fuck Xbox Live Arcade!"

Instantly, we laughed nervously, in unison. Daniel James said *fuck Xbox Live Arcade*? Holy shit, the GZ nerd herd had landed a scoop!

"The thing is," said Daniel in his suave British accent, "there's like three million people who've got an Xbox. And there's two hundred people who have a PC that's capable of playing a good, well-executed flash web game."

With that final pearl of wisdom, Daniel sought to gracefully—and hurriedly—escape stage left. But I would not have it so.

"What is your anti-zombie weapon of choice?" I asked.

"What?" He asked, his British manhood visibly perked.

"…your anti-zombie weapon of choice?"

 "Cricket bat, of course," said Daniel, right into the camera.

We exploded like a fountain nerd joy. The alpha-geek had shown us how it's done.

One of the Web's Most Complete Game Developer Interview Archives

Covering GDC for GameZombie TV was part party, part adventure, but full on serious production initiative. My enthusiasm was infectious and my colleagues were feeding off it. Hell, I was feeding off it. I had stumbled on another key idea that would give the project legs— *bringing the real world into it*.

And once I got a taste of that action, I was like a Crisco kid in a fudge factory:
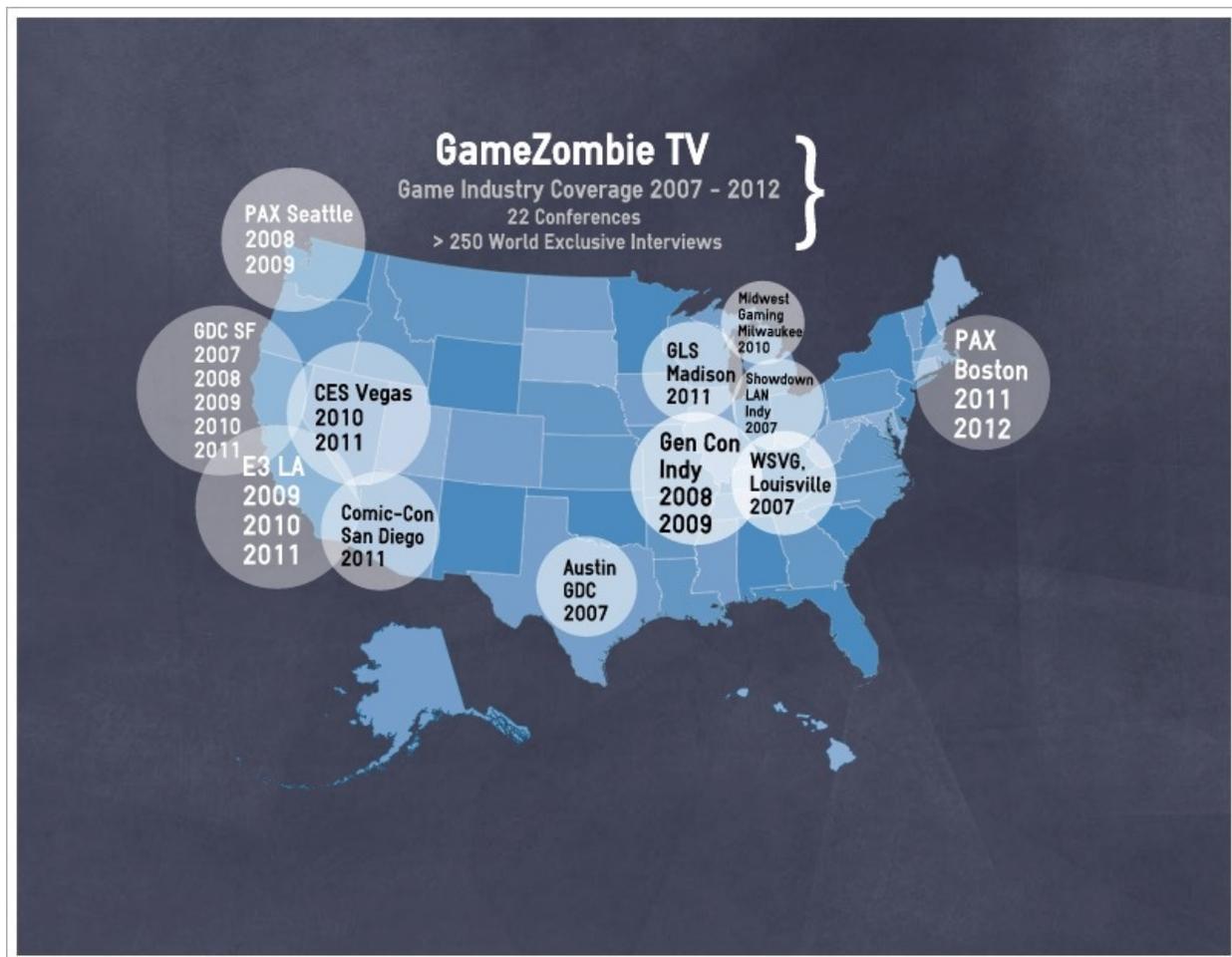
Between March of 2007 – March of 2012: GZ has covered 22 professional game

conferences around the country, including GDC (five times); E3 (four times); CES (two times);

PAX (two times); PAX East (two times); Comic-Con; and the GLS in Madison. In that time we

produced and published one of the largest game developer interview libraries on the web. GZ's

more than 200 game developer interviews include world exclusives with some of the industry's

biggest stars, including: Cliff Bleszinski (*Gears of War 3*); Warren Spector (*Epic Mickey*); Kim

Swift (*Portal*); Chet Faliszek (*Left 4 Dead*); Todd Howard (*Fallout 3*); Clint Hocking (*Far Cry 2*);

Ralph Baer (the inventor of video games); Eric Holmes (*Prototype*); Ben Mattes (*Prince of

Persia*); Ed Boon (*Mortal Kombat*); Peter Molyneux (*Fable 3*); Neill Glancy (*Stranglehold*); Evan

Wells (*Uncharted 2*); Michael de Plater (*EndWar*); Simon Hurley (*Borderlands*); Alex Evans (*LittleBigPlanet*); Chuck Beaver (*Dead Space*); Petro Piaseckyj (*Heavy Rain*); and many, many more.

But it all began with our inspired, amateurish GDC 2007 coverage.

A Fuel Injection of Star Power

Returning to Bloomington in March of 2007, that atomizing fuel injection of star power—that exotic experience of having mingled with the titans of the industry—served to ignite enthusiasm for GZ in ways I had not anticipated. Simply put, it was terribly useful to my recruitment efforts. The bullshit gap narrowed.

I was eager to begin cutting this proprietary game developer interview footage immediately, and to start publishing it to the web. I spent my entire Spring Break in Wells Library editing the seventeen interviews we had shot, (plus a few other video exclusives), pulling together assets, and working to get the videos launched to our nascent YouTube channel and brand new WordPress site. I burned to make the project a self-fulfilling prophesy. While we had bluffed that we were professional game media in order to get free passes to GDC 2007, now as we began to publish our sort of-kind of professional body of work, we were in fact becoming that which we had claimed to be. With every uploaded game developer interview, we *closed the bullshit gap* a little more. And I wanted it closed forever.

Zap- GZ Becomes an Interest-Driven Learning Environment

It was during this long Spring Break that I first began to delegate edits to my grad

student colleagues, cajoling them to please do a couple edits for me here, a couple there. There

was simply too much material to cut it all myself and it would be speedier and more efficient if

they did some of the edits for me. *This was the flashpoint during which GameZombie became*

an educational project:

1. I had to instruct my grad student buddies on how to edit the videos (though this was
    awkward because they were peers, and proud of their software skills)

2. I had to share assets with them, (which I was simultaneously begging, borrowing, and
    schmoozing Vincent, and others, into developing)

3. I had to share password info and instruct them on how to upload content, and

4. I had to run quality control, including sending some videos back, suggesting that they
    were not good enough yet, and needed to be cut with more attention to quality and
    detail.

On this last point, I had to send one of Carter's edits back at least three times. When this

occurs, you wonder whether it's not more efficient just to edit the damned thing yourself. But

as I would learn in the course of developing GZ, it's healthier for the project to give people the

opportunity to get it right. That letting go, that *trust*, was critical to the burgeoning inclusivity

and scalability of the project. Eventually, it was important enough to Carter not to let either of

us down that he got the piece finished properly. This event reinforced for me the correctness of

holding the line, and *keeping our roles intact*. It also informed me that I needed to step up my recruiting.

While producing the twenty-five GDC interviews over the 2007 Spring Break represented the true beginning of *GZ content*, one more critical ingredient was missing— officially using *undergrads* as the backbone of the project.

At the same time that my frustration with the prideful-ness and glacial slowness of my grad student colleagues was peaking, my undergraduate students in Mark Deuze's T101 class were expressing greater and greater eagerness to work on the project. Through J.D., once again, I acquired another terrific young whippersnapper, Wesley, whose resourcefulness and willingness to do scrappy, utilitarian type duties eventually morphed into an official job description that summarized what he contributed. I called it Production Manager. In time, many students would hold the role. But he was the original. I also acquired a character of a kid named Khalil, who had the funniest case of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). He could not walk down the sidewalk without going out of his way to avoid every possible crack in the sidewalk. Imagine a shaggy haired and scruffy computer nerd hopscotching down the avenue beside me as I patiently told him what was wrong with his rough cut edit of an Eric Zimmerman interview.

GZ Attracts Geeks in the Best Sense of the Word

GZ volunteers were like the *Bad News Bears*.

The project attracted loyal, industrious misfits; undergrads who were geeks (Ito, 2010) in the best sense of the word—obsessed with ideas on the edges, and willing to take their fascination with games, media, and software to the next level.

Almost immediately after getting the GameZombie.tv site launched, and releasing the seventeen (more or less badly produced) exclusive game developer interviews, I initiated yet another important piece of the puzzle—I began to *promote and propagandize the little successes* we had already had in order to drum up support, and recruit more true believers. In time, trumpeting GZ's minor, incremental victories—such as getting spotlighted in a front page feature; being the subject of a flattering article; or inking a promising business partnership—to the ever-growing email list of volunteers became a key ingredient toward building the momentum and stickiness of the project.

People want to be on a winning team.

The Irish Lion Revisited – This Thing of Ours

Returning to that first and fateful meeting at the Irish Lion, where our boisterous tale began, everyone assembled there had gathered of their own accord. I had no real authority. I had not yet created the internship program, and I was eighteen months away from GZ becoming an official class. The underlying abstraction—that we were all there to survive the horror, kill zombies, and review video games—became a useful fiction indeed. This *us against the (undead) world* narrative perfectly suited my purposes of building a sense of loyalty to the project, to the group, and to me. This was not a conscious contrivance at the time, but looking back, it makes sense.

The Groupish Gene and the Right Recruit

"I want to be the cook," said George. "And I'll be the guy who can find anything for anybody. But I'll only accept hands."

"Hands?" I asked.

"Yeah, you have to pay me in zombie hands."

George was a stocky, intense, nerdy guy with Elton John style glasses, and a shifty sort of quality, like he was always trying to get out of the direct path of the sun. He was the best 3D artist in our program, a sixth degree black belt, and the biggest anime fan I'd ever met. He always smelled like he'd slept in the media lab and hadn't taken a shower in a long time. I liked him. He had talent, and was creative. George would wind up doing some concept art for GZ, but he was too independent and too proud to be pulled into my vortex. In other words, George did not fit *the profile of a strong GZ recruit*. He was too much of a lone wolf.

The rotating door of GZ's club membership remained forever open, but those who thrived, and whose contributions proved the most lasting, by and large tended to demonstrate what Jonathan Haidt calls the "groupish gene" (2012). They got what I was trying to do, instinctively, assimilating into the GZ group identity, club, and culture, and meanwhile embracing the project's challenges, as a worthy, self-defining struggle.

Of the ten faces at the first meeting at the Irish Lion, two wound up quitting within the next month, four faded away within the next six months, while the other four wound up working on GZ for over a year. But in the end, even they would be replaced. By the fall of 2008,

none of this original team remained actively involved in the project, save me. But the ideas that we put in place at that meeting—the categories of problems to solve and the aforementioned company culture—were all set in stone.

Just Think About It Deeply, Then Forget It

One of the perpetual challenges for students working on the GameZombie TV game media studio is: what to do with the body of work and knowledge that they inherit? Naturally they accept some part of it, but the question is: how much?

In many ways the legacy of GZ's previous generations is a *boon*—in terms of assets, branding, and momentum—but in others, it's a *nemesis*. To date, GZ's archive comprises nearly five hundred original videos, averaging about three minutes each, totaling around *twenty-five hours of original programming*. And that's just the video legacy, to say nothing of the blogs, scripts, website code, handbooks, 2D graphics, motion graphics, original sound effects, and music compositions stored on our cloud servers, in Google Docs, in personal external hard drives, and elsewhere.

The new GZ recruit should study the archive but then throw it off, since their job is not to replicate but to innovate. My advice to the overwhelmed undergrad is to do like Don Draper, "Just think about it deeply, then forget it…then an idea will jump up in your face." (2007)

The Proto GZ Web Team

The web has a uniquely ephemeral character—you change things, and then they're gone. Images stay. Videos stay. Comments and posts stay. But website iterations go away. Yes,

the Internet Archive: Wayback Machine—a digital time capsule created by the nonprofit organization, the Internet Archive—can pull up approximations from the cache, but it's never quite right, and elements are missing, like an incomplete fossil.

The GZ Web Team usually finds it unacceptably boring to simply maintain the site. They insist on an ambitious overhaul. Sometimes the revision is better, sometimes it's worse—and sometimes it's just different. But as with a new presidential administration moving into the White House, when a new cohort takes control of the GZ operation—usually at the beginning of a semester—they feel the need to start fresh. Efficiency be damned; they want to exert creative control and express ownership. And how can I blame them? I promote GZ as a culture of productivity, forward momentum, and *learning by doing*. Endemic inefficiency in pursuit of creative kicks is therefore an integral piece of the project's DNA. But as I will explore in Part Two in this dissertation, this core tension at the heart of GZ dooms it as a business, while making it a success as an interest-driven learning environment.

In an ironic twist of fate, the original version of the GameZombie.tv website was built on a WordPress template, followed over the years by a series of progressively more complex and proprietary website variations, until one day the site became so complex and proprietary that the GZ Wisconsin Web Team couldn't make sense of it. It had become a Gordian Knot of legendary proportions. At that point my steadfast Sconnie soldiers offered the sensible solution that perhaps we should switch to a WordPress template, blissfully unaware of the circuitous absurdity of it all. Sometimes I do feel like John Gardner's Dragon in *Grendel* (1971)—ancient,

omniscient, and fatigued by fatalism. I've seen too much. I know how this movie ends. We're headed back to where we started.

Back in March of 2007, version 1.0 was getting better all the time. At the Irish Lion meeting, we discussed navigation, the database, the profiles page (which was based on a gritty file folder look), and all the cool assets we still needed and wanted. The proto GZ Web Team was just three guys—Mason, Vincent, and me. Mason was our first Webmaster. Vincent was called Lead Web Graphics, but effectively was the Web Designer. He could have claimed the title of "Admiral of the Ocean Sea and Viceroy of the Indies" if he'd requested it. He was a GZ lynchpin. His artwork was professional quality, and he turned it around fast. *The day you find somebody good, is the day you start to fear losing them*, it seems, for I was always terrified in those days of losing Vincent. The fearful prospect of losing essential people had to be balanced by a progressively aggressive and expansive recruitment program—a lesson I had not yet fully internalized.

In the middle of the fall of 2007, in a dramatic phone call I took in a busy Wells library, Mason told me he was moving on. He was firm with me and stuck to his guns because he knew he had to be. If he'd been squishy, I would have talked him into staying. Despite his resolution, I piled it on:

"You don't want to be the fifth Beatle, man, do you? You don't want to be the guy that jumps ship just before it takes off, right?"

And I was right to fear losing Mason because his immediate replacement, Roland, did a disastrously inferior job. Roland was skinny guy with a strong Brooklyn accent, pomade-soaked

hair thick enough to pling a bullet, and a shell-shocked look about him. From the get-go he was

in over his head. His web programming skills were middling and his communication skills were

worse. He couldn't keep up with GZ's expansion, in terms of either pace or technical

competency. Meanwhile, the stress was killing him and he kept threatening to quit. The job of

Webmaster is vital. GZ was staring into the abyss.

But that spring of 2008, I reversed the situation via the same means that has saved GZ

before and since—by casting a wider net, and recruiting meritoriously along specialized talent

verticals. GZ caught a lucky break when the Informatics Department Secretary blasted my call

for interns to the entire list of undergraduate Informatics and Computer Science majors. This

was against protocol, and I could never get her, or more importantly, her supervisor, to let me

do it again. Believe me—*I tried.* (The alternative which they made us utilize in future semesters

was to post the job opening on an internship database, which was far less useful because it was

far less likely to get seen). But that spring of 2008, GZ's call for web development interns got

blasted into every Dilbert inbox on campus—and the response was excellent. We wound up

with the best and brightest GZ Web Team to date, including three of our all-time greats, Cy,

Cameron D, and Nelson.

Even though GZ suffered in the short term without a competent webmaster—just as I

feared it would—there was a part of me that was relieved to lose Mason. Back in January of

2007, when the project was embryonic and I was desperate, he had negotiated with me for Co-

Executive Producer status in exchange for his long-term commitment to the project. I knew I

would need him, so I caved. This gave him equal status with me on paper, a stature he never

deserved. Don't get me wrong, Mason was essential in getting the project off the ground, and he brought skills to the project that I did not have—primarily web programming competency. But he never worked as hard as me, and it was *my* project. Like Tony Montana cries alone in his hot tub, munching his Cuban cigar, "Who put this thing together? Me, that's who!" (1983)

When Mason hit the road, I became solo big cheese again, and that was better. But you always need people, and power is a negotiating chip you can't be afraid to spend. But you've really got to weigh it with deadly care because if you give away too much too soon, it can leave you raw.

I would come to learn these lessons more intensely beginning in 2008, as GameZombie developed as a business. Together with the guy who would become my first *real* business partner, Vladimir, research into angel investment and venture capitalism illuminated for me the subtleties of ownership dilution. Vladimir, unlike Mason, was a partner that I legitimately felt was irreplaceable. He brought not just competency in an area that was outside my expertise, but also energy and innovation. What's more, Vladimir, unlike Mason, seemed to get the culture of GZ I wanted to promote, which centered on politeness, camaraderie, and *chillaxed severity*.

A Creature of the University

But at the Irish Lion, in March of 2007, we were a year away from a sensible business conversation. At this meeting, when we talked business, what we really meant was creative, aggressive, viral, guerilla marketing, carpet-bombing the web with content (Google bombs), and making a name for ourselves by any means necessary.

The Proto GZ Biz Team

Web 2.0 was breaking across the web and there was a genuine sense that anybody could reach a big audience if you knew how to make the right moves. Vincent had already gotten us over a thousand views on our Alexey Pajitnov interview simply by asking GoNintendo.com to post it on their highly trafficked site, which they did. This was a revelation for me. I realized that reaching out and asking for favors from web influencers—specifically, for content mangers to promote our original GZ content—was within our reach, and doable.

Eventually, we'd learn that the single best way to get a lot of views on a video—short of truly building a big, loyal audience—was to discover, schmooze, and befriend the content managers at video sharing sites, such as Revver (at long last bankrupt after a piteous struggle (Hendrickson, 2008)); Bebo (slowly dying in the wake of "one of the worst deals ever made in the dotcom era" (BBC, 2010)); Crackle (profitable since it stopped accepting user-submitted content (Marshall, 2007)); GameTrailers; Dailymotion; Metacafe; and YouTube—and kindly ask them to feature, spotlight, or promote the video prominently. Video site content managers have the power of life and death in their hands. They can choose to starve videos or feed them thousands and thousands of views, at will. Eventually, our videos would receive *over ten million unique video views*, and nearly all would come through promotion on video sites.

The hard truth is: GZ never managed to build a big, loyal audience.

We built a large, award-winning body of work; made friends with all kinds of connected people in the Internet and gaming businesses; succeeded as an interest-driven learning environment; and even made a little money along the way. But we never built a true following.

In the end, ours is and was *push content.* We make our stuff for Internet consumption for our own reasons. There never was anyone clamoring for us to do it. Unlike our arch-nemeses, ScrewAttack, Mega64, Zero Punctuation, Red vs. Blue, or the indomitable Internet sensation, the Angry Video Game Nerd, we never managed to build a rabid, motivated community fan base. I'm not sure why this is, exactly, but I have my suspicions.

Marketing and promotion is something that I've always pushed very hard, and pursued aggressively. From this early viral and guerilla marketing conversation at the Irish Lion, I would build GameZombie's Business Team, which would attract students from IU's excellent Kelley School of Business, including Advertising, Marketing, and Entrepreneurship majors. But no matter how hard we tried, GZ never became popular on its own. In the end, despite many victories, we failed to achieve critical mass. We never hit what Malcolm Gladwell calls the tipping point (2000).

Suffice to say that GZ worked as a *creature of the university*. There is and was something *self-content* about the project. The students relished the opportunity to cut their teeth, collaborate and engage with the world of games and media. But they didn't give a damn about the professional success of the project, not in a way that moved the needle. Perhaps the true purpose of business and the true purpose of academia are in fact *incompatible*. What works as a simulation, cannot work in fact. Pivotal considerations include money, incentives, and the realities of an authentic business climate. On the one hand, students working on GZ were not under contract, and could not reasonably expect to share in future profits. On the other hand, the opportunity to make money in original web video content was almost nonexistent.

The rise of web video as a phenomenon lowered the barrier of entry for everyone, making it a *gold rush*. Despite our years of work building the brand and market penetration of GameZombie; anybody, anywhere could start a YouTube channel and an original video series, and become our competitor, at any time. And so, while we could reach a big audience— something truly unique in an educational environment, and do it sustainably—we were, as Blade so cathartically summarized, "always trying to ice skate uphill" (1998) in our effort to monetize original web video content.

But that harsh truth never stopped us from trying—*trying a lot*. In any event, I solemnly swear to perform a vividly gruesome autopsy on the corpse of GZ's now dead business aspirations in Part Two.

Assigning Video Game Reviews – Good to Keep the Yang Up

I concluded that first Irish Lion meeting by initiating an ambitious slate of video reviews. This was the fun part—the part that kept everybody going.

Vincent would cover *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*, which was on Xbox Arcade, Carter would cover *Crackdown,* on the Xbox 360; Jack would cover *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* on the Nintendo DS; Russell and J.D. would cover *God of War 2* together, (the last great game of the PlayStation 2 era); and Russell would cover *Rogue Galaxy* solo, (a diehard completionist, as I mentioned, he'd played it for one hundred hours); and finally, I was planning a *Lost Planet/Starship Troopers* Bug War Bloodbath comparison/appreciation piece as well as an interview with Dig Dug, which would be a live action/animation special effects thing. It all sounded like lots of fun, and it would be.

But there was already a caste system forming between those who would do the hard work of editing the videos, and those who only wanted to be in them, as game analysts/stars of the show. The rift that was forming was between the grad students, (high maintenance), and the undergrads, (willing to get their hands dirty). The whole operation was a balancing act since I needed to keep momentum and enthusiasm high while making sure the real work got done. In the coming weeks, I scrambled to find enough *volunteers* to keep editing the increasing backlog of material. The opportunity broke when Thom made yet another propitious suggestion.

You Should Start an Internship Program!

It was late in April of 2007 when Thom made a second breakthrough recommendation:

"You should start an internship program," he said, interrupting my fevered news of GZ's recent struggles, triumphs, and defeats.

I thought maybe he was joking. I read his face, and I couldn't tell. I knew one thing; I was not. No, I took the idea deadly seriously—its implications immediately striking home. An internship program was just what I needed. I had been trying so hard to figure out ways to sustain the momentum of the project and to get people to stay interested and to keep working on it. I was already experiencing that unique stress of a constructivist, interest-driven project— the constant pressure to keep the dream alive, to scare up new recruits, and to keep them engaged (or stuck, so to speak). In this regard, I was resembled a nomadic warlord, like Attila the Hun, Genghis Khan, or better yet, Khal Drogo, from *Game of Thrones*. Leadership of my motley crew hinged on my ability to sustainably provide my wild warriors with expansionary

rewards, glory, and plunder. In the absence of a steady diet of such booty, I feared they would

seek out a new leader, a new cause, or simply disperse back to their villages and farms.

Once again, a self-fulfilling prophesy would come to be. I recruited aggressively for

interns and got eight students to sign up for the summer of 2007. Then in the following fall of

2007, I enlisted fifteen official interns. And then that spring of 2008, twenty students signed up

for an official internship with the local Bloomington company, GameZombie TV. With seemingly

no end in sight to GZ's aggressive expansion, there came a dreaded email from the director of

the Career Development Center, and head of all internships at Indiana University:

> *"Spencer,*
>
> *Due to the overwhelming amount of applications coming through from your organization, we'd love to have you come in for a chat."*
>
> *Howard Pryce*

I panicked. This could be the end of my operation. What legitimacy did I, as a grad

student, have to sign up undergrads into official Indiana University internships? No one had

given me this permission—I had simply given it to myself. I was in the proverbial *gray area*.

Living in the Gray Area

Let's face it, GameZombie lived in the gray area for years, and still does to some degree.

My whole philosophy as a renegade grad student entrepreneur was to avoid meetings with

authority figures, whenever possible. The idea was to never officially ask for permission, if such

a formality could be avoided. Why? The answer is simple. When you ask for permission you give somebody the opportunity to say no. Operating in a bureaucracy such as Indiana University, there are many gatekeepers who love to say no. It gives them the opportunity to feel the power of their job. And the problem is once somebody has officially told you no, then when you go and do it anyway, now you're breaking the rules. And you can get in trouble. But if you never ask permission then you're neither obeying nor breaking the rules—you're in the gray area.

And this is where GZ lived.

Operating in the shadows was a key component to the successful launching of GameZombie. As a grad student in a major university like IU, you really have no power. But since you're not a political threat, you can fly under the radar. Actually this has tremendous benefits. You can make moves, takeover labs, hold big meetings, launch ambitious internship programs, and talk undergraduate coordinators into blasting out your promotional emails—all without ever having to answer any questions about what you're doing. As I would later learn, as a Lecturer, co-founder, and core faculty member of the MAGD program at the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater, the more power and influence you have the more attention your moves draw to yourself. By way of example, I was told—quite firmly—that I needed no less than three layers of permission in the academic hierarchy just to launch an iTunesU channel for MAGD. Running GZ as a grad student at Indiana, I routinely launched initiatives like this without a second thought. The level of scrappy opportunistic entrepreneurialism I was able to get away with in the early stages of GameZombie's development at Indiana University was inseparable from my relative powerlessness.

On the other hand, asking for permission and getting it is more valuable than sneaking around. But it's riskier. The situation implies *a moment of truth*. It's all on the line. If ye ask and ye do not receive, ye project can get hobbled. Later, as I will describe in Part Three of this meditation—whose occasional focus is artful maneuvering—a similarly high stakes moment occurred when I asked Bruce for permission to shoot GZ originals in the $2.5 million HDTV studio. Stay tuned, because that's a big one. Meanwhile, confronting IU Career Services, I was up against it—if I failed to convince them, and got barred from enrolling students in official internships, the project would get killed.

This was GZ's evolution—the internship program had to continue.

The Strategic Overreach & the Theoretical Straw Man

I showed up to the meeting with Howard Pryce wearing a tie, a truly rare SS sighting. The idea was to look older and to exude professionalism—after all, as my grandfather used to say, nobody ever got thrown out of anywhere for wearing a tie. I was worried that I looked too young. Most of the local Indiana business owners that he dealt with were either 1. not associated with the university (especially as students) or 2. were older men and women, who looked the part. I had done my research, and knew that Howard was a PhD student in music in addition to being the Director of the Career Development Center. With his red hair and Mephistophelian goatee, he looked to me like the composer Danny Elfman. Like many 21st century office workers, his emails were terse and emotionless, like cold military dispatches, and so from our preceding email correspondence I couldn't tell if he wanted to rip my head off and destroy me, or if there was nothing to worry about.

Seated around an imposing oak conference table, Howard brought with him three of his minions whose sole purpose in the meeting was perhaps to outnumber and intimidate me.

"So, Spencer, you've got quite an operation going," said Howard.

"Yes, thank you," I said.

"Well, the reason we asked you to come in for a meeting is because we keep seeing more and more of these applications come through, and we thought it would be a good idea to have a face to face, you know, just to get to know who we're working with."

"Actually, you've got more interns than any other company we work with," added Kay, Howard's second in command, and co-internship supervisor. Then she snickered.

She was a young woman, with strawberry blond hair, and a curiously nondescript countenance in a self-consciously austere grey Chairman Mao pantsuit. You couldn't tell if she had kind eyes, or if she was looking to hurt somebody. I had schmoozed her via email relentlessly for the past six months.

"Yes, we do have a big organization," I said, smiling for my life.

"That's great," said Howard. "But we just want to make sure that everyone is getting a quality experience in the internship. We want to know that they're learning employable skills."

"Of course," I said, "and that's the focus of the internship…"

And then I began to breathlessly illuminate every role on GameZombie and all the skills that students learn within each job description. I had it down pat, of course, like campaign

talking points. I've had this speech memorized for nearly six years. I could describe the work

done on GZ until I was blue in the face. But what mattered was not the words, but the music.

Most of what people pay attention to in conversation is emotion, confidence, authenticity, and

passion. And Howard Pryce knew I believed it.

"So how big do you see this getting?" asked Howard.

Now I had my mojo, and knew I could handle this. He wanted assurances that I wouldn't

scale up my number of interns past the point of ridiculousness.

"I think twenty interns is right where we want be," I said. "That's the right number

where we can offer a quality learning experience for every student intern. Past that, it starts to

get a little crazy." I laughed.

They laughed.

It was the one, two punch—the strategic overreach followed by the theoretical straw

man. They were becoming convinced that twenty interns per semester for a grad student

project was the new normal; a modest figure, compared to the alternative.

"So tell me about your offices?"

"Ah yes, well our offices have over twenty Mac computers outfitted with the latest

multimedia software, including The Final Cut Pro 2 studio and the Adobe Production Suite…"

"And they're off campus?" Howard wisely interrupted me before I went on to describe

every software program in detail.

"No," I said, "we use the various multimedia labs on campus."

I said it strongly, like I knew that was a good idea. Of course, I realized right there the jig could be up. There might be some kind of rule that internships must be off campus. It might be categorically unacceptable that we didn't have a real office.

"I see," he said.

"As a bootstrapping local startup, we find that the multimedia labs on campus work perfectly since they're easy for the students to get to in between their busy class schedule and they have all the production hardware and software that we need."

Howard nodded, seemingly impressed by my bullshit. "And are you planning to get offices off campus in the future."

"Absolutely. This is definitely one of our goals that we see happening in the not too distant future."

Dr. Frankenstein, the Transformation Has Already Begun!

Vague, yet confident, it's what he wants to hear. Probably it allows him to check some box somewhere and cover his ass. Of course, by that time—January of 2008—we were already beginning discussions with the Indiana Small Business Development Center concerning how we could achieve *escape velocity* from the university. Therefore, it was not a dishonest statement. But a reasonably sized private office for GZ in Bloomington would probably host no more than four to six Mac workstations—not even close to what we were working with at IU. Of course, if making original content for the web was a high growth business in which we could make early

Google or Instagram type money, then replicating our IU labs in a private office might have been a sound idea. But, as I will shortly describe in grisly detail, after exhaustive research and endless hustling, it finally sunk in that our business model would not work *in the real world*. It would not scale. The conditions that made the success of GZ possible, limited our operation in the same breath. Namely, the low barrier to entry of Do It Yourself Media production in the Web 2.0/Digital Age gave us the opportunity to make ourselves into a professional game media studio; but simultaneously that same low barrier to entry gave opportunities to competitors everywhere. As a result, the value of web content plummeted. And there was no real money to be made making original videos for the web.

At the same time, GameZombie has always been unwieldy, ambitious, and indulgent—with twenty, thirty, even fifty hour work sessions common on video reviews and game developer interviews. This is the exactly wrong model for making money from web video, where speed, uniformity, and the second-hand rehashing of third party content, (such as the uploading of game trailers), is rewarded. The wildly successful Machinima embodies this model. And for us to replicate it, would have, in my opinion, ripped the soul out of GameZombie. It would have taken all the inspired, messy, inefficient, crazy fun out of it. Even though during those early years I used to say that GZ was a business pretending to be a student project, the truth of it is that GZ has fundamentally, and irreversibly, transformed into an educational program pretending to be a business.

GZ has always been, and will remain, a creature of the university.

"Well Spencer, we'll get all these internship applications—all twenty of them—approved right away. We look forward to working with you."

"Thank you so much, Howard," said I. "We very much look forward to working with you, as well."

We shook hands firmly and I escaped out the door.

After that, GameZombie TV would become the biggest internship program in the city of Bloomington, with around 20 official interns per semester, or around 60 per year. I doubt any local business, university affiliated or not, has every matched that.

Part 2: GZ; Failed Business, Successful Interest-Driven Learning Environment

> *Roger: That kid…he has a spark. He is a pure account man.*
> *Bert: And what is that job all about?*
> *Roger: I don't know. It's about listening to people and never saying what's really on your mind.*
> *Bert: No, it's about letting things go so you can get what you want.*
>
> *- Mad Men (2009), Guy Walks into an Advertising Agency (Season 3, Episode 6)*

A Shitty Plan beyond the Shadow of a Doubt

In the summer of 2008, I assembled every able-bodied GZ crew member, what *Platoon*'s (1986) scar-faced Sergeant Barnes might call in macho marine talk "every swinging dick in the field," to meet in the IU Telecom Building's TV 250 production lab—one of our many informal offices. The plan was to execute a *Digg Bomb*. We'd heard that if you could get your damned link on the front page of Digg, it would send so much traffic your way that it could crash your site. We wanted a piece of that action—the sudden surge of popularity (not the crashing).

We picked a cool video we had recently finished—an interview we shot at GDC 2008 with Eric Holmes, the Scottish born Lead Designer of Radical Entertainment's open world action-adventure city wrecker, *Prototype*. The video represented our best work at the time. It featured a rising star game developer talking with our elegant hostess, Kelly, about an exciting new original I.P. (intellectual property) that had not yet been released. The video had been stylishly post-produced, including original motion graphics by Shosanna, an original music remix

by Cedric, and skillful editing work by Hershel. In other words, it was solid and we had no reservations about giving it a strong marketing push.

To begin, the fifty or so of us at the meeting created a number of different Digg accounts, using every active email address we owned, and inventing still others. Then we proceeded to have everyone *digg* (i.e. post and share) the *Prototype* video interview from every one of those accounts. Simultaneously, we performed a Mixx bomb, to maximum our chances of success. Mixx, (now defunct), was a less popular rival of Digg we hoped might have less sophisticated security measures. After going at it aggressively for a good forty-five minutes, Digging and Mixxing our hearts out, we were ecstatic when we saw the YouTube video link show up on the front page of both social bookmarking sites. Our Digg Bomb had worked! In other words, we had initialized sufficient energy and engagement around the online content that the piece was now being legitimately shared, recommended, and forwarded by others.

We were high-fiving, backslapping, and congratulating one another just as we saw the links promptly vanish. The air left the room –we knew we were cooked. The web administrators behind Digg and Mixx had either personally zeroed in on our white collar crime, or otherwise it had been discovered and penalized algorithmically. In any case, it was an epic fail. Too many new accounts, too many similar IP addresses—it must have been easy to spot.

My troops were crestfallen; all that dreary grinding for naught.

Of course, I had long understood its high likelihood of failure, and for this reason, had put off attempting a Digg Bomb for months. Mason first proposed this *gray hat SEO strategy* at the Irish Lion meeting back in March of 2007; it was a new way to game the system, an

irresistibly mischievous form of web 2.0 hacking. And it was my thorough, obsessive tendency

to leave no stone unturned. The simple fact that it *could* have worked, and that, given our

available manpower (fifty warm bodies) and resources (fifty iMac stations), it was *doable*,

meant that it had to be *done.* And now, having failed miserably, we knew beyond the shadow

of doubt that that was a shitty plan. Such was the nature of our frenzied, energetic business

development initiatives. We were willing to try everything, and were comfortable failing—

upwards, hopefully, but invariably laterally at times, and at others backwards, no doubt.

My God, we tried everything.

The Russian Who Knew How to Laugh Better Than Me

When the Russian called Vladimir joined forces with me and GameZombie TV in January

of 2008, the project instantly metamorphosed into a more sophisticated, clear-eyed business

operation.

At the beginning of the spring of 2008, my third consecutive semester of overseeing the

ever-growing internship talent pool, the project had tremendous momentum. And so I decided

to bet it all on black; to double down on GZ—not just as a project of creative fulfillment and

ambitious scale, but now in terms of taking the business aspect of it deadly seriously.

The GZ Biz Team Launches (For Real)

I established an official GZ Business team for the first time in the spring of 2008, and the

first members of this flagship branch were Hoyt and Francis. As it turns out, they would not last.

At one of our initial business meetings at Wells Library, Hoyt proposed in perfect seriousness

that we implement a business directive called "panty logic," by which he meant that we would

get a bunch of panties branded with "GZ" in order to explore an untapped ad space. Never

wanting to discourage creativity, I faithfully wrote it down into our GZ Business Meeting notes,

and there it stands to this day in all its adolescent hormonal absurdity. At that same otherwise

fruitless meeting, Francis told me there was somebody I had to meet, named Vladimir, who was

the President of the Young Entrepreneur's Association.

"He might not be interested," warned Francis, "but maybe you can talk him into it."

This single sentence would remain Francis's best contribution to the GZ Biz Team, since

shortly thereafter both Francis and Hoyt switched back over to the Editing Team, where, like

Eliot Ness said, they could "do some good" (DePalma, 1987).

Vladimir and I met a few days later in my office, which was whatever multimedia Mac

station I could secure at Wells. I liked the cut of his jib right away. He had a seriousness that I

craved. I pitched GZ aggressively, spelling out our many accomplishments—then defining our

glaring weaknesses.

"I need help," I said. "I want this thing to be big."

Born in Moscow but raised in West Lafayette, Vladimir was about 5 foot 7, 120 pounds

soaking wet, with translucent blue eyes that shone through his gaunt visage. The son of a

Purdue Math professor, (who'd incidentally studied with Sergey Brin's father in Moscow),

Vladimir spoke fluent Russian, but was an American through and through. He had a touch of

Woody Allen absurdity to him, and knew how to laugh better than me. "D," as I called him, had

the curious quality of listening so intensely to what you were saying, with his blue eyes wide

open, that it sometimes seemed he needed an extra second for the translation. I never felt

totally in sync with his conversation style. Having been raised by East Coast Italian-Americans,

my people are always eager and ready to retort. Since I'm a big talker, it worked that Vladimir

was a good listener. I always felt like he was picking up what I was putting down. But the beat

of the conversation was often awkward, maybe just for me, because when I'd finish speaking,

he'd still be listening, absorbing, and this made me anxious. Inevitably, I'd think of something

else to say to fill the unbearable silence. And so on. It follows, logically, that Vladimir wound up

listening to a lot of my endless plotting, planning, and scheming for GZ world domination.

But V was no wallflower. He had lots of good ideas, right from the beginning, and

offered them in droves. Vladimir was like a shot of adrenalin to the GZ Business Team and even

though he was seven years younger than me, he rarely acted like it. Demonstrating the business

acumen that would so benefit the project, he negotiated with me hard from the beginning.

"If I'm going to commit myself to this project, long-term, I'd like a 50% partnership

stake," he said.

50% partnership stake, up front! 50%? You've got to be kidding me? He was just

starting! The request was bold, assertive, audacious—it put me on my heels. Everyone worked

on GZ as interns or volunteers. I hadn't had a partner since Mason, the original webmaster, and

I had been deeply relieved when he left, since, as I've said, I never thought he deserved equal

standing. And here was this little guy wanting half the company right off the bat! Like I said, I

liked him right away. I fretted about it, stressed out, and dragged my feet. But I didn't want to lose him—I needed Vladimir to stay in the picture.

"Can you spell out exactly what you'll be bringing to the table?" I asked.

Within a day, he produced a definitive list:

- accounting
- legal services
- business consultation
- community-building
- monetization strategy
- sustainable organizational structure, and
- negotiation with investors

God he was tough. I needed to have him. Up until this time, GZ had had over two hundred student interns and volunteers, both graduate and undergraduate—most of them very competent, some of them extremely talented—but nobody had given me the impression that they had a pragmatic understanding of the realities of starting a business. This is what I needed and this is why Vladimir had so much leverage with me, right from the drop. After much deliberation, I came up with a solution that would incentivize him without forcing us to get married on the first date. I offered him a profit-sharing consultancy, entitling him to 50% of the company's profits during the term of his contract, which would be for four months.

"Here's the deal: I built this project from scratch, and I've been working on it nonstop for eighteen months," I said. "If you work on GZ for a year and do a great job, then we can reevaluate your contract and a 50% ownership stake is not out of the question."

My father, who's been a corporate attorney for thirty-five years, drafted the contract, and Vladimir signed. He legally became GZ employee number two. Or perhaps, as Steve Jobs speculates in *Pirates of Silicon Valley* (1999), he became employee number one, and I remained employee number zero. That sounds more like it.

Vladimir came on board, and crushed it from day one. A few months later, I extended his contract through the end of the year. Some months after that, before the expiration of his first annual contract—when I genuinely thought he'd earned it—I awarded him 50% of the company. It was a tough decision, but not that tough. I figured I could have 100% of a company that was totally unprofitable or 50% of a company that had a chance of making some money. I decided to roll the dice on somebody I had a good feeling about.

The Problem We Wanted to Have

As I said, Vladimir's immediate impact was to substantially improve the professionalism and focus of our GZ Business Team meetings.

The GZ Business team evolved from those first conversations between Mason and me, (and sometimes Vincent), about how to integrate Adsense into the website, as well as how to go about establishing a proper business account. Beyond that, the focus of the evolving

business team over the summer of 2007 and into that fall remained primarily that of establishing and building legitimate web presence.

The Prehistoric GZ Biz Team – Pure Aggro

Like a rookie *World of Warcraft* warrior, my original strategy was pure aggressivity—GZ *carpet bombed* the web with our ever-growing library of original game videos. At the same time, the business of video sharing sites was going through a period of intense competition—as was the niche industry of social bookmarking sites (such as Digg)—providing a great opportunity for original web video creators who were agnostic about where they wanted to upload and promote their videos. In those early days, I spent entire nights in the Wells library personally uploading hundreds of videos to video sharing sites around the web, perpetually on the lookout for new sites and new opportunities. Eventually, during the summer of 2007, I began offloading some of this painfully tedious uploading work to Wesley, whose reliability at the job helped me to define and construct the utilitarian duties of the GZ Production Manager role.

In the prehistoric era of what became the GZ Biz Team, our amateurish business conversations inevitably turned to anxiety about the management of AdSense accounts and what we were going to do with our preordained windfalls of money. I knew, however, we were, as Cicero says in the HBO's *Rome*, "cooking rabbits we had not yet caught" (2007). There was no reason to get too excited about the logistics of business bank accounts, or the prospect of second summer homes for that matter, if our videos were not wildly popular.

Even then, YouTube was the hardest nut to crack. We didn't get any real success there until we were invited into the YouTube Partner program in the summer of 2008, at which point we began scoring front page features on the Gaming Channel. In the meantime, we established strong early traction in web video's second tier—on Crackle, Revver, and Dailymotion. Crackle, Sony's attempt at creating a user-generated web video competitor to YouTube, awarded us nine front page video features over the summer of 2007 and into that fall. Revver, a revenue-sharing video portal—whose pioneering, innovative business model, based on paying content creators an upfront percentage against views, eventually drove the company to ruin—*loved GZ*, and put us on the front page for over three months. And Dailymotion, the French video site that recently landed a huge investment from the French media conglomerate, Orange, (Lawler, 2011), and which is one of the only video sharing sites still standing in the wake of YouTube's insurmountable expansion, became an early friend and supporter of our work, awarding us MotionMaker status, and front page stars, over and over again, for years.

GZ Achieves Strong SEO

The net reward of this aggressive uploading and getting featured strategy was dramatically enhanced search engine optimization (SEO). It was truly thrilling to perform a search for a popular gaming related term, and see as a result our videos coming back as the first fifteen results—often the same video, over and over again, but from different sites. In other words, our admittedly indelicate carpet bombing technique was successfully manipulating Google's search algorithm such that our videos were dominating particular search terms.

This sort of *Google Bombing* (N. Jackson, 2011) is a less sophisticated version of the same essential strategy that was used in the 2004 presidential election to make George W. Bush's White House biography the first hit on a search for the phrase "miserable failure." The sex columnist, Dan Savage, orchestrated a similar campaign to make the first hit for the word "Santorum" a blithely obscene site defining the word as something the homologous conservative politician would no doubt rather not have associated with his name (Burns, 2011). Google maintains that it will only manually manipulate results in the most extreme cases, "such as illegal content and violations of our webmaster guidelines." Google's search algorithm was more easily manipulated in 2007 than nowadays since it was a touch less sophisticated—i.e. it didn't punish duplicate postings as severely, and searches were still "vanilla." By this I mean: Google had yet to implement its 57 flavors of *hyperpersonalization*, a phenomenon that Internet activist, Eli Pariser calls the *Filter Bubble* (2011). Web video promotion was still the Wild Wild West in 2006 – 2009 and we were right there on the edge, trying to make the most of it.

Vladimir's First Instincts

Vladimir's first two initiatives were simple and to the point. First of all, he thought that GameZombie TV needed a legitimate *business plan* to clarify what the hell we were trying to do. I agreed. And even though we both agreed, it would take us years of brainstorming and creative revisions before we realized that we couldn't make a business plan because success in the emergent niche industry of original web contact required endless flexibility and creativity. A business plan proved too rigid for the pace of new media opportunities. Secondly, Vladimir

suggested that we figure out how to achieve *escape velocity* from the university. He argued that

we were assuming dangerous liability by pursuing profit while using university resources. He

didn't want the university to be able to step in and claim all our treasure the moment we

figured out how to generate it. I did not disagree with this plan either, I just didn't know how to

do it. Over time, Vladimir would become more and more comfortable running GZ out of the

university, as I had, because of the wealth of resources to which we had access—including the

$2.5 million HDTV studio, the multimedia labs, and the ever-expanding army of talented free

labor.

"Having the university motivated to sue us because GameZombie TV is making millions

of dollars is a problem we want to have, Vladimir," I said.

Rightly or wrongly, that was my position. I wanted to focus every moment and molecule

of our time and energy on making GZ successful; all else was tedium and distraction. For better

or worse, I quietly got my way.

We Gotta Set Our Own Mark, and Enforce It

Just as Tony Montana told Frank Lopez, "we gotta set our own mark, and enforce it"

(1983), Vladimir and I consistently emphasized the importance of *goal setting* to the GZ crew.

Unable to scare our kids with the ferocity of a 1980s era Cuban drug lord, we asked nicely. Since

proper research necessarily precedes setting goals, such projects became one of our favorite

tasks to assign our GZ Biz Team interns, beginning in the spring of 2008 with our GZ Biz Team

original, Lester.

GZ's First Biz Team Intern – Aggregate View Count Research

Lester, a well-mannered, somewhat distant Asian-American marketing major from the Kelley School, responded to our first ever call for business interns, thus becoming the first official intern we signed up for the sole purpose of assisting us with GZ's business development goals. Initially, we tried to bring Lester into the larger strategic conversation, asking for his input, feedback, innovative ideas, etc., but these were not forthcoming. Quite the opposite, he actually requested that we give him repetitive, brain-numbing assignments, which he apparently enjoyed, or found therapeutic. Once we learned this about Lester, Vladimir and I were not shy about coming up with tedious research projects GZ might find useful. By the spring of 2008, having aggressively uploaded content to as many video sharing sites as I could find, our content was all over the web, but we had no idea what was our cumulative video view count.

So, we gave it to Lester.

We tasked our persevering greenhorn with tracking down GZ content on every possible site and manually adding up the views—by video, by site, and by various other metrics. Like Sarah Robertson says in *Margin Call* (2011), "the kid crushed it." Lester painstakingly pulled together a bundle of information, both valuable and revealing. Turns out we were on the cutting edge. Months later a startup out of UC-Berkeley's Haas School of Business, called TubeMogul (Schonfeld, 2011)—founded in 2006—began to pick up steam. They focused on providing a service that not only allowed content creators like GZ to blast upload to twenty different platforms simultaneously, but also aggregated view counts across platforms, genre,

and individual video performance. TubeMogul, whose uploading and aggregation business has since broken off to become OneLoad, successfully observed the acute pain point of early web video companies like GZ and provided a valuable solution. If uploading videos everywhere was a time-consuming tactical nightmare, than keeping track of their aggregate performance was a full on house of horrors. But in those early months, Lester, like a Charles Babbage Difference Engine, was ahead of his time—our very own manual TubeMogul. Lester has subsequently gone on to launch a successful Mountain View startup, so perhaps his dog days in the GZ trenches helped him refine a battle-hardened thousand-yard stare.

Through experience, and via consulting, we concluded that closely watching performance metrics—or analytics—and setting specific goals, should be foregrounded as a critical means of motivating incremental progress. In other words, if you keep your eye on the ball—that is, on such metrics as global view counts, search engine results, and Alexa ranking—you're more likely to effectively push to increase those numbers, as opposed to just working blindly, and hoping for the best.

Critical Literacy and Community Research

In the summer of 2008, two best friends joined our GZ Biz Team, Tenzin (who was Nepalese), and Imran, (who was Pakistani), and like Lester before them, they seemed to enjoy the challenge of detail-oriented research projects. I charged them with the Herculean chore of researching virtually every web video portal on the web, to discover their Alexa rank, and relative traffic, but also to provide a qualitative report of the tenor of their respective communities. I wanted to know whether:

1. the community liked video games

2. they commented frequently (in other words, there was a high engagement level)

3. they were flamers and haters (like on YouTube, where civilized discourse amounts to such subtle rejoinders as "You suck!" and "Fail!" and "Eat shit and die, GameZombie!"), or were they decent human beings

4. And finally whether uploading and promoting content on said site was a worthwhile endeavor

On the one hand, we might find a site where the users were sweethearts, and the community managers were willing to feature us regularly and put us on the front page, but the traffic might be terrible, rendering all the work a waste of time. By contrast, a site with strong traffic, but indifferent community managers, or an evil community, might not be worth the trouble either, since despite the eyeballs being there, the content lingers in obscurity, or gets savaged. Of course, *getting savaged* is the name of the game in web video. It is unavoidable. While initially, negative comments would stick in my craw, over time I developed a thick hide. Meanness is a curious, but strangely permanent, quality of online discourse, and if you're going to put stuff out there, especially at the volumes that we were, you mustn't resemble the gutless first level boss of Nintendo's *Punch-Out!!*—Glass Joe. No, you've got to be able to take a few shots to the chin—like Soda Popinski, or better yet Mr. Sandman.

Towards a Focused Uploading Strategy – Part 1

Based on analysis of the relative effectiveness and opportunity of the various web video

portals, we refined our approach to content uploading and promotion, working smarter rather

than harder, as time went by.

We pivoted from a strategy of carpet bombing the web with videos toward zooming in

on the sites where we felt we could achieve both quality view counts and community

engagement, while at the same time, success on these platforms could be packaged and

pitched to potential investors and business partners. The shortlist of sites where we saw the

most potential for real impact included YouTube, GameTrailers, Facebook, Dailymotion, and

Metacafe. Another important consideration during this research was whether we reasonably

felt the web platform would still be around in several months or a year. Consider that platforms

where we had had some of our best early successes either went bankrupt (Revver), dissipated

(Bebo), or changed their business model (Crackle); thereby effectively negating the progress

we'd made building success on their platform.

A Web Video Marketing & Monetization Experimental Laboratory

The GameZombie Business Team at the height of its glory was a cutting edge web video

marketing and monetization experimental laboratory. We thought up a great many imaginative

schemes, and pretty much tried them all. It really was *fun*. To give a genuine sense of the

energy of our meetings, what follows is a meditation on some of the key initiatives we pursued

during the period from January 2008 to August of 2009, as synthesized from our hundreds of

pages of GZ Biz Team meeting notes, correspondence, and business documents (See Appendix L).

Of View Counts & Visibility

As I've been developing, GZ's initial foray into taking business seriously had a singular focus—building *web visibility*. Like Obama on gay marriage, as our thinking evolved, we wound up right back where we started. In web video, as in Rome, all roads lead to view counts, since everything else flows from that. Unique view counts represent a genuine indicator of quantifiable audience, community engagement, and popularity—what sponsors are really looking for. Toward that end, we became adept at building relationships with the community mangers of the various web video sharing sites, regularly asking them for front page features. We weren't always victorious—but in our time we knew our fair share of glory.

Identifying and Schmoozing Community Managers

It was a challenging seduction. First, you had to figure out who the community manager was, either through online research or cold emailing. Then, you had to continuously massage the relationship. Finally, you had to tactfully request features on a regular basis—this being a fair trade: high quality original content in exchange for preferential treatment. Initially, we were always thrilled to get any kind of feature since all we were interested in was view counts, exposure, and validation. This was real currency for me, after all, since I paid my interns in *glory*. If I was asking an editor to work for thirty to forty hours doing postproduction on a video, and then the video wound up on the front page of highly trafficked website, racking up tens of thousands of views, the positive reinforcement was invaluable. The intern and I learned to trust

each other since we could look forward to a tangible, synergistic, mutually beneficial reward—

all this, without money changing hands. We always had our eye on the global view count meter,

like Sisyphus, forever pushing to get it a little higher. Today, it stands at over ten million unique

video views, each of which was a hard-fought slog.

Negotiation - Exposure or Money

As GZ matured and got to a point where we already had many millions of views, we

began to negotiate more aggressively. By the summer of 2008, in a phone conversation with

the Content Manager for PwnOrDie, (a now defunct gaming focused spin-off of Will Ferrell's

Comedy vertical, FunnyOrDie), we were offered to be featured as a partner channel on the

front page of their site in exchange for us uploading lots of videos. Since we uploaded lots of

videos to lots of sites, this was a no-brainer. Of course, I thought, let's do it. But Vladimir held

the line. He wanted GZ to get *paid* for exclusive, original content. Specifically, for a specified

amount of money we would agree to give PwnOrDie a collection of original videos—and

simultaneously agree not to upload these same videos to any other site—for a certain window

of time. During this embargo period PwnOrDie would benefit from being the exclusive host of

this original web video series. In addition, for a greater sum, we offered to create an original

series of videos just for them. As opposed to simply breaking off a piece of one of our

established series, such as our game developer interview series, *GZ On the Scene*, we would

create a new series from scratch, custom-made for the theme and style of their site.

In the end, the deal fell through. But this was the new more aggressive position that

Vladimir advocated, and upon which I agreed. It was smart, and it was tough, but it caused us

to lose a lot of deals. And I always felt bad leaving views on the table. But Vladimir argued

correctly that if we did not negotiate forcefully to get paid for the content, we never would. In

the end, nobody wants to pay for web content—in economic terms, it's an ever-growing

resource with ever-declining value. Despite Vladimir's correct analysis of the problem, and his

appropriately tougher negotiating position, we were fighting an uphill battle. The brutal reality

of the web video content business is one of the core reasons GZ is a failed business model. But

what amounted to a disadvantage for GZ the business could prove an advantage for an

academic project leader only interested in exposure—since that's the preferred form of

payment.

Rejecting Machinima's Content Farm Business Model

The reigning heavyweight champion of game video views remains Machinima, the

uncatchable content beast that it is. We could never catch Machinima because we could never

replicate their business model, nor did we want to. Well, maybe Vladimir would have gone

there, but not me. Machinima employs an army of grunts that aggressively upload every piece

of game media content that game companies release, as soon as they release it, in order to

soak up the maximum amount of SEO. So, for example, as soon as the new *Call of Duty Black

Ops* trailer is released, a slave at Machinima is grabbing it from Activision's press site and

dutifully uploading it to YouTube. As gamers around the world look for the video, they find it

there, and therefore Machinima becomes a reliable *content portal*, which is the dream of all

Internet properties. Once a site becomes a legitimate content portal, its fortune is made.

YouTube, Facebook, GameTrailers, and Machinima are all colossal content portals—since they represent one-stop shopping for web surfers.

Covering every major game conference, and being a legitimate game media outlet, we have access to the same trailer from Activision at the same time that Machinima does, and we have just as much ability to upload it to the web. But the question is not whether you can upload the content but rather whether you want to be that kind of company. And I did not then, and do not now. The thought of slavishly uploading game company's third party media to maximize view counts was not remotely intriguing to me. I've always preferred to create original, exclusive content and to see how many views we could get on that. I held the line on that point, probably with two major consequences:

1. GZ remained a fun project, where students could have a good experience and learn how to make original content they were proud to put on their reels. GZ's production style remained exploratory, indulgent, inefficient, and creatively fulfilling.

2. GZ therefore necessarily remained bound to the university, since I was not sufficiently practical about the realities of the business environment.

Sustainability, Expansion, World Domination, and Keeping the Dream Alive

While the difficult work of keeping the GZ torch burning was shared by all the teams, especially Producing and Production Management, a disproportionate part of that challenge fell to the GZ Biz Team, whose perpetual mission was to figure out how to flip the work of GZ into

something bigger and better. I remember a time; I believe it was early in the spring of 2008,

when Thom said to me:

"You've got GameZombie on autopilot now, it's self-sustaining. You should move on to

other things and let it take care of itself."

I felt outraged and flattered all at once. Like *Mad Men'*s existential hero, Roger Sterling,

perhaps I made "my job look too easy" (Carveth & South, 2010). It occurred to me that Thom

was taking for granted how calculated and assiduous was the continuous work I did to keep GZ

going. The second I took my hand off, I feared, the student-fueled operation that was GZ would

crash into a pile of gelatinous mediocrity, training wheels and all. The project *needed* me,

thought I. Its success was inseparable from my passion and leadership. As it turned out, this

was only *partly true*. On the one hand, GZ is a product and reflection of all my interests scared

to glory by my neurotic, self-conscious fear of failure. On the other, the culture and self-

organizing learning community that I put in place proved quite capable of moving forward

without me. I must admit, this latter fact rattled the fragile narcissist within.

GZ continued strong for two full years at IU after I'd left, under the leadership of my

friend and protégé, William. Was I rooting for it to fail? *Never*. But it's like Seth Godin says in

Tribes (2008): "do you know what people want more than anything? …they want to be missed

when they're gone." Truly, I was terribly thrilled to find that the institutions, people,

production, and learning community that I put in place could sustain in my absence, for years in

fact. Returning to the point that Thom made early in the spring of 2008—the very fact that GZ

accrued this powerful momentum, and like a particularly virulent zombie, *it will not die to this*

day, has everything to do with all those conscious, tedious steps we took in the good, old days

to keep the project moving forward. Like the Mongols of the barren plain, I found myself in a

naturally weak position—a powerless grad student running an unpaid student army—but

counter intuitively GZ grew strong partly because I spent so much time meditating on the

project's *infrastructural vulnerabilities* and therefore shoring up defenses against them.

When Thom told me to drop GZ in the spring of 2008, he was wrong, because GZ would

have died without me. But by late in the summer of 2009, he was right. To wit, just like Dr.

Emmett "Doc" Brown, Thom's advice was correct—but *in the future.*

Energizing Sustainability – Recruiting Widely, Meritoriously, and Along Talent Verticals

My top GZ lieutenants and I put in place many practices that solidified GZ's

sustainability. First of all, maintaining a strong relationship with the Indiana University Career

Services office was essential to making sure we could keep being the single largest employer of

student interns in the city of Bloomington.

Beyond this, I instituted constant, self-willed pressure to recruit talent for GZ from all

over the university. The idea was to keep the project oxygenated with a continuous flow of

fresh blood—energy, enthusiasm, and ideas. As the work of theoretical physicist, Geoffrey West

et al. (2007), illuminates—cities last forever, while most companies die. The reason, West and

his colleagues argue, is that the distributed, random, continuously refreshed creative energy of

cities keeps them vibrant while companies invariably drift toward complacency and stagnation.

Steven Johnson (2010) advances a complementary claim in his popular science book, *Where*

Good Ideas Come From, arguing that cities have historically facilitated the formation of loose,

informal, liquid networks hence catalyzing intellectual breakthroughs.

While certainly not as earthshattering as the three thousand year history of Istanbul, or

London at the dawn of the Scientific Revolution for that matter, GZ, in its own (micro) way, has

lived West's principle as a result of the unique pressures of running a large-scale project in a

university environment fueled by undergrads taking it as a three credit course. Fear has been a

driving factor—since I have found myself perpetually pusillanimous GZ was going to run out of

good people. Our weakness—massive semester by semester turnover—could also be a source

of strength, if approached from a sufficiently energetic and paranoid point of view. We wanted

the best students from Telecommunications, Theater and Dance, Informatics, Computer

Science, and the Kelley School of Business, amongst many other departments. Greedy for

talent, I wanted the project to be big and ambitious. I wanted it to sustain a positive word of

mouth as a fun, worthwhile experience. My goal has always been to leverage the scale and

momentum of the student team to recruit more and stronger students, in perpetuity. William,

my successor as GZ Boss at IU, embraced this principal, and continued to *recruit widely,*

meritoriously, and along talent verticals, after I'd left.

Restless Nonstop Continuous Expansion

Like a shark that dies the moment it stops moving forward, GZ's success depended on its

nonstop, continuous expansion. From the fall of 2006 until the summer of 2011, GZ grew in size,

power, and influence. Beginning with a handful of grad student volunteers in the fall of 2006,

GZ expanded to incorporate undergrad volunteers in the spring of 2007; we then launched an

internship program in the summer of 2007 that snowballed in size, talent, and interdisciplinary

inclusivity; then, in the fall of 2008, we launched GZ as an official class at IU, (meanwhile

keeping a scaled down version of the internship program alive); and then, in the fall of 2009, I

launched GZ at UW-Whitewater as both an official class, and a cornerstone of the MAGD

program I co-founded, and meanwhile, William kept GZ going as a scaled-up internship

program at IU throughout 2009-2011, whereby GZ reached its peak scale with over eighty

students actively enrolled per semester, working in tandem at two Midwestern universities.

The pattern of perpetual talent recruitment, inclusivity, and opportunistic expansion kept the

dream alive and the momentum moving forward. The next logical step might have been to

continue to expand GZ to more universities across the country, but that's simply not a project

I'm interested in at this time.

In the quest to keep expanding and scaling up GZ, we consistently created pitch

documents and proposals intended to convince gatekeepers of the viability, organization, and

professionalism of the project. I've included a number of these in the appendix for interested

readers (see Appendix L).

GZ Transforms from an Internship into an IU Course

Midway through the spring of 2008, as my time as a Master's student in IU's

Department of Telecommunications was drawing to a close, several professors informed me

that they would support a proposal to make GZ an official class at IU the following year. While

GZ was warm and snug in the university environment, as I've been saying, it was not my original

idea to make GZ an official T436 course, (which is the curricular designation for advanced

production classes offered as one-offs). But the moment it was suggested to me by people like Jim Krause and Mark Deuze, I became convinced this was the best way forward for the project. Interestingly, Thom didn't seem crazy about the idea—I imagine because he wanted me to move on from the university and get out there into the real world.

But with GZ as a T436 class, I knew I would, as Lee Sheldon once told me, "level up," and achieve more power, and that the project would in turn obtain more validity and prestige. Recruiting would be easier, and less self-conscious, since GZ would no longer be a rogue, grad student run, shadow internship operation, but instead an official class, on the books—kosher, above board, apropos. And of course, it would buy me more time to figure out how to make GZ successful as a business. Simultaneously, however, GZ's drift toward official university status also opened me up to two distinct species of criticism:

1. faculty and university officials could grill me about protocol, rules, and the like, and

2. students could accuse me of a genuine *conflict of interest* between viewing them as customers paying for an educational experience and unpaid employees being leveraged for the benefit of a private company.

As we shall see, during GZ's run as a T436 class at IU during 2008-2009, university faculty and administration pretty much let me do whatever the hell I wanted, but there was one student who did not hesitate to challenge my newfound authority and initiate a shit storm stand-off such as GZ has never seen.

But that story has yet to come.

Proposal to Expand GZ into an IU Telecom Minor in Web Video Production

Always looking to press advantage, after I'd successfully implemented GZ as the T436 class, we began developing a proposal for Indiana University president, Michael McRobbie. The idea was to get GZ on his radar, and see if he would support us in some capacity.

But we hesitated.

Instead of audaciously going straight to the big boss, I audaciously went straight to the little big boss, Bruce, with a proposal to expand GZ into a four course Telecom Minor in Web Video Production. I think this ambitious proposal caught Bruce off-guard. He had magnanimously supported GZ's expansion into an official T436 class, despite the fact that GZ's popularity siphoned off many of the best production students from the passion project classes of senior production faculty; and equally so, despite the fact that GZ's occasionally raffish rule bending and breaking was a known quantity in the department. And now, here I was threatening the sanctity of his core curriculum.

I showed up to my meeting with Bruce, nervous, but prepared.

"First of all," he said, "this is a well thought out proposal."

"Thank you," I gulped. I tried to sit up straight and stiff, and appeal to my perception of his militaristic values.

"But expanding GameZombie into a Minor will take more time than you want to spend."

"Ah ha," said I.

"Spencer, this type of thing would take *years*."

And of course, I knew what he meant. Maybe I could pull it off, but I was staring in the abyss of a Pyrrhic victory. Either way, I'd lose. As he said, it would have taken years of my life to get the Web Video Production minor established at IU, during which I'd never go beyond being a super grad student, running in place.

The proposal was doomed.

But I had another trick up my sleeve.

Proposal to Expand GZ to UWW's Media Arts & Game Development Program

In March of 2009, I had developed a rival proposal to expand GZ to UW-Whitewater as a core piece of their forthcoming Media Arts & Game Development Program (see Appendix K). This proposal was an instant grand slam, since they needed me as badly as I needed them. I accepted their offer in the midst of my moribund negotiations with IU. Whitewater gave me everything I wanted, best of all a real salary. And they gave me a small budget to help me cover game conferences around the country. But most importantly, my hire was attached to a $100,000 multimedia lab renovation which I designed to optimize GZ.

The only problem was that UWW was in the middle of nowhere.

Business Leadership – the Vision Expands

The GZ Biz Team provided leadership, direction, and vision to the business goals of the GZ team, accelerating expansion. If GZ was the super robot, Voltron, then the Biz Team would be the head.

Expert Consultation – You Know What's Cool? A Billion Dollars

As I touched on, in one of our first meetings, Vladimir proposed the sensible idea that we should put together a proper business plan, like they teach you to do at the Kelley School of Business. Though Vladimir was a Communication and Culture major, he was, as I said, the head of the Young Entrepreneur's Association, and had a natural head for business. He was juiced in with all the top business professors at Kelley, including both Johannes Denekamp, (in whose class I pitched GZ in the spring of 2007), and the celebrated Donald F. Kuratko. Known by all as "Dr. K," professor Kuratko is one of the world's leading scholars on entrepreneurship, and the author of numerous influential books on the subject, (2007; 2004). Generous with his time, we consulted formally with Dr. K on one occasion, and informally on many others. From these business experts, we sought wisdom and clarity on how to move forward with GZ.

From Elusive Business Plan to Executive Summary to Umbrella Corporation

Though we tried to put together an official business plan beginning in February of 2008—and though we would continue for months to try to bring all our inspired ideas concerning how to make money in online content production and distribution together into one coherent, self-contained package—the goal would forever elude us. We realized that the

moment we finished the forty page document, it would require revision, since the opportunities, technology, and business environment of online content swirl, as did the newborn university, in a perpetual in a state of transformation and disruption. We concluded therefore to keep our plans and documents more tactically and short-term focused to preserve maneuverability.

Vladimir became convinced, however, that at the very least we needed a competently written *executive summary* laser focusing the purpose and objectives of the company—a two page letter that he put through endless iterations. Beginning his two page masterpiece early in the spring of 2008, he didn't complete it until the spring of 2009, by which point the vision had expanded to become the Perseus Network (see Appendix L), a web media conglomerate that included various web video portals, of which GameZombie TV was just one. Toward this end we formed loose confederations with other original web content creators we liked and whose content complemented our own.

I always admired Vladimir's salt—like me, (and Nigel Tufnel before us); he was always looking to *push it to eleven*. Beyond simply being full of piss and vinegar, Vladimir's astute instinct by the spring of 2009 was to diversify our available suite of content platforms and offerings in order to maximize sponsorship opportunities.

The Neophyte Lawyer & the Sorcerer's Apprentice

Setting up the company legally was a core charge of the GZ Biz Team. I had no idea how to do this when I started, but I learned more and more as we went along. I relied heavily upon

Vladimir in these matters—both his lawyerly acumen (he's currently earning his J.D. at the

University of Southern California), but also his interest.

D and I made a good partnership because we each knew our competencies, and were

realistic about our weaknesses. While we overlapped in some areas—such as the

entrepreneurship bug and a propensity for equal parts hustle and networking—we were both

comfortable delegating huge swathes of the project to the other. For my part, I was the harried

sorcerer's apprentice at the heart of the undisciplined hurricane. It was my duty to keep the

damn thing spinning—by keeping the project productive, morale high, and institutional

relationships strong (such as GZ's alliance with IU). And it was Vladimir's responsibility to make

sure all our business objectives were in order, both strategically and technically. From the LLC

that I set up in the fall of 2007, we later reformulated GZ as a partnership LLC, which owned

GameZombie. We incorporated the company first in Indiana, then in California, and finally in

Wisconsin, (see Appendix L).

My father, the semi-retired career attorney, was invaluable in all of this.

A Show of Force

A distinctive feature of GZ's promotional character has always been *force*.

It's my experience that students hate marketing and promotion. Students enjoy making

the show, spending the hours in the editing lab, writing the scripts, doing web graphics—all the

production stuff—but they instinctively abhor selling it. And here's the rub: if our GZ team

that's here in the room, making the stuff, is not going to go through the trouble to like it,

favorite it, comment on it, and share it via social media, then why the hell should some random

person across the globe do the same? We needed to be our own *street team*, as they say in

marketing terms, taking responsibility for kick starting some passion and community

engagement around our product online. We needed to be having an authentic conversation

that others could stumble upon, and find engaging. But it was always pulling teeth.

Chokepoint – Whether to Force the Social Media Promotion Issue

I pushed students to do marketing about as hard as I could get away with—both at

Indiana, and later at Wisconsin. Truth be told, I was able to get away with a lot more at Indiana.

At best, at the height of GZ Indiana's glory days, people thought my style of social media

marketing was aggressive, irksome, and boring, but necessary and important. At worst, at UW-

Whitewater, students have accused me of forcing them to promote something for my sole

benefit, thereby exploiting them. For my part, I've gone from finding it to be a necessary

burden, to being something I can no longer do, since I've become too self-conscious and wary

of student complaints. But let's face it, every shred of popularity or influence that GZ has

achieved has come through pure hustle and guerrilla marketing—from the forced commenting I

would have the students do at Indiana, to the grinding work of having students sort through

and add thousands of friends and followers, one at a time, on various social networks.

Now perhaps I am at fault for not figuring out a more enjoyable way to do social media

promotion online? To be honest, I think it's a dreary grind. Self-promotion carries with it a whiff

of the distasteful. Perhaps the HASTAC sponsored badges for lifelong learning initiative, as

discussed in Cathy Davidson's book *Now You See It* (2011), promises a more playful (and

palatable) solution. Perhaps I have turned the work into a *worksheet* by presenting the challenge as a "now you're going to *eat your spinach"* kind of thing. If a clever form of incentivizing, credentialing, and competitive *gamification* could be applied to the challenge of getting students to promote their own original content online that could solve a very real problem—one that has plagued GZ for years.

The Fly & the Bazooka

Unsolicited newsletter blasting remains one of GZ's most controversial, abominable, and simultaneously effective promotional strategies. It started as an idea from Mitchell, who would rise to become our first Senior Production Manager, and later would even become a Production Manager at Cartoon Network, in his own right. Incidentally, he told me that working at the Cartoon Network, in their web video division, was just like working at GameZombie—but with less power, and less fun. Mitchell may have lobbed the newsletter idea out there, but I'm the one who spiked it.

Unsolicited Newsletter Spamming

By the summer of 2008, I had accumulated nearly ten thousand unique email addresses in my Gmail account, which admittedly included a whole lot of irrelevant people, such as students at Indiana University who'd had me as a T.A., but also a whole lot of really *relevant people*, such as professional game developers, game journalists, game scholars, game PR and marketing professionals, and various game media colleagues. Since I was on the press list for every major gaming event, including GDC, E3, and PAX, and since we were in regular correspondence with all sorts of gaming professionals, my Gmail account was stuffed to

bursting like a Mitt Romney Cayman Islands bank account with potentially useful addresses,

worth spamming. I shudder to think about it to this day, since there's nothing ickier and more

alarming than getting a bile-laden email from a deeply offended spam recipient threatening to

kill you, burn you, destroy you, and sue you in Internet court for sending them unsolicited spam

in violation of every principle of human decency. It's hurtful, and it stays with you.

But we did it anyway.

The fact is that our indubitably barbaric, unsolicited newsletter blasting strategy

worked. It made an immediate impact. By injecting ourselves into the inboxes of thousands of

relevant video game professionals we kept ourselves relevant. But the tactic was less than

elegant, to say the least.

Facebook Event Spamming

To magnify the impact, we executed a concomitant inbox spamming strategy on

Facebook. We invited everyone connected to my personal Facebook account to an event that

was not really an event, but rather an advertisement for GameZombie's coverage of a particular

game conference. Since the summer of 2009, I've been maxed out on Facebook friends (at

5,000), so this was a big swathe of folks. In fact, GZ production management interns had done

the time-consuming, tedious work throughout the spring and summer of 2009 of searching out

people on Facebook with the highest amounts of mutual friends with me, and add requesting

them, thereby expanding the relevance of my/GZ's contact network. I would have had the

interns add the friends to GZ's Facebook page, (which is meant for company promotion), rather

than my personal profile, but for the fact that my profile had all the momentum, and because it was easier to run our Facebook event spam strategy through a profile.

In those days, leveraging an oversight Facebook has since removed, you could message everyone associated with an event, whether they had accepted the invitation or not. What this meant was that I could blast a follow-up promotional message to pretty much everyone invited to an event (5,000 or so). Specifically, the blast message options were: attending, maybe, not yet responded, or all of the above. If you had not declined the invitation, which only a small percentage do, or otherwise blocked yourself from receiving event spam somehow, (which was harder to do back then), then you were going to get the message. Generally speaking, of all those invited to an event, only a few hundred would actually accept the invitation and probably many less would actually take the time to look at GZ's videos on the Facebook event page. But the blast-message-all-event-invitees tactic overcame this visibility limitation by pushing the promotion right into people's email inboxes. This was the kicker, the reason this tactic was truly effective—when you messaged all event invitees, the message got pushed to their *email inbox*. It was invasive. Knowing people would probably not go to the Facebook event, I would put various YouTube links and easily digestible branding messages right there at the top of the message, so the email would have maximum effect. Facebook has since cracked down on this stuff to the point where it no longer sends you email at all.

But in 2007 - 2009, we were pioneers of guerilla web marketing.

Actionable Guerilla Web Marketing for Students

Between newsletter spamming the 10,000 contacts I had through Gmail, and Facebook event invitee message spamming the 5,000 friends I invited to our promotional events, we could make a relatively big dent in the cosmos, jackhammering the GZ brand into people's brains. Controlling for duplicates, recipients who couldn't care less, and the negative repercussions of sending unsolicited promotional material (i.e. spamming), we got our stuff in front of thousands of people who matter without spending a dime.

The strategy was like going after *a fly with a bazooka*—we hit our intended target, but the collateral damage wasn't pretty. The net result was unquestionably effective, however, since awareness of our brand and our game media coverage grew and got enhanced. On many occasions at game conferences I'd hear things like, "oh GameZombie, you guys are really making it happen, I see you everywhere." Our spam functioned like a billboard—people didn't remember where or how they'd seen or heard of us, but there we were, implanted in their brains. Of course, the holy grail of promotion is what Seth Godin calls permission marketing (1999), whereby you ask people to opt into receiving your promotional materials, and you work steadfastly to build trust with potential customers, viewers, and clients. This is the better way, there's no doubt, but also impractical. My student team and I needed results and we needed them fast. I needed victories to sprinkle down on my troops, and my troops needed *actionable marketing projects* whose timeframe and level of difficulty were not beyond reason.

Later we got smarter and began using the newsletter service MailChimp rather than just having students Bcc ten thousand email addresses in twenty waves of five hundred or so. The

advantage was that we could see who opened it, who marked it as spam, and various other analytics. Regardless, it remained a blunt force trauma weapon that served its purpose during GZ's scrappy bootstrapping days.

Unsolicited newsletter spamming died within the first month of my employment at UW-Whitewater. A cute, if aggressive, technique that people let me get away with when I was running GZ as a grad student at Indiana, flying under the radar, became categorically unacceptable the moment I became a Lecturer, co-founder, and core member of the MAGD program. After blasting out our *Darkest of Days ButtonMashers Season 2* promotional newsletter in September of 2009, I got a very nasty email from UW-Whitewater's iCIT (Instructional, Communication, and Information Technology) Department informing me I was in violation of its anti-campus spam act. And that was it. Given my new status, and the importance of keeping it, I knew this questionable (though unquestionably effective) technique had seen its day.

Reasonable Student Assignments – Level Appropriate

Why didn't we sort the wheat from the chafe, you say, the relevant email addresses from the irrelevant ones? The answer is simple—there were ten thousand of them and the list was always growing. As tedious and unappealing as some of the jobs I occasionally gave our GZ Biz Team and GZ Production Management interns (see Appendix D), I never for one instant entertained the idea that a student could deal with that kind of mess—on par with the fifth labor of Hercules, the cleaning of the Augean stables. Student jobs could be tough, *but not that tough*. Besides to pull it off they'd need to be in my personal Google/Gmail account, which is

the most sensitive password I own. As I will explore, I did give access to my personal accounts to trusted students, regularly, for years—even though I've never felt totally comfortable with the idea. However, yet another barricade to sorting my Gmail contacts was that it was a tedious job for a smart but grunt-level production manager; someone who would not yet have achieved a high enough GZ rank to gain that kind of password access, anyway. Typically I only gave personal password access to my most senior level, trusted student colleagues, whom I knew well and had vetted, and was pretty damned sure would not abuse my trust. And by the same token, I didn't give such gruesome tasks to my top lieutenants. After all, as security guard Bart says in *Dawn of the Dead (2004)*, "shit rolls downhill."

So, we spammed.

Password Sharing – a Necessary Risk and Trust

The necessity of password sharing has remained a technical hurdle for GZ for years since many of the primary business accounts are my own, or are linked to my own: such as Gmail for contacts and press emails; YouTube for our videos (GZ's YouTube is linked to my Google account); and Facebook, where the heart and soul of our influence has always been my personal account, rather than our public fan page, which has only a fraction of its influence.

To this day, every student on the GameZombie team has access to the five terabytes of GZ assets we have stored on our cloud servers at UW-Whitewater. What that means, strictly speaking, is that any one of those students—just as anyone of the more than five hundred students in the project's history, for that matter—could go rogue and wipe out all our content, at any time. They could do this out of jealousy, spite, revenge, or simply madness. Who knows?

The simple fact that large-scale sabotage of the project has never been carried out speaks volumes about the *cohesive spirit of the operation*.

Of course, there are always outliers—and as we shall see, a student who had been trusted above all others would one day betray that trust.

Fear of Moronic or Unfortunate Things

We were on Twitter almost as soon as it came out, and for a while we had more followers than the leading game video website in the world, GameTrailers.com. If we had entered the Shorty Awards in 2008, (the inaugural year of the awards event that honors top content on Twitter) we would have won the gaming category. By 2009, our advantage had vanished, and our Twitter momentum had ground to a halt. We attempted a mass follow/then unfollow Twitter strategy early on, which is largely responsible for our first two thousand followers. Since then, no matter how often I have pushed the GZ Writing Team to prolifically tweet timely gaming material—utilizing trendy hashtags, and asking them to get back to gaming fans via @ replies—our number of followers has not budged.

Student Teams Running Twitter Account and Life Overlap

For nearly five years, I've had small teams of GZ writers, as many as ten at a time, tweeting through our account—using the service SocialOomph, (formerly TweetLater), to coordinate and schedule staggered tweets throughout the day. I think this has kept GZ relevant, and it has been a good learning experience for GZ interns and students. But it has been largely ineffective at generating more followers. For a long time, I had the GZ Twitter account push to

my Facebook and LinkedIn feeds, which many of my contacts probably assumed were my tweets. Admittedly, my goal was to leverage GZ's prolific tweeting to keep my social media activity current. GZ was my baby so I was ok with being perceived as a face of the company. But fear of students tweeting moronic or unfortunate things is one reason why I've always insisted that the GZ writers tweeting through our account put their initials after their tweets. This way individuals would be held accountable for their opinions, and more importantly for this delicate egoist, my friends and followers would be able to differentiate between GZ writer tweets and my own. By and large, my request has been categorically ignored. The students have either preferred anonymity, been almost pathologically forgetful, or otherwise not been terribly concerned with running reputation management for the SS.

I think the last scenario is likeliest.

Pushing Tweeting for Uncertain Reward

During the two season run of ButtonMashers, I pushed all the talent on the show to have Twitter accounts and to stay as active as possible. I encouraged GZ folks to have public conversations between our primary account and those of our various stars. I wanted nothing more than for one of our ButtonMashers leads to become a Twitter sensation. It was all for naught. To this day, I find it hard to tell if all our strenuous efforts ever even moved the needle, and I have personally always found Twitter to be terribly un-gratifying.

Whether to Play the Student Card

GameZombie, a game media outlet in its own right, managed to get covered in the press consistently for five straight years. At one point, around the fall of 2008, I made it a standing declaration that we should strive to get *one major piece of press written about us every month*. Most of the stories were written by either local Indiana or Wisconsin news media outlets, with a few by rival game journalism sites, and nearly all focused on the unique phenomenon of a high performance *game media studio being run by students*. Journalists liked the hook—a ragtag group of Midwestern kids was doing something extraordinary, winning awards and publishing a quasi-professional body of work to the web. And they liked the video game angle too, I believe, because it sounded hip and cutting-edge.

This foregrounds another key choke point in the building of GZ—*whether or not to play the student card*. In some instances it was advantageous to present the narrative of GameZombie as that of a rambunctious, charming student-fueled game media studio. Journalists got the story and could write it easily. In other instances, however, such as dealing with professional game developers, or dealing with the discerning press team at GDC, (with its highly evolved bullshit detector), the last thing in the world they wanted to hear was that your outfit was composed of a bunch of amateur student poseurs. The question would come up again and again. When pursuing deals, such as a sponsorship package or an angel investment, was it wise to advertise that our giant team was composed of students? Or did we want to sort of imply that we were running a big media organization fueled by a talented workforce? Which sounded more impressive? Which was more likely to close the deal?

Once again, GZ was in the gray area.

It was a matter of packaging, I suppose, or what the political pundits like to call "optics." In fact, while we would necessarily have to disclose to an angel investor the details of our student-fueled operation, we were under no such requirement with regard to sponsors. What did they care how the video sausage got made? The question for ad men was whether we could deliver the original web content, the views, and the community engagement—enough to move the needle for their product or service. You catch my drift—at various times, we played it different ways. For the purpose of obtaining press, the student angle was the way to go. To date, GZ has had over forty different articles written about the operation, including memorably, being on the front page of the *Herald Tribune* the day I graduated from Indiana University in May of 2008 (See Appendix A). For the purpose of communication with video game, advertising, and investment professionals, my experience is that it was always better to play up our professionalism, play down our student-run reality, and let our work and reputation speak for itself. Why tell them what they don't want to hear?

GameZombie TV - a Site or Series?

A big issue for GZ's business development has always been whether to push GZ as a *site* or as a *series*—since this highlights the question of where and how we should work to maximize traffic. By all accounts, traffic to your home site is the most valuable thing on the web. Steady, reliable home site traffic is how Alexa, Compete, and Quantcast rank is measured, and how websites are valued when companies are considering acquisition.

GZ has long struggled to be a highly trafficked web site, or content portal. One reason this goal has eluded us is because a viewer could find our content at around fifty different locations on the web, making our site somewhat irrelevant. And it has always been easier for us to obtain popularity on other sites, such as YouTube, Dailymotion, Crackle, Revver, Bebo, Facebook, and Metacafe. For this reason, and because I have always been primarily interested in people seeing our content—i.e. maximum exposure—I began to use the term web *series*, advisedly. In my definition, GZ is original web content that's distributed across the web, and its popularity can only be properly assessed by aggregating total view counts, exposure, and community engagement. Even though I am right about this logically, it's still a tricky sell. It would be much easier to just say, GZ is a highly popular website with tons of traffic to the homepage, and all you need to do is put ads against it to make a million dollars. Given the straightforward logic of the web that *homepage traffic is what's most valuable*; we tried a number of different tactics to get our homepage traffic up.

Towards a Focused Upload Strategy – Part 2

Based on Vladimir's fervent recommendation, we became far more selective about which web portals we would upload our content to, moving away from the super aggressive, blind video sharing site bombardment strategy that I innovated and implemented back in the dark ages of GZ, just to get us on the board. Vladimir convinced me that any site we uploaded our content to—that was not GZ—became by default a competitor of GZ. We were giving all that traffic to other sites. But this logic must be balanced against the fact that people are more likely to discover our content on popular video sharing sites than to otherwise find our

homepage in the immeasurable infinitude that is the web. Our compromise was to focus our

upload strategy to *a shortlist of sites* where we felt big view counts and community

engagement were still worth cultivating, namely: YouTube, Dailymotion, Metacafe, Facebook,

GameTrailers, and a few others.

The Star-crossed Struggle of the GZ Forum

We fought a long hard fight to get the GZ Forum going.

Our forum, ill-fated beast that it is, has gone through multiple versions and innumerable

promotional campaigns. Many of the most popular sites, especially video game sites, have

dynamic forums where members of the community express ideas and argue about all things

gaming. Vladimir and others were therefore convinced that a popular forum was a key to us

boosting traffic, and the stickiness of our site. In terms of web traffic analysis, our effective

bounce rate was too high; meaning that while we consistently got a lot of new people to our

site, they stayed for only a very short period of time—they *bounced* too quickly. Despite our

dogged campaigning, and despite making everybody on the damned team register a forum

account and post comments on our fledgling threads, the GZ forum was a doomed operation. It

had not arisen organically, and it wasn't fun for people. It was just un-fun work.

And so it died.

Blood, Chains, and Buzz Saws

A theme we often discussed in the GZ Biz Team, in terms of the branding strategy of the

series, was *the role of the GZ narrative*. Since the fall of 2006 and into the spring and summer of

2007, the zombie apocalypse narrative had served to energize the team, and to inspire "an us against the (undead) world" style camaraderie. But the real question was whether the whole thing was too "goofy," as Thom might say, or too forced. After all, looking around, you didn't see any of the top game media outlets using a similar metafictional contrivance? Accordingly, the long-term trend of GZ's production competencies and momentum drifted toward increasing conformity with professional standards, such as those exercised by the industry leading game media companies, including MTV's GameTrailers, 1Up's GameVideos, NewsCorp's IGN, and CBS Interactive's GameSpot. Consistently covering the industry's major gaming conferences—combined with paying close attention to the game media business—influenced our operational tendencies toward industry standards.

Increasingly less relevant, we nevertheless wondered if the zombie survivor narrative backstory could be leveraged and developed as a unique branding component. Toward this end, we spent some time throughout early 2008 developing the concept for an alternate reality game, (ARG), which we would distribute across the web, as Jane McGonigal had done with the successful *I Love Bees* (Jones, 2008) campaign for Microsoft's *Halo 2*. Like so many of our mad scientist schemes, the ARG idea wound up on the cutting room floor.

Realizing the narrative could be pushed to the background as a unique style point, we decided instead to keep the zombie theme as something you would observe in the gritty graphics, *blood, chains, and buzz saws* we integrated into the site and the videos.

Zombie Shooter – The First Sale

Working with the quiet, withdrawn, somewhat troubled Glenn, I developed a simple

Flash-based zombie shooter game in the spring of 2008, as a side initiative, and put it right on

the front page of the site. Later, at E3 2008, the founder of the Nolan Bushnell (Atari founder),

backed GameWager, (a now defunct site that allowed competitive gamers to place money

wagers), fell in love with our GZ shooter game and asked us to develop a customized version for

his site. So we did. In the fall of 2008, our GameWager zombie shooter became our first official

sale, for $1,000.

The Cold Rains that Killed the Spring

We reasoned that we could use a cool, zombified mascot of some kind—a stylishly

branded creature that could pop up in videos and be used on merchandise and apparel.

In the fall of 2008, we developed Dr. Killgore. We conceived of him as the mad scientist

behind GZ; the whackjob who was actually responsible for the zombie outbreak. In the manner

of Dr. Logan from George Romero's 1985 zombie classic, *Day of the Dead*, Killgore would spend

his days feverishly working to find a cure for the zombie plague. But the students never really

embraced this character, probably because most of the idea came from me. As I have

discovered, again and again, I need to build consensus and *buy in* from the students in order to

get initiatives really going. The students need to believe it is *their idea* they're working on. So, in

an inefficient manner deeply characteristic of the unique dynamics of the GZ game media

studio, we threw out Dr. Killgore in January of 2009, and set about to take a second crack at

developing a GZ mascot that the team could rally behind. After an open brainstorming session, and a vote, we settled on the name, Porterhouse.

Unleashing Arnie on the Porterhouse Project

I gave the job of bringing the character to un-life to Arnold. Arnie, as I called him, was a thirty-six year old Asian-American guy who was a graduate of the prestigious NYU Film School, and had found himself, to my mind, living listlessly in Bloomington, not doing anything of importance. I wanted him for the project. NYU was the best film school in the world and I wanted to siphon off some of that excellence. Ever greedy for talent, I pulled him into the GZ vortex, and unleashed him on the Porterhouse project. Arnie seemed to really be enjoying working with our team. He seemed to be thriving, as many creative people have done, off of the crazy, inspired energy of our meetings. His newfound purpose rendered him ebullient. Meanwhile, I got to know his narrative a bit. He told me about how he'd been fired from every job he'd had, and that for some reason, something always went wrong. Problems held him back, he admitted, and he had to take medication to maintain his equilibrium.

"Under the sunshine of my enlightened despotism—and the zany, inclusive energy of GZ Indiana—he would flourish," thought I.

By April of 2009, Arnie had produced a really great character. Porterhouse was like this adorable little Pillsbury Doughboy composed of gooey blood. It was just what we wanted— gruesome, endearing, funny, irreverent. The whole team loved him, and we couldn't wait to begin using Porterhouse in videos, on the website, on t-shirts, and in GZ promotional media

everywhere. Then came the incident. The Arnie incident ranks amongst the top five most dramatic meltdowns in GZ history.

Arnie Falls Apart – The Liabilities of Inclusivity, Soft Power, and High Expectations

It all began late one night in the TV 250 multimedia lab, as William and I lingered—weak and weary—long after our GZ production meeting had ended. We did this all the time. In fact, Indiana University multimedia labs were equipped with the most obnoxious high security features, which we set off habitually. Working till the eleventh hour as a matter of course, we invariably triggered the blasted alarm, causing the IU police to come running like Keystone Cops. Compulsorily we were always gone by the time they got there. Yes, we were the *Bad News Bears* indeed.

Anyway, there we were, William and I, in our familiar time and place—TV 250 at the end of the night—chatting about production details, GZ world domination, this and that. I was exhausted, and it was not a good time. Arnie was the only other person there. Everyone else had trickled away. Arnie was putting finishing touches on the 3D animated character, Porterhouse, and I appreciated his dedication. But Arnie had already shown signs that he was fraying at the edges. Students had reported to me that a few times when I'd left meetings, Arnie had leapt to the front of the room and begun "teaching" and "leading" the session. Apparently, the students had not taken him seriously but his attempts to "imitate Spencer" had been noteworthy for their weirdness.

Arnie approached me with an uncharacteristically aggressive tone:

"How do I get a job as an Adjunct Professor at IU like you have?" he asked.

"Well," I said, "I got my job through special circumstance because I was running GZ as big internship program as a grad student, and then the professors offered it to me."

"Would you put in a recommendation for me to be an Adjunct Professor too?"

This question threw me off. No, was the answer in my head. Hell no. Arnie was off. That was a known quantity. I didn't think he would make a good instructor at IU, and I didn't want to expend my political capital or leverage my reputation vouching for somebody that I legitimately did not think was a good hire.

"I think you should get the hell out of Bloomington," I said. "There are far too few opportunities here. You need to go to a big city, where there are more opportunities."

"Get the hell out of here?" He asked, startled. "Get the *hell* out of here?"

I'd never seen him like that before. He was a racecar in the red.

"That's not what I mean," I said. "I just mean by staying here there's no real opportunity for you. You know what I mean, man? Bloomington is a small market. You know what I *mean*?"

But it was too late. He didn't know what I meant. He only heard what he wanted to hear which was that I refused to help him and then told him to get the hell out of there. He felt deeply wronged. He stewed on it, and built it up in his mind.

And then, he imploded.

A few days later, Arnie quit the team in dramatic fashion, blasting out a series of strange emails, claiming that he owned Porterhouse, and that we could use him over his dead body. While I know that I mishandled Arnie by not treating his fragile contents with sufficient care, I also think his self-destruction was inevitable. That was his pattern, I think. He was a person determined to get in his own way. In my relentless and non-introspective ambition, I had pulled him into the GZ vortex, without sufficiently, delicately, considering the subtleties of his brittle condition. And this was a mistake—but one I am likely to make again, *since inclusivity implies risk*. After all, it's a broken world, and we know not from whence horror or genius originates. To compound the tragedy, I had failed to compel him to sign a waiver when he joined the team, probably out of self-consciousness, politeness or shyness. And that was the end of Porterhouse, the mascot who died for no reason, as Hemmingway (1964) once wrote, like the cold rains that killed the spring.

What if You Threw a Party and Nobody Came?

In order to sustain the energy and team spirit of GZ, and as a means to build and expand our brand influence, we've developed and threw a number of events and contests throughout the years, with mixed success. It's a dangerous proposition to host an event or contest, in my opinion, since there's always the fear that nobody will come. There's no worse feeling than throwing a party to which nobody comes—it reveals in no uncertain terms that *nobody loves you*. I think the failed contest that Mason threw in the dawn of GZ's history, in the spring of 2007, broke his spirit early on. He was unrealistic about how popular we were right off the bat, and when he went out of pocket to pay the winner of his shabby contest, it left him bitter. After

that, for Mason, the emperor wore no clothes. Rather than view the building of legitimate

community engagement as a worthwhile project, he instead viewed GZ with suspicion.

Personally, I have always dreaded events and contests precisely because:

1. they are enormously time-consuming to put together for an uncertain payout, and

2. if they are unsuccessful, as I said, they throw into stark relief the exact degree of

   your unpopularity, thereby doing more damage than good to morale.

Throwing Events – Go Big or Go Home, (and Cover Your Ass)

Basically, if you're going to throw an event, party, contest, tournament, or fund drive,

you've got to do it right—*go big or go home*. GZ's first foray was Mason's failed contest from

the spring of 2007. In time, however, we learned to do it right.

For Halloween 2008, we threw a rowdy GZ-theme party with great energy and turnout,

bolstering internal relationships, (both professional and otherwise), and team morale. Of

course, you never know what's going to come back to haunt you. When a prominent GZ Team

Lead melted down in December of 2008, this sanctimonious so and so would use the 2008

Halloween party against me, threatening to expose me to a draconian university shadow

council for throwing a party involving minors and alcohol. This sudden expert on the law had

only one true purpose—*he wanted an A.*

But that story comes later. For the moment, suffice to say that if you are going to have a

house party involving undergrads make sure you take care of that paperwork (aka CYA).

In my wake, William threw some of GZ's most successful events. Beginning in the fall of 2009, he, Walter, and a rotating cast of characters threw GZ-themed zombie and video game movie themed marathons. For up to 72 straight hours they'd watch every horrendous zombie or video game movie imaginable, live streaming their agony to the world, and raising tons of money for charity in the process. I always admired this since I knew it was something I couldn't do. His unselfconscious charisma surpassed me—the teacher becoming the student.

Later, at UWW, beginning in the spring of 2010, student-run GZ themed gaming tournaments were at times wildly successful, with hundreds of kids attending from all over campus, and even the greater Midwest. Otherwise, and sadly, GZ's UWW gaming tournaments have proven embarrassing debacles with barely any attendance of which to boast. It has depended pretty much entirely upon the *motivation* of the particular students involved.

Don't be a Severe Romnian Bastard (Like Me)

In the final analysis, perhaps my Romnian "severity" has influenced GZ's character toward all work and minimal social events. My gut instinct is that weekly or bi-weekly social events—removed from the context of pure work—would probably have been good for the project in terms of building camaraderie and morale. Every GZ semester at Indiana began with a meet and greet orientation at the Irish Lion, and after every one, we always said "we should do this more often." But we never did. Perhaps that's because for me it would have been just one more meeting, indistinguishable from work—or even worse, a waste of time, since no work was getting done. Outside socializing inevitably occurs during a GZ semester, but it's a hodgepodge. My advice to someone starting or running an interest driven learning environment would be to

host at the minimum *a monthly social event* whose purpose is not media work, but simple fun and games.

This will stimulate morale and encourage a positively charged, energetic culture.

Fresh Meat for the GZ Grinder

GZ's in-person recruitment program—featuring impassioned recruitment speeches delivered by GZ veterans, with professor consent, during the first ten minutes of classes across IU campus—remained consistently effective. On many occasions, these types of proselytizing campaigns proved highly successful at sparking interest and self-selection from students intrigued and excited by the prospect of jumping on board a student-fueled game media studio, with established momentum and industry connectedness. Sometimes they'd never heard of us, other times they'd heard some word of mouth about GZ, and this was the tipping point that closed them.

Veterans Proselytize the Gospel of GZ

Mark Deuze gave us permission to pitch GZ to his introductory level T101 Media Life course at the beginning of every semester, which had around 500 students. This was a recruitment goldmine—a veritable stockyard of fresh meat. Invariably, twenty interested emails would trickle in to apply@gamezombie.tv within the forty-eight hours following one of our demonstrations of multimedia shock and awe. I used two tactics to ignite excitement in potential recruits:

1. I showed GZ video interviews with some of the game industry's biggest stars, such as

   Cliff Bleszinski, Ed Boon, and Peter Molyneux, and

2. I always featured GZ veterans at these types of recruitment drives, doing as little

   talking as I could get away with, choosing to lead with my strongest lieutenants

   instead

It's one thing for a bunch of uninitiated undergrads to hear a grad student project leader talk up the quality of an internship experience—it's quite another when that pitch comes from a fellow undergrad whose been in the program and now exhorts its virtues with the messianic enthusiasm of a true believer.

Industry Connectedness via Game Conference Coverage

Despite being physically located in the Midwest's back of the beyond (yes, that's where game industry people often think Bloomington and Whitewater dwell), and despite being by definition an online project, (in terms of both content and marketing), GZ has nevertheless always been what Stephanie Palmer (2008) calls "good in a room."

Beginning with our inspired bullshitting at GDC 2007, GZ became increasingly prolific at the art of *pressing flesh*, exchanging thousands of cards at professional conferences. We developed multiple versions of *GZ business cards* over the years, working toward a more professional design. We used the cards to *obtain media credentials* to gaming conferences—as previously discussed, they're required during press registration—and once approved, we used them to build our brand awareness and expand our professional reputation. We got as well as

we gave, such that my Gmail contacts database eventually ballooned into a malformed

monstrosity. We gave the task of *digitizing our collected business cards* to production

managers, like Mitchell. His mission—should he have chosen to accept it, which, bless his

masochistic heart, he did—was to tediously, monotonously input the data on the hundreds of

cards we brought back from conferences into my Gmail contacts database, thereby ever-

expanding our GZ rolodex. Digitizing the cards represented a critical move; afterwards,

whenever we started a new social media account, we could connect my Gmail account to "find

people you know," instantly making hundreds or thousands of connections.

So, networking, exchanging cards, digitizing said cards, connecting those contact

databases to various social networks, (and later promoting our content to those expanded

social networks), strengthened GZ in two self-reinforcing ways:

1. GZ's authentic industry connectedness grew and

2. Students perceived this connectedness as a real value and were therefore eager to
   get involved

In the Stories of the Elder Warriors

Beginning in the spring of 2008, and with increasing momentum, we took the quest to

land a sponsor more and more seriously.

In the summer of 2008, after we won our first Webby Honoree Award, I attended the

various Webby parties in New York—networking, schmoozing, and generally pushing GZ's

agenda on the movers and shakers of the web content business. I cornered the Vice President

of MySpaceTV, and to get rid of me, he introduced me to a CAA (Creative Artists Agency) agent

named Matt Mazzeo, who, after hearing my pitch, informally agreed to represent GZ. It never

went anywhere—turns out the informally part meant not actually—but we did get a lot of

information from him. For example, we learned that the original game video creators,

ScrewAttack—whom I considered to be our *archrival*—had an agent in the new media division

of CAA.

Why did I consider them our nemesis, you ask? The answer lies in the Bushido

philosophy of the eighteenth-century samurai, Yamamoto Tsunetomo, who said:

> *"In the stories of the elder warriors it is said that on the battlefield if one*
> *wills himself to outstrip warriors of accomplishment, and day and night*
> *hopes to strike down a powerful enemy, he will grow indefatigable and fierce*
> *of heart and will manifest courage. One should use this principle in everyday*
> *affairs too."* (1980)

ScrewAttack's Business Model – a Profitable Independent Game Media Studio

Based out of Dallas, ScrewAttack was just like us—an independent game media studio

that specialized in original branded video game shows for the web. Unlike us, however, they

had figured out how to: 1. build a big community of rabid fans, 2. Get a syndicated show on

GameTrailers, 3. Make money off merchandise they sold through their online store, and 4. Get

a goddamned CAA agent. Let's cut the crap—theirs was the model for success in our business,

and we wanted to replicate it.

The CAA agent, Matt Mazzeo, provided us with lots of insider details about

ScrewAttack's various deals and business model. We learned that they had an annual contract

with GameTrailers to provide them with three shows, and that they got paid on a per-view

basis. We also learned that that deal was in jeopardy since neither GameTrailers nor

ScrewAttack was entirely happy with it. To my surprise, we discovered that GameTrailers

depended heavily on ScrewAttack's popularity to bolster community engagement and view

counts on their site. ScrewAttack had more leverage than I realized, and what's more, they

were considering walking out.

To us, ScrewAttack was "such a cool guy" (1994) as George once called Elaine's new

popped collar boyfriend, Tony. Not only did we want to have an agent like ScrewAttack, what

we really aspired to was their syndication deal with GameTrailers.

Chasing a Syndication Deal with GameTrailers

GT was ground zero for game video on the web—and for an outfit like GZ; it was the

place to be. Jesus, I tried hard to get that deal. I cornered their general manager, Brad Winters,

at a party at GDC 2008; pitched their editor-in-chief, Shane Satterfield's, ear off on the street at

GDC 2009; and continuously bombarded their community manager, Barndi Kim, with updates,

friendly notes, promotional material, and feature requests, for years. I wasn't shy. And yet,

somehow I never closed them. GT thought we didn't have a sufficiently loyal—or engaged—

community audience to call our own. They wanted to keep us in their farm system until, if

indeed one day we did hit critical mass, they could then call us up to what *Bull Durham's* (1988)

Crash Davis called *"The Show."*

It was a catch-22. Of course they were right—we did not have ScrewAttack's raw

community fan base. That was indisputable. But who the hell did? At the same time, like

Commodus in *Gladiator* (2000), we had other talents that weren't on their list. Unique

competencies distinguishing the GZ game media studio from the YouTube horde included:

- consistency

- large-scale

- prolific

- and proven capability of creating strong original branded content

    o leveraging formidable technical production facilities

    o and advanced multimedia skill to take advantage of them

If given the opportunity to provide GT with an original series, I think we could have

crushed it. We had the studio and they had the traffic. With a little guidance, we could have

made whatever they wanted. But that's the rub—*they didn't know what they wanted*. They

wanted what their fans wanted, and nobody seemed to know what that was except

ScrewAttack. Despite my forward position, I still don't think we pushed hard enough. We

weren't shy, but we weren't sufficiently forceful either. In my gut, I know I could have gotten

the deal. An unwillingness to take no for an answer combined with more tactical pressure, and

they would have caved. A GT/GZ partnership remains *the one that got away*—the game-

changing deal that never was.

ScrewAttack Partnership Proposal

In the spring of 2008, when the founder of ScrewAttack, Craig Skistimas, had a public

falling out with his original founding partner, I made a move. We had the army but not the

audience; ScrewAttack had the audience but not the army, (at least not at GZ's scale). A merger

with ScrewAttack would in one mighty stroke have ameliorated our weaknesses and landed us

our coveted grand bargain with GameTrailers—it would have been our coup de grace, our rising

dragon fist, our *shoryuken.*

> *April 11, 2008*
>
> *GameZombie.tv – business proposal*
>
> *Hi Craig,*
>
> *Spencer here from <u>GameZombie.tv</u> We've been fans of yours for some time now, though this is the first time I've shot you an email. I just listened to your podcast concerning the departure of Tom, and I have to say that I understand many of the things you're talking about. I'm the mastermind behind GameZombie.tv. In fourteen months, I've taken the project from an idea to a Webby Award-winning game video website. Along the way, I've had to deal with various levels of talent and motivation from members of the team--and I've certainly been extremely frustrated with people who I like personally, but who have not carried their weight in terms of the amount of work I really needed from them to make the project truly successful. I propose that ScrewAttack and GameZombie form some type of partnership to improve the viewership and profitability of both our sites. We have a tremendous amount of multimedia expertise, as well as an extremely big team, whereas you have a larger, more loyal fanbase. If we joined forces, we could potentially create a very mutually profitable alliance that would improve our career opportunities. Please email or call me back at <u>812-322-0138</u> so we can discuss this business proposal in greater detail.*
>
> *Thanks so much and looking forward to hearing from you soon!*
>
> *Spencer*
> *GameZombie.tv*

He never responded.

The hard truth is that we needed him more than he needed us.

The Soul & the Wallet

Vladimir led the charge by escalating the urgency and sophistication of our quest for *sponsorship*, overseeing the development of innumerable PowerPoint pitches in response to RFPs (requests for proposals), studiously unearthing opportunities from the far reaches of the web. Along the way, we pitched Dr. Pepper, Sam Raimi's *Drag Me to Hell*, Xbox Live, Phantom EFX for their *Darkest of Days* game, among so many others (see Appendix L). I credit Vladimir not only with discovering these opportunities but more importantly, with pursuing them relentlessly. When I gave him 50% of the company in the summer of 2008 my biggest fear was that he would not come through. What if he should suddenly become lazy, disinterested, or incompetent? That would have been a real break from his established character but it nevertheless represented a genuine risk.

Well, V came through. He came through big—in terms of commitment to the project, sustained energy, and creativity, all of which helped keep me going.

Industrial Scale Cold Email Sponsorship Requests

We tasked GZ Biz Team interns and students with sending out titanic volumes of cold email requests for sponsorship. Via research, and wishful thinking, we identified hundreds of potential student-fueled game media studio sponsors, drawing up huge lists in our Google Docs database (see Appendix F). Then we divided these company lists up amongst our loyal GZ Biz Team soldiers and sent them to the salt mines. We assigned soft deadlines and enforced (which on GZ meant something more like *strongly but kindly suggested*), a quota system to stimulate productivity. In true GZ fashion, even in the face of grueling odds and what Ralph Ellison (1953)

called "certain defeat," we never gave up, and assigned the damned thing over and over again, blasting out hundreds of these babies:

Our industrial scale cold request for sponsorship email strategy was *doomed*.

The True Purpose of Academia and the True Purpose of Business

Despite faithful and persistent execution by GZ Biz Team loyalists—upon much reflection—I've come to the conclusion that students can't be trusted to bring in money for a company. I must be nuanced here, since my discovery is somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, our students carried out the operation faithfully and consistently, over a long period of time, which, by all accounts, indicates that they gave it their all. And I appreciate their efforts from the bottom of my heart. How could I not? They tried so hard. And yet, *they didn't try hard enough*. For them, the exercise was too detached, too mechanical. And this is not their fault. Rather, this failure reveals the essential *incompatibility of the true purpose of business and the true purpose of the university.*

The students didn't really give a damn if the company succeeded. It wasn't their company; they weren't profit-sharing, drawing a salary, or being incentivized via commission. They were doing the work out of curiosity and for the experience; for a good grade and the credentialing; and of course—for some—out of loyalty to the project, the team, and me. As the controversially Draconian former CEO of General Electric once wrote, "the better you do, the more you get—and you get it in *both* the soul and the wallet (Welch & Welch, 2005)." The gritty work of cold emailing to scare up sponsorship leads, and the brutal reality of entrepreneurial business development generally, is so tough, discouraging, and low probability that it requires

uniquely dogged personalities *plus* financial incentives, to bear fruit. We had some pretty strong students on the GZ Biz Team over the years, and especially in the spring of 2009, but we spun our wheels by assigning them this work.

Here's the riddle: inasmuch as GZ the business failed for lack of extrinsic incentivization; GZ the interest driven learning environment succeeded for its unique ability to unlock intrinsically motivating multimedia engagement and development opportunities for students. And yet, these opportunities only came into being, and sustained, as a direct result of GZ being thought of, and run, as a legitimate business hiding out in an academic environment. One reason *I know this* is because GZ really doesn't work at UWW precisely because the business is dead, or at least the dream of the business is dead, which is what made the whole thing authentic and invigorating. This perplexing epiphany is the *major theme* of Part 2 of this dissertation.

So, why did I give GZ Biz Team students such a crumby assignment? The answer is: just because it was a failure for GZ as a business doesn't mean it was a bad assignment. Actually, the task of cold emailing potential sponsors, when mixed in with more creatively demanding work, like designing professional pitches and PowerPoint's for RFPs, fit the profile of a solid project assignment. And students threw themselves into the work, even if it proved entirely inefficacious.

Digital Media Innovation, Inc.

By the summer of 2009, fatigued from our thus far unprofitable quest for sponsorship, and awakening to the cruel reality that the value of original web content was in free fall, we

brainstormed yet more ways GZ could make money. It seemed smart to create a parent

company called Digital Media Innovation, Inc. (DMI), which would incorporate GZ, and the

Perseus Network, and under whose super umbrella we could branch out and experiment with

various ambitious schemes.

Having learned so much in the trenches, we figured maybe we could make money

consulting as web video experts. Notably, Vladimir did manage later to get paid in Los Angeles

consulting for his web video business expertise, but I never followed suit.

Realizing that we had developed a unique competency for web based motion graphics

and visual effects; we researched the profitability of going into business doing *contract work* for

various companies in the Midwest. Our goal was to find production companies that had really

big projects and convince them to break off some of the work for GZ, where our talented

student team could do a great job for far less than the usual rate, thereby underbidding the

professionals. Like Vladimir's Machinima strategy, this was a good idea, and practical, but my

heart was never in it. I've always hated client work.

The Intolerable Condition of Indenturetude

As I have been saying, my stubborn decision to maintain GZ's *creative autonomy*

undermined, and perhaps unconsciously sabotaged, the business goals of the company.

By drawing my sustenance and salary from the university, and by keeping GZ bound

within its educational and institutional structures, I have always been able to do, creatively

speaking, *whatever the hell I wanted*. Just as, unlike a real business, GZ never goes broke—let's

face it, if it was a real business, it would have gone bankrupt many times over—equally so, unlike a real business, GZ doesn't answer to anybody regarding creative decision making. From day one, we've decided what kind of content we wanted to make—and we've succeeded, or more often failed, on our terms. But the moment you take somebody's money is the moment you need to listen to what they say. This is why I maintain cold feet about entering into a formal business partnership with the university. Perhaps to the point of paranoia, GZ has ever viewed indenturetude as an intolerable condition.

GZ remains a wildly indulgent and inefficient company precisely because, at its core, it's a new media learning environment, and an experimental laboratory, where everybody's getting off their creative kicks, including me. In its soul, it doesn't care about business, but rather about *fulfillment, learning, and experience*. And taking client work flips that model on its head—you're trying to find spots to have fun in the midst of being told what to do. To that proposition, GZ raises an irreverent middle finger, puts on its noise canceling headphones, and gets back to work on its own thing.

Considering App Development

Since our first deal was making the flash-based GZ zombie shooter game for GameWager, we circled back to that idea, considering whether we could go into business making games for the ever-expanding mobile and app marketplace. In the summer of 2009, the apps marketplace was still very fresh and open—Apple's app store was growing exponentially and the Google Android space was just coming online. We looked into it, but we really did not have sufficient competency for this type of development work. While we had a decent track

record of acquiring strong developers, designers, and programmers from the departments of

Computer Science and Informatics—including Cameron D, Cy, and Nelson B—such high caliber

technical students were both hard to come by and harder to retain. Their skills are sufficiently

rarified that they can easily command competitive paid internships. What would they really

need us for, other than to secure deals? Conceivably, we might find ourselves at their mercy,

needing them more than they needed us.

For GZ to work as an educational environment, its technical people can be good, but not

that good. Once they cross a certain threshold, they must be released or else break free. For GZ

to work as an app or mobile game development business, our technical people would need to

get paid, and consistently, pushing us away from our university character toward a focused,

small-teamed, niche business model. It couldn't be run as a side initiative—it would have

required full commitment. And since I didn't really want to leave the university, another pretty

good idea died on the altar of its imperfection.

That's a Dirty Business

In a slowly dawning, bleary-eyed revelation, Vladimir and I awoke to the stark reality

that GZ's most successful profit-making endeavor to date had come from students paying for

the privilege to work on the project. By the summer of 2009, we calculated that the hundreds

of students who had taken GZ for credit—either as interns or by enrolling in the official class—

had given a quarter of a million dollars to the university. And we had not seen dollar one of the

money. Well, that's not true—I'd pulled a meager salary as an Adjunct Professor to teach GZ as

a T436 in 2008-2009. And more importantly, the project had benefited enormously from access

to the wealth of the university's resources, including both the multimedia facilities and the free

student army. But the lion's share of the money that GZ generated as Bloomington's biggest

internship program, and as a popular Telecommunications course, went straight into IU's well-

greased coffers. So, we reasoned, what if—like Denzel in *American Gangster* (2007)—we cut

out the middleman?

We began to postulate that GZ could become a private, for-profit web video training

academy based out of the city of Bloomington. We researched the University of Phoenix, DeVry

Institute, and their various for-profit competitors in the space, examining the industry and its

business model. Profitability depends on the ability to accept student loans. But you can only

accept student loans if you can become *accredited*, which as it turns out, is a major hurdle. But

if we had managed to become accredited and actually began enrolling students who paid our

independent GZ tuition, (which would have undercut IU's price tag), with student loans,

conceivably it could have been a pretty profitable enterprise.

But like Don Corleone warns, that's a "dirty business" (Puzo, 1969).

While shockingly profitable—the industry generates $32 billion per year from federal

loan money—most private, for-profit education companies are considered degree mills, preying

on desperation and gullibility. According to a recent report (Harkin, 2012; Lewin, 2012) by Iowa

Democrat Tom Harkin's Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee: ninety-six percent

of all students who enroll in for-profit colleges take out student loans, accounting for forty-

seven percent of all federal student loan defaults. In other words, the business emits an

unmistakably pungent aroma of the unethical.

"If we're to do this," I told the GZ Biz Team, "we've got to do it right. Be the real deal. No bullshit."

Since transforming GZ into a solo, for-profit web video training academy represented one of our strongest money making strategies, after I accepted the MAGD job we discussed launching such an academy via the Whitewater Innovation Center, UWW's nascent business incubator. Naturally this was a preposterous idea. UWW had hired me to develop GZ as a cornerstone of their flagship MAGD program, not to use their brand new business incubator to build a for-profit rival right in their backyard.

Reimagining GZ as a private, for-profit web video training academy was an eminently practical idea that died relatively quickly for two key reasons:

1. the business gave me the creeps, and

2. having taken the UWW job, the conflict of interest was extreme.

As fun as all these schemes were, it was all just part of the educational process. And nobody learned more from GZ's business development research than me.

15-30 Slides and Some Inspired Bullshit

We were always hustling to get deals, which often resulted in us doing high pressure phone calls and meetings.

In the summer of 2008, as I said, I networked my ass off at the Webby Awards parties in New York, trying to talk anybody who would listen into taking GZ seriously. I pitched GZ to all

the big shots, including Pete Cashmore, the founder of Mashable—the ultimate startup insider

(See Appendix A). I attended an angel investor/entrepreneur mixer, and there I met Ben

Goodman of Milestone Venture Partners, who told me he was interested in GZ, "because he

always sees his grandson playing that game, *World of Warcraft."* That was good enough for

me—any in, with such a high profile investor, was a good in. We followed up, and that led to

Goodman kicking us down to his lieutenant, Andres Moran, a Columbia MBA, whose job was to

vet opportunities for Milestone.

Vladimir and I wound up learning a lot from Andres. We sent him version after version

of our *angel deck*—which is basically a PowerPoint presentation that convinces rich investors to

give you a quarter of a million dollars after seeing 15-30 slides and hearing some inspired

bullshit. Andres gave us tons of feedback on how to refine it. He introduced us to the logistics of

how to project future earnings as well as the inside baseball on valuation. We learned through

this work, and through feedback from Andres, how to protect ourselves, as the founders, from

giving away too much too early. Startup founders have often made this rookie mistake with the

dreary consequence that they get boxed out or even fired by professional venture capitalists,

who take control of the company once it becomes profitable.

In the history of Facebook, it was the experience of Sean Parker, who had been through

hell with his previous startup Plaxo (his Napster follow-up)—he was acrimoniously ousted by

Sequoia Capital—that proved so valuable to Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg, (Kirkpatrick, 2010;

Mezrich, 2009). As his mentor and friend, Sean Parker guided Zuckerberg toward lucidly and

carefully retaining majority ownership of Facebook, even while taking money in numerous investment rounds.

We were knee-deep in these types of conversations and intrigues in the summer of 2008, and I was soaking it up.

The First Cigarette

Vladimir's catalyzed the number of deals we both negotiated and struck.

One of our first deals came in the spring of 2008, when we talked the French video sharing company Kewego into signing us as an exclusive partner. We spent weeks refining the terms and securing the paperwork, and to this day, I have no idea what the hell happened there. The French web video executives promised us exposure and view counts, but I barely noticed an impact. The Kewego deal was particularly strange and disappointing since our French counterparts were exceedingly fastidious about the contractual procedures yet totally lax and uncommunicative in their follow-through.

This unfortunate imbalance underscores a few key themes regarding original web video content deals:

1. they don't want to pay you, if they don't have to
2. they'd prefer to simply barter in view counts and exposure, if possible and
3. These deals often aren't worth the paper they're printed, scanned, and emailed on.

With no hard currency on the line, they just fall apart. For our part, as web content creators, we can always choose not to upload our videos to their site. Conversely, as stewards

of the content portal, they can choose not to promote our material at any time. And in the case

of a breach of contract—on either side—there's pretty much nothing either party can do about

it. Let's face it: *if there's no money on the table, the stakes are pretty low.*

Sometimes, of course, the deal worked out really well. And that was the juice—the

reason we doggedly pursued official partnerships and guarantees. It's like the world wearied

bon vivant, Roger Sterling (2008), says:

> *"Don't you love the chase? Sometimes it doesn't work out; those are the*
> *stakes. But when it does…it's like having that first cigarette: your head gets*
> *all dizzy, your heart pounds, your knees go weak. Remember that? Old*
> *business is just old business."*

We chased that rush with heroic ardor.

And in the summer of 2008, just like Charlie before he got crazy, we "bagged the

elephant" (Stone, 1987) when we signed as an official YouTube Partner. Nowadays, they give it

to you at the door—compounding the competition—but in the good old days of 2008, you had

to earn your coveted YouTube Partner status, and it meant something. We had the ear of Ross

Hoffman, a hotshot business development executive, and Mark Day, the gaming channel's

content manager. We got fast-tracked to the bright lights, regularly securing spotlight features

which massively enhanced our view counts and Google juice.

In our pursuit of deals—some were hits, more were misses. Nevertheless, we secured a

lot of contracts. At one point or another, we officially inked business contracts with the

following companies: Kewego, YouTube, Bebo, National Lampoon, Tremor Media, Dailymotion, GameWager, Phantom EFX, and the recent Google acquisition, iSocket.

Avoiding Foreign Entanglements

The GZ business team can be defined by one word—*hustle*.

It was an energetic, creative, experimental web video monetization laboratory wherein we pretty much threw everything at the wall to see what stuck. In the end, what stuck the hardest was GZ's definition as a learning environment. The hard fact is that GZ as a business was doomed to failure, while GZ as an educational program was fated to succeed. I know this because *we tried everything*. Our stalwart, uncompromising goal was to uncover a workable financial model for our authentic business posing as a student project. In service of this mission, we stayed flexible, and kept an open mind. Opportunity could come from anywhere and we didn't want to miss it. Well, almost anywhere.

In the fall of 2008, we learned that a relatively low key Telecommunications student, Lane, had secured—based on a flimsy application—$8,000 bucks to buy a bunch of high end video equipment. I was jealous. My GZ operation was superior to Lane's goofy one-off video project by orders of magnitude, and yet I had never thought to just apply for a bunch of money directly from the university. We looked into it. Yes, it was doable, but for a catch—your outfit had to either be an official student organization, or otherwise be associated with one. And for me, as it turned out, that was a deal breaker.

Eluding Formal University Partnership

As I've been developing—for the same reasons that GZ has avoided taking client work, we have also remained hesitant to take grants, and other short-term money bursts, directly from the university, fearful that that might indebt us to them. Don't get me wrong, as I've catalogued, GZ has leveraged the production resources of the university, (including labs, studios, cameras, and student labor), and I have drawn a salary, (both as an Adjunct Professor and a Lecturer), but we have never taken student organization grants as such, probably for two reasons:

1. As a for-profit company pretending to be a student project, (at Indiana University), it struck me as a conflict of interest, and

2. By taking the university's money, just like with taking a client's money, you become opened up to scrutiny and interference.

Rightly or wrongly, my gut instinct has always been to take as little money as possible from the university—beyond embedded production resources and salary—to minimize *foreign entanglements*, against which George Washington and Thomas Jefferson warned, and to keep private business opportunities alive. While GZ Wisconsin is no longer a profit-seeking enterprise, this edict continues to be obeyed, like so many rituals in life, for its symbolic importance.

Victory Has Defeated You

Echoing the words of the great nihilistic misanthrope, Hannibal Lecter, GameZombie has fumbled in its quest to make money "like a freshman pulling at a panty girdle" (Harris, 1981). No, that's too harsh. The truth is: GZ has always been *conflicted*.

In the process of metamorphosing from a real company posing as a student project to a student project posing as a real company, I oversaw a sustained attempt to both:

1. make money along the way, and

2. to establish a realistic, long-term business model.

I succeeded occasionally at the former and failed abysmally at the latter—unless of course you consider my UW-Whitewater salary to be the ultimate coup. But just as Bane tells Batman, as he's kicking his ass, "peace has cost you your strength, victory has defeated you" (Nolan, 2012), GZ's ascendency to an official course—and a cornerstone of the MAGD program at UW-Whitewater—simultaneously heralded the doom of its legitimate business aspirations. In other words, the fact that GZ at Indiana was not a simulation, but rather an authentic new media startup, albeit with a strong educational component, meant that we could, well, reach for the stars like old Ronnie Reagan rapped. Its transition to a pure simulation, and the concomitant constraints applied, both institutional and self-willed, necessarily have rendered the project inauthentic, and lowered its stakes. For me, *the juice is gone*. Like a gambler playing with Monopoly money, the rush just ain't the same.

GZ's Cumulative Revenue Generation

But let's be clear: GZ has made money. The project has made money for me, for my business partners, Vladimir and William, and even on occasion a little scratch for some top-level students who've been paid for contract work.

Here's a list of all the money we've made along the way:

1. $1,000 for the GZ Shooter adaptation for GameWager

2. $65 for and an iSocket ad buy

3. $1,100 a month salary to teach GZ as an adjunct professor, 2008-2009

4. $40,000 DoD marketing buy, (which netted me $12,000)

5. $49,000 per year salary at UW-Whitewater, (1/4th of which is for teaching/running GZ); so $12,500 annually for GZ at UWW, or $37,500 to date

    a. Plus $1,000 annual conference travel budget—though this does not have to be used for GZ, it has been and can be.

    b. Plus $5,000 salary to teach GZ during the summer of 2011

6. $4,000 Award from Dean Haven to attend the Webbys in the summer of 2010, (no personal remuneration, but enjoyed flight plus hotel in NYC for myself and top GZ lieutenants).

7. $13,000 in the summer of 2011 to cover E3 and Comic-Con for Dailymotion ($4,000 of which was for me)

8. $5,000 to cover GLS 2011 for Constance, ($3600 of which was for me).

9. Tangentially, the $100,000 studio that was attached to my UWW hire—though that's not exclusively for me, it was designed and built expressly to serve the project

10. And finally, my $5,000 faculty multimedia Mac station and HDTV, which have served GZ

In other words, GZ's direct revenue equals around $118,000, and its institutional support amounts to more than $100,000.

So, I'm not complaining.

(As a side note, the program has easily generated over $1,000,000 million dollars for Indiana University and the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater combined. A back of the envelope estimation as follows: 500 individual students taking GZ for course credit at an average cost of $2,000 equals $1,000,000).

The Momentum Electrocardiogram

GZ has been the work of my life. I started it at the age of twenty-eight and now I'm thirty-four; arguably the best years of my life—the time during which athletes peak.

I know it's the best damned thing I've ever done.

Commensurately, it has been rewarding in so many ways, including financially. And while I have made an effort to quantify the project's material rewards, it's far harder to

measure the sheer volume of work, passion, and grit I've poured into the project. It's not a number, probably, rather more like a burnout index or a *momentum electrocardiogram*. That's the thing I've learned about starting a company—you don't really care how much you work on it. At least that's how I see it.

Back in Wells Library, in the late GZ dark ages of 2007-2008, I poured my heart into the project, giving my student interns everything I had to give. Every shred of my time and energy was theirs for the taking. But this was not a selfless initiative—GZ's success reflected directly on me, and *us*. It was a *non-zero-sum game*; everybody could win, and often did. Every incremental GZ victory bolstered my reputation *and* those of the students laboring away in the trenches with me. Not to put too fine a point on it, but with the lowered stakes of GZ in its current manifestation, the challenge falls too far within what the Russian constructivist Lev Vygotsky called the "zone of proximal development" (1978). Like playing the first level of *Super Mario Brothers* over and over again, GZ's become boring; I can predict with routine certitude exactly what's going to happen. I'm no longer building something whose potential is unknowable, nor pursuing a Nietzschean "will to power" (1924) by smashing myself—my very atoms—against a worthwhile challenge.

The relationship with making money in the university is a tortured one, besides.

A Sticky Proposition

I must admit, I always thought the media professors at Indiana University were hoping I'd figure out how to make real money for GZ. They were willing to turn a blind eye to our business aspirations since the success of GZ reflected on the prestige of the

Telecommunications department. A grad student launching a real company out of their multimedia program would have looked great, and there was no harm in it. But that's also because conflicts of interest were considered marginal or irrelevant. But as I have leveled up in university status so too have I been forced to reckon with previously non-applicable *institutional constraints*. At Whitewater, employees are required to turn in annual "external earnings reports" that are scrutinized by university officials. Since day one, I internalized that GZ at UWW could no longer operate as a headstrong, roguish quasi-company. There was only one logical, ethical, sustainable way to maintain GZ's legitimate business arm—and that would have been to *go into business with the university.*

Truth is: the proposition of a formal partnership with the university struck me as too sticky. But I've always tried to keep an open mind. Mindfulness of the gory pileup of failed notions in the rearview mirror of life keeps me ever vigilant.

Exploratory Meetings with UWW Entrepreneurship Professors and the Chancellor

Accordingly, I explored the concept in various high-profile meetings—one with the leading entrepreneurship professors from UWW's College of Business and Economics and the other with the university chancellor. In the exploratory meeting with the business professors, I floated the idea that Whitewater could pay for GZ to employ *a fulltime business development professional* whose sole job would be to pursue GZ sponsorship deals. In the end the amount of money GZ could earn from sponsorship contracts against our steady production of original content would be greater than this person's salary. In my meeting with the chancellor I proposed the same thing, adding that GZ might make a good addition to the recently launched

Whitewater Innovation Center in the new technology park (which incidentally was partially

funded by Obama administration stimulus money).

Despite the fact that I think this concept of a fulltime sponsorship specialist might

actually work, and despite some interest from the chancellor, I just don't feel like pursuing it.

While I admit that GZ's only path forward as a real business relies upon an open, fully

negotiated contract with the university, I have dragged my feet for two reasons:

1.   I'm concerned university officials would butt their noses in our business too

       much, and

2.   I fear I'll get pinned down in a long-term commitment that will compromise

       my maneuverability

Dying of Encouragement

In the fall of 2008, I considered taking a $30,000 loan from an organization called Seed

Corporation, which was sponsored by the ISBDC (Indiana Small Business Development Center).

In order to qualify for the loan, you needed to take a semester long course that

consisted of a series of lectures and presentations by local business people. As my wife will

attest, I'm not one to suffer in silence. Accordingly, I coerced my talented producer, Vanessa,

into taking the class with me. It was Mickey Mouse stuff—easy and fun to boot. And once we

successfully completed the crash course, GZ became eligible for the $30,000 loan. Though

tempted to take the money, I declined it. As *Saturday Night Live'*s George H.W. Bush used to

say: "wouldn't be prudent." GZ hadn't learned how to make money yet and I feared we'd just

burn through the cash while we were scratching our beards. And then we'd really be behind the

eight ball. But working closely with Seed Corp and the ISBDC had other benefits.

An Angel Promises all the Heavenly Glory

Indiana business insider, and Seed Corp Principle Executive, Marty Donnelly,

recommended GZ to Bill West, the president and founder of Option Six, Bloomington's own

award-winning and highly successful design firm focused on creating custom online training

programs. Bill, who has since become the president and founder of Silicon Quarry Ventures, an

entrepreneurial collective, was at that time looking to get into the business of angel investing.

The timing was perfect for Vladimir and I because we'd spent months strenuously researching

and revising our *angel deck*. Though Milestone Ventures had yet to pull the trigger, (nor had

they passed), their due diligence guy, Andres Moran, had proven invaluable, as I said, providing

us with heaps of valuable criticism and advice. So when Bill West reached out late in the

summer of 2008, we were ready.

Vladimir and I pitched our hearts out to Bill. We tried like hell to convince him that

within three years GZ would become the next Revision3—the San Francisco based Internet

television network that just this year was acquired by Discovery Communications (home of the

Discovery Channel). Our pitch was solid, and we were passionate, and I don't think we made

any unforgiveable mistakes, save two:

1. The business of web video content was not actually going to be a big money maker,
    (turns out, Revision3's are rare), and

2. Our ties to the university were problematic since we had neither

a. proven that we could do the work outside of the institution, or

b. demonstrated that we could surgically excise ourselves from the various intellectual property rights entanglements that were already bound up in GZ's every sinew.

Bill passed, and it hurt.

He wanted to see where we were in six months. This is a dangerous thing to hear for entrepreneurs like us, since we might, as Pauline Kael once wrote, "die of encouragement" (2011). What Bill was really saying was: "let me see you make good on your big promises, begin to generate some real revenue, and then I'll be more interested." But the problem with Bill's position was, in a word, that he sought to avoid all risk. Honestly, once we were making real money, what the hell would we need him for? Angel money is meant to float your company during the perilous times, while you operate at a loss and get your bearings. We needed him now, not later.

Having missed a big opportunity, we were crushed, heartbroken, crestfallen, defeated.

Sun Tzu Says: "In Death Ground, Fight"

In retrospect, if we had followed Vladimir's initial instinct to separate from the university—enforcing short term suffering in exchange for long-term sustainability—perhaps GZ would have been better set up to eventually succeed as a small business. This is one of the decisions that bound the fate of GZ to the university. This half measure truly reflected my own inner ambivalence to leave a university environment that had provided me the opportunity to achieve status and leave behind the ignominy of my perceived failures in the real world. I saw

my future in the university, both as a PhD student in Digital Media and perhaps even as a professor, so I was really in no hurry to leave. So we had tabled the discussion of severance from the university, and moved forward, unaware of how significantly we had shaped the destiny of GameZombie TV.

The GZ Biz Team – For Real or Not

This raises an interesting question about the nature of the GZ Business team, generally, and whether it was ever really for real. As I have explored, the GZ Business Team became an excellent *web video monetization experimental laboratory* in which Vladimir, myself, and various entrepreneurial and creative students tried a million different ways to make GZ successful, both in terms of popularity and profitability. And nobody learned more in the process than me. I really found working on the GZ Biz team to be enlightening and educational. Unlike the production team, where I was in my element, and the web team, where I was not, the business team was a place where I was always one step ahead and one step behind. We really did just throw everything at the wall to see what stuck. And at the same time, nobody knew how to make money from original web content anyway (except Google of course, the Hungry Hungry Hippo of web profits), so we were pioneers. It was *The Oregon Trail*—would we die of measles, snakebite, dysentery, typhoid, cholera, exhaustion, drowning or a broken leg? Or would we lead our party of settlers from the Midwest to the Promised Land?

In other words, it was exciting.

As I sit here writing this, in Madison, Wisconsin in the summer of 2012, I do wonder if I did not unconsciously *sabotage* the overall objectives of the GZ Biz Team? Did I want it to succeed enough? Lurking in the back of my mind were always those two things:

1. I loved the university environment, and wanted to stay there, and

2. I wanted to earn a PhD, more than I wanted to run a company

So while I was actively working on GZ's real world success, I did not *need* it to happen. Expressly, I did not put myself or my troops on what Sun Tzu calls, "Death Ground" (Tzu, 2007), as Cortez did when he scuttled his own ships off the coast of Veracruz (Greene, 2006). We shouldn't underestimate the motivational power of *desperatio*n. Cornered, starving, and outnumbered, Caesar engaged Pompey at the Battle of Pharsalus, famously reasoning (and fictionally saying), "Our men must win or die. Pompey's men have…other options" (2007). Albert Einstein echoed the sentiment in the oft-attributed quote, "in the middle of difficulty lies opportunity."

On the subject of morale and constitution, GZ Biz Team students have been amongst the project's very best and very worst. Exemplary students have viewed the team as an opportunity to get a first-hand experience of the scrappy inner workings of a legitimate new media start-up. By the same token, students working on the initiatives of a for-profit company within a university setting—in which they are not getting an hourly wage, earning commission, profit-sharing, or being promised financial rewards at a future date—justifiably may not feel *incentivized* to make the business successful. I rarely, if ever, heard the criticism at IU, however, that students felt they were being exploited. Virtually all of my GZ Indiana Biz Team students

viewed the experience as a legitimate, fun, unpaid internship in which they got to make

connections, achieve status, and learn valuable skills. Of equal importance, they observed

Vladimir and me in the trenches with them day to day, scratching our heads, trying to figure out

how to make this thing successful. We led from the front, and as General Buck Turdigson said in

Dr. Strangelove, we were definitely getting "our hair mussed" (Kubrick, 1964).

Student Accusations – Rare but Painful

As a genuine reflection of the difference between the type of soft power that I

leveraged at Indiana, and the hard power that invariably I have wielded at Wisconsin, students

at the latter institution have on more than one occasion levied the criticism against me that

they felt they were being *exploited*. Despite scoring consistently well on GZ instructor and

course evaluations over the years—stellar at Indiana, solid at Wisconsin—including a decent

share of blush-worthy raves; admittedly, my all too human predilection for negativity bias

causes the rare missive of disparagement to get under my skin, (and burn, like abrupt exposure

to sulfuric acid). Never uttered to my face, or even in my presence—I've encountered the

gloomy impugnment that "GZ is exploitive" (no doubt in coarser language) about three times in

postmortem course evaluations or, more traumatically still, on two separate occasions on that

pillory of the professoriate, RateMyProfessors.com. This is even more ironic since the for-profit

initiatives of the GZ Biz Team ended abruptly when I brought the project to UW-Whitewater.

Mortifyingly sensitive to this criticism, beginning as early as October of 2009, I narrowed

the goals of the GZ Biz Team at Whitewater to simple promotion and community engagement

and management, much as they had been in the beginning. Pulling a proper salary, and having

real professorial power over the students, the legitimate business aspirations of GZ were extinguished, and it transitioned entirely into a *simulation*—one that's self-conscious of being perceived as an unethical business property. Doubtless, this is one of the key reasons GZ had become increasingly less fun for me. The juice is gone, so to speak; the action.

GZ's metamorphosis from a business pretending to be a student project to a student project pretending to be a business causes me to once again channel the dragon in John Gardner's *Grendel (1971)*—I become cynical because I know too well where every path leads; my omniscience rendering me *fatalistic*. By contrast, during the dog days of the GZ Biz Team's epic struggle, the project's destiny was great or terrible, but unknowable, and therefore animating.

Can't Keep a Good Zombie Down

But you can't keep a good zombie down.

After months of pitching, networking, groveling, posturing, and promising the world, we got our big break. And his name was Mel Kirk. Mel, a mid-level account executive at Reverb Communications—the video game marketing firm based out of the small Northern California town of Twain Hart—liked our style. He liked our hustle and grit. As a fellow traveler, he appreciated GZ's take-no-prisoners guerilla marketing tactics.

The game was called *Darkest of Days*. A time-traveling first person shooter, *DoD* was to be the flagship AAA title from Phantom EFX, the game development company out Cedar Falls, Iowa, whose claim to fame was that they were the industry leading casino genre publisher for

the personal computer market. They had high hopes for *Darkest of Days*, their intrepid foray

into the competitive console shooter marketplace, dominated by such mega franchises as *Call

of Duty, Gears of War,* and the *Resistance* series. Mel decided to roll the dice on GZ in a big way.

Phantom EFX's entire marketing budget was $100,000, and he decided to give us 40% of it.

"That's right," said Vladimir, "I just closed a $40,000 ad buy."

"Incredible," said I. "That's incredible."

We promised them the moon and the stars to get them in bed with us, and now the big

night had arrived, and we had to deliver. Naturally, the magnitude of video impressions and

exposure we guaranteed was totally beyond our capacity. And so we learned an important

word, *arbitrage*. We approached our great good friends at Dailymotion, who had long

supported our content, and we bought a front page takeover as well as millions of impressions

for $7,500. This was a big gamble, but it was our only option. We were totally exposed because

if Phantom EFX didn't pay up for the campaign, we'd still be on the hook for the dough to

Dailymotion. We'd have promoted Phantom EFX's game out of own pockets! (Slim pockets,

mind you—my IU Adjunct Professor salary in 2008-2009 was about $10,000).

But what the hell, there was no going back now, "once more unto the breach," as

Bungie's development team is wont to say.

But our reckless commitments didn't stop there. We also promised Phantom EFX a

social media bombardment—blast newsletters, Facebook, Twitter, news articles, customized in-

video shout outs, and more. And to bring this all together, we'd make *DoD* the official sponsor

of GZ's strongest production ever, *ButtonMashers Season 2*, the vehicle through which we

would bring our first ad campaign home.

Now, let me tell you how we made that show.

It was hell on earth, and fun.

Part 3: ButtonMashers – all the Heavenly Glory

> *"[smack!] Don't think. <u>Feel.</u> It is like a finger pointing away to the moon.*
> *[smack!] Don't concentrate on the finger or you will miss all that heavenly*
> *glory. Do you understand? [smack!]"*
> –Bruce Lee*, Enter the Dragon (1973)*

Welcome to Development Hell

Making ButtonMashers, our most successful show, was a living hell.

Well, it was that special kind of hell that a masochistic, production-junky like me thrives off of. In other words, it was a self-affirming conflagration, a worthwhile challenge—a cleansing supreme ordeal. The development, production, and release of ButtonMashers grew into a profoundly fulfilling—and transformative—experience precisely because it taxed our abilities down to the last molecule.

In a single word—that was *it.* We found the bottom. That was the best work we could possibly do under those conditions. The self-initiated, self-willed struggle was strenuous, ambitious, and uncompromising.

Ringing Every Last Drop out of IU Telecom – GZ Sweeps the 2010 Webby Awards

I rung every last drop of creative potential and productivity out of the students in the Telecommunications Department at Indiana University with that project—and that epoch— maxing out our collective brain cells. In my debatably humble opinion, the production work we did on GZ during the spring of 2009, later marketing and launching *ButtonMashers Season 2* in

the summer and fall of 2009—while simultaneously continuing and enhancing both our game developer interview series, and our game video original one-offs—was the reason we swept the Webby Awards in the summer of 2010 for Student Online Video (see Appendix B for full press). That cumulative body of work represented the peak of GZ's production competencies, which, while never becoming indistinguishable from professional productions, did in fact come pretty damn close—closer than any student production I have ever seen.

GZ would continue to expand, reaching its apex size and influence in the fall of 2010. And we would in fact create our most professionally produced game developer interview series—our 2011 coverage of E3 and Comic-Con—for Dailymotion, in the summer of that year.

But nevertheless, the production of ButtonMashers Season 1, and especially Season 2, at Indiana University, in the academic year of 2008-2009 represents the point at which GZ managed to squeeze the highest caliber work out of the most students, at the same time. It was our great moment. A standing army of about fifty GZ students, interns, and volunteers at IU, during 2008-2009, tackled the most advanced artistic and technical challenges in GZ's history and meanwhile collaborated at the highest level of complexity. My *commitment was total*; my number of contact hours was unreasonable. Basically, I never stopped working on GZ. In the process, I consciously squeezed the maximum amount of value out of the resources available to me—which at the IU Department of Telecommunications, with the right kind of eyes, were substantial.

A Professional Original Gaming News Show for the Web

Beginning in the summer of 2008, before I had officially launched GZ as a formal class at IU, I knew we had to produce an original gaming news production that fall semester, leveraging the awesome potential of Indiana University's $2.5 million HDTV studio.

While I was making a slave wage—$1,100 per month to teach GZ as an Adjunct Professor—I recognized that IU offered enormous benefits to the project, in terms of both production resources and talented, motivated students, which massively increased the value of the deal. As long as GZ was a true business, privately owned by Vladimir and me, I was well incentivized by the enormous benefits of aligning with IU. From a business perspective, access to the HDTV studio, alone, provided our organization with a significant competitive advantage against rival game media studios, like Mega64, ScrewAttack, and Zero Punctuation. But access to those Elysian Fields—those amber waves of grain—proved anything but axiomatic. To the contrary, it took years of trust building and following through to gain sufficient political capital to:

1. Obtain unquestioned free reign of IU's assorted media labs
2. Gain unspoken consent to run the large-scale internship program
3. Get GZ established as an official class, and
4. Secure access to the multimillion dollar HDTV studio

Let's face it, the diminutive Greek with the iron fist called Bruce held the keys to GZ's good fortune; he was the boss we had to defeat, or simply survive.

The Diminutive Greek with the Iron Fist

Bruce, who was in charge of all IU production equipment and facilities, scared the hell out of everybody, including me. His emails were terse and cold, like military dispatches. It wasn't hard to get the sense that he hated your guts. Gaining Bruce's trust to allow me to run the studio—on my own—took two straight years' worth of confidence building and hard work. As IU's highest ranking production professor, Bruce was our Cerberus—the snarling gatekeeper guarding all the best lights and cameras, and what mythologist Joseph Campbell (1949) called the "ultimate boon," the HDTV studio.

In short, Bruce could have ended GZ.

And he approached his charge with deadly seriousness. Years of maintaining and protecting IU Telecom's impressive arsenal of equipment and labs, including one of the nation's only fully HDTV studios in higher education, had rendered him obdurately apprehensive and incredulous. Bruce had developed rigid regulations, including strenuous procedures for checking out equipment, granting access to facilities, and holding students accountable for damages. The equipment checkout waiver you were made to sign essentially promised your first born child to the department should you, God forbid; break one of the $10,000 Canon XL series HD camcorders.

I suspected that all Bruce really wanted was to be treated with respect. He valued a kind of militaristic formality, promptness, and politeness. So that is what I gave him, serving it up in great gooey gobs. Dealing with Bruce reminded me, but in a more benevolent way, of my experience of dealing with cops. You must always be polite, always be respectful, and always

tell them what they want to hear. It is in their irascible nature to hurt and destroy that which threatens them. All it takes is the slightest sliver of snivelry, one flash of insolent pride, and they will, like a pitiless Jules Winnfield, "strike down upon thee with great vengeance and furious anger" (Tarantino, 1994).

The Quest for Bruce's Blessing

Winning Bruce's confidence was a carefully plotted seduction. I began the quest to obtain his elusive good graces in the summer of 2007, by taking his course, Intro to Teaching Electronic Media. Afterward, for the academic year of 2007-2008, I served Professor Jim Krause as his teaching assistant for his intermediate level TV Studio Production course.

During that period, I audaciously asked Bruce for studio access on weekends in order to shoot special episodes of various projects, including my *Halo 3 Round Table*, (which I later spent my entire 2007-2008 winter break editing in Wells Library). This was an unusual request; there were no other grad students wanting weekend access to the HDTV studio. The goal was to test the limits—to see how much rope Bruce was willing to give me in support of making GZ into something special, (while hopefully not hanging myself in the process).

Bruce did agree to give me studio access in the fall of 2007, but under one critical condition—I needed to have the studio engineer, Stan, on set.

Paying Santa Under the Table

This was no problem—I loved Santa Stan.

Here was a true character—a warm, gentle, sixty-something electrical engineer from the South, who looked exactly like Santa Claus. He bounced about in his jolly way, with his flowing white beard and big 70s glasses, snapping his fingers exuberantly, solving perplexing technical problems, telling offbeat stories, and making himself perpetually helpful.

There was nobody I'd rather have on set than Santa Stan. Nobody knew the studio better. His presence protected me, and the professionalism and integrity of GZ productions, since an impossible technical problem has inevitably emerged at every studio shoot I've ever overseen. Hell, I needed the Santa. There was only one problem; I had to *pay him out of pocket*. Since this studio access was off the books, and not associated with any class—and since he did not work for free—I had to make it worth his while. And I did. With Bruce's implicit blessing, I paid Stan $25 per hour—half his official rate—to engineer our weekend shoots. Usually I paid extra just so he'd know he was loved. Even on my meager IU Teaching Assistant salary, this expense was worth every penny.

Achievement Unlocked - Unlimited Studio Access

The long-term payoff of all this maneuvering was that by the fall of 2008, Bruce's confidence in my ability to run the HDTV studio reached the breaking point I had so long coveted. By virtue of GZ becoming an official class, I was granted access to shoot in the studio virtually every Friday of the semester in the academic year of 2008-2009, with Stan serving as the official studio engineer, and working, thankfully, on the clock, (i.e., on IU's dime, not mine). This was an awesome opportunity—one of GZ's biggest breaks.

Bruce, who could easily have become our great antagonist, like the multi-armed Vishnu in *the Bhagavad Gita*—the destroyer of game zombies—instead became our great patron. Beneath his stringent veneer, there was a man who responded to dynamism and creativity and wanted to see this rare, inspired student-fueled project succeed.

The Half Asian Who did not Share Power

Beginning in September of 2008, we set about to cast the most charismatic, talented, brilliant on camera hosts we could possibly find. Until this time, I'd never really done on screen talent recruiting in this way. Rather, GZ's on camera personalities had generally gotten the gig through personal relationships—they were loyalists, friends; geeks like us.

But, as a rule, our student-fueled project tended to improve whenever we aggressively *recruited along specific talent verticals, widening our net, and increasing our skillset specialization*. Beginning in the spring of 2008, the GZ Biz Team had improved by leaps and bounds when I teamed up with Vladimir, and when we recruited Lester from the Kelley Business School. In that same semester, the GZ Web Team had been fundamentally transformed from an unstable, roughshod bunch, of which I was the slave, into a competent, problem-solving unit, with its own internal hierarchy, that I could guide via common sense, seniority, and persuasion. But this sort of fuel injection, and enhanced professionalism, came later to the on screen talent team for one critical reason above all—we already had a star, her name was Kelly, and like the Dark Lord of Mordor, she did not share power.

The Holy Shit Talent Trinity

Allow me to elaborate—Kelly, our smart, bubbly, razor-witted, half American, half

Korean host, had a jealous nature, certainly, and actively discouraged GZ acquiring any

competition for her as our lead VJ (video jockey). But at the same time, she was good. Kelly was

a natural on camera and could hold her own interviewing some of the biggest names in the

video game business.

By contrast, thinking back to GZ's inspired but awkward coverage of GDC 2007, one

reason that original footage was so weak, among others, was that Mason and I alternated the

role of VJ—a job at which we both equally sucked.

Beginning with Kelly's charming, irreverent self-penned script for an original Wii Sports

video review in the summer of 2007; she instantly became our go to person for on camera

work. Later, in that same summer, it was her idea to drive down to the World Series of Video

Games in Louisville, Kentucky, where I tried her out as a VJ for the first time. And she killed it.

At GDC Austin in the fall of 2007, once again she proved strong, interviewing the gaming

industry's second tier with natural aplomb. But it was at GDC 2008, in the spring of that year,

when we really got to see what she could do.

Kelly held her own in the spotlight of gaming's biggest conference, interviewing industry

heavyweights such as Eric Holmes, lead designer of Radical Entertainment's *Prototype*, Morgan

Webb, the popular host of G4 Media's *X-Play*, the Running With Scissors crew, makers of the

blissfully unapologetic *Postal* series, and especially Cliff Bleszinski, one of the most famous

game developers on the planet, (who was at that time was still called CliffyB), and who had just

broken nerd-shattering news by announcing Epic Games' *Gears of War 2.* She did a terrific job

with them all. Kelly was quick on her feet, generating smart follow-up questions at a nimble

pace, maintaining flow, and skillfully sidestepping the dreaded pauses that can kill a game

developer interview. Critically, she could *talk games*, and this made her agreeable to both the

game developers she interviewed and the game geeks online that watched our videos. Kelly

was the rare trifecta—charismatic, skillful on camera, and most importantly, sufficiently

knowledgeable about video games.

It's damned hard to find a host that the cruel and exacting gaming masses will accept,

and Kelly fit the bill. Since we had something that worked, we determined to move forward

with her as our lead and not shake up the working formula. Since she possessed that most

uncommon trinity of talents, I remained afraid that if we lost her the series would be damaged.

However, lurking beneath this defensive-minded interdependency lurked an Al Gorian

inconvenient truth. Despite lots of exposure combined with social media push, Kelly was not

breaking through into an Internet sensation, which was our endgame. Cults of Internet

personality drove the success of rival independent web video series, like the prostrating legions

that orbited Felicia Day (*The Guild*), James Rolfe (*Angry Video Game Nerd*), and Veronica

Belmont (*Tekzilla*). Since GZ had no marketing budget, and our approach hinged on pure hustle,

casting a bona fide star in a hit web show was our holy grail.

It was as Princess Leia pleaded, our only hope.

In the fall of 2008, I decided to tempt fate. Kelly's rage was of Olympian proportion—

volcanic and inconsolable. But as much as we loved Kelly, and appreciated both her gifts, and

her contributions from the very earliest days, we needed to give the show the best opportunity to succeed. It didn't make sense to limit our on-screen talent options simply to placate our current host, who was unwilling to accept competition. I tell this story because it illuminates a real challenge of running an interest-driven, student-fueled learning environment that's energized by an authentic purpose (building a game media studio) and bound by the strenuous application of soft power. Internal relationships and loyalties can grow deeply intertwined; therefore making decisions that are in the best interest of the project acutely painful.

To initiate a full on campus wide casting call for new on screen GZ talent in the fall of 2008, I had to come to terms, like *True Romance's* (1993) Clarence Worley and the Buddha say, with my "fear and desire." I decided to go for it, branch out, and see what happened.

We blasted out recruitment emails to departments all over campus including, Broadcast Journalism, Telecom, and Theater and Dance.

Searching for Olivia Munn

The response was a deluge.

Vanessa, (my top lieutenant and first truly competent producer), Frank, (my close advisor and unruly PR Manager), and I, received and sorted through around fifty applications. We wound up auditioning twenty young women or so. Our goal was to find a strong female VJ to complement Bradley, whom I'd already cast as the lead male VJ. Bradley, whom I'd rapidly promoted to GZ Head Writer, and the male lead of our in-development news show, was a disaster waiting to happen—a train wreck I'll divulge presently.

Despite the strong competition, it was an easy choice to pick Brigitte, who gave the impression during her audition that she possessed a *competent, scrappy work ethic*. Since competent, scrappy work ethic was the stuff that kept GZ running, she seemed a natural fit. This initial instinct would be borne out in reality, as Brigitte would rise to become one of GZ's best and brightest stars in the coming years.

Though we set out initially to discover one young woman to co-anchor the show—a role which easily went to Brigitte—in the course of our auditioning we were so impressed by Amber that we decided to cast her too, rearranging the show concept around the dynamics of one male, and two female, lead VJs. Yes, the absurd sexual implications were irresistible for a bunch of college kids—so much so that one of our initial titles for the show became "Two Girls, One Gamer," (a riff on a disgusting viral video meme), but Vladimir shot that title down—wisely, I might add.

The Nobleman Who Got Stripped of His Lands and Titles

I hired Bradley as Head Writer for GZ going into the fall of 2008. Shortly thereafter, I decided that since he had the right confidence and charm, he would be a good choice for the male lead in our news show. Since he was enrolled in the class, and was already in charge of developing the script for our flagship news show, I reasoned, this would ensure that he would make it good. In other words, it was my producer instinct to make Bradley a captive of the show via two key means: 1. if he was in the class, in a leadership position, he would not be able to blow off the responsibilities of rehearsal and shooting schedules and 2. If he was going to be on camera, he'd be unable to escape the responsibility of making sure the script was strong,

since—just as it's easier to spend someone else's money—it's easier to write crumby material for another performer.

But the above proved *lazy logic* on my part, having made two key errors: 1. I conjured this scheme before I realized how successful GZ's campus-wide auditions were going to be and 2. Like McCain in 2008, I made the quote unquote gutsy call before I'd fully vetted my maverick pick to learn whether he was ready for the big show.

Bradley had been a student in Jim Krause's TV Studio Production class, for which I was the T.A., in the spring of 2008. And he'd often been a boldly insubordinate ass. Despite that, he wrote something I thought was good, so in a flourish of magnanimity, I invited him to join the first official GZ class in the fall of 2008, promising him the role of Head Writer.

Here's the thing—he had *personality*. And I've always recruited to GZ people that were *characters*; offbeat, dynamic, weird, assertive, or otherwise defiant of social mores. "Here's to the crazy ones," said Steve Jobs. "The misfits. The rebels. The troublemakers. The round pegs in the square holes" (1997). I thought Bradley might make a colorful addition to GZ's panoply of charming misfits. Once incorporated, I gambled, he'd develop affinity for the project, and loyalty to me. In GZ's long and aggressively inclusive recruitment history, the goal has always been to get *interesting people* into the program to see what they could do. Then, if things didn't work out, we'd just deal with it later. Rightly or wrongly, this has been GZ's modus operandi, and while it's worked more often than not, its failures have on occasion been big and ugly—and something to remember.

Before this time, GZ never had an official writing team. But from the humble, embattled conditions of the fall of 2008, the GZ Writing Team would soon emerge as one of our strongest, most consistent, and self-sustaining teams. Interestingly, the strongest writing teams in the history of GZ have been at UW-Whitewater, where the students have determinedly taken charge of the responsibility to generate new and original GZ blog entries and original video game show scripts. But this evolution did not happen overnight—the first couple months of the GZ Writing Team were grisly as you like.

The real problem began when I asked Bradley for a first draft of the script. He just wasn't on my wavelength. Bradley simply did not understand how uncompromising I was that this show should succeed. I was utterly determined that the new GZ News show would be GZ's best original production to date—successful both as a technical operation, and as a hit online. He was comfortable failing with this project, and I was not. After a period of brainstorming and open pitching during which I encouraged everyone on the team to contribute ideas, I gave it to Bradley to produce the first draft of the show's first episode. He came through reasonably, but there was something vapid about it. The tone was too breezy and uninspired. And what's more, he made himself look too cool. His character, as scripted, lacked nuance or the capacity for self-deprecation. I imagined the character differently—I wanted more physical humor and self-punctuation, like G4's Kevin Pereira on *Attack of the Show*. Politely, but firmly—and with corroborating feedback from Vanessa, Frank, Vladimir, and various other GZ captains—I requested a new draft.

Meanwhile, I was busy doing a million other things. I was running every aspect of GZ, from our business initiatives, to casting, to overseeing post-production on our E3 and PAX 2008 footage, to finessing Bruce in order to secure HDTV studio access. So, to my mind, this was the *one*—albeit critically important—thing I'd asked Bradley to do. And yet, the new script did not come. This was not good. I called, I texted, and still, no new script. As the date approached for our first real studio shoot, wherein I had secured Santa Stan to serve as studio engineer, a twenty-five person crew to run every studio operation, two talented co-hosts in Brigitte and Amber, and an original set that we had built from scratch; there was still no new script, and no word from Bradley. This was no way to win my heart.

Finally, in the eleventh hour, Bradley came through with a new-ish draft, which contained only minor changes and in which he still portrayed himself as the puffy-cool center of the world. Now it's hard to disconcert me, especially on the outside. But Bradley was doing his damnedest. Throughout all this, he exhibited striking indifference, which in turn prompted me to check my own emotional levels. In other words, as it became increasingly clear to me that he just didn't care that much, it helped me to see by contrast, how much I *did* care, and to be self-conscious of that fact. My soft power strategy—the technique with which I built GZ—relied upon staying calm, measured, and perpetually polite; being ever diplomatic, flattering, coercive, incentivizing, and persistent. But it wasn't clicking with Bradley. I had elevated him too high, too fast, and he was incompetent. I had to make a move.

The penultimate night before the first shoot, Brigitte and I holed up in a tiny, windowless room on the fifth floor of Wells Library, furiously rewriting the script. We

developed a whole new show section, called Flame Warz, which would provide in-depth blow

by blow historical accounts of particularly vicious, nerdy, and impassioned comment wars on

video game websites. Beyond this, we worked to punch up the overall humor of the script and

to make Bradley's character more humble, dorky, and likable.

At the GZ meeting the next day, a Thursday—the day before the first big studio shoot—I

announced to the team that Brigitte and I had heroically rewritten the script. Secretly, I didn't

believe in it. In my heart, I knew the work to be less than magnificent. Mine was the wrong

voice for the material. This was video game news and sketch comedy for the YouTube

generation. It had to be written *by them, for them*.

Still stewing, it nonetheless was not my leadership style to burn Bradley publically.

Equally, I had no desire to share with my troops the morbid details of all the behind the scenes

scrambling and drama that composed the tortuous tale of our news show's script development.

As GZ's fearless leader, it can only reflect badly on me when my handpicked team leads

crumble in their duties, thereby threatening the integrity of the whole operation. And it looks

weak to lay blame on subordinates. It shows a lack of character and strength. This lesson is

something I've tried to embody, and make part of the GZ DNA.

At last, Bradley strode into to the packed and buzzing GZ production meeting, late as

hell.

"What did you think of the new draft?" I asked boldly, not sure where this might lead.

"I think it *sucked*!" He vomited.

Eyebrows rose. People looked to see how I would react to this insolence.

"But what about our egos?" I quipped, shrinkingly. Brigitte laughed a bit, either nervously or out of impression with my sharp wit. Though I'd like to think the latter, it probably was the former.

He scowled with pride and disapproval.

"Well, Bradley," I said, "if you think you can do better than us then you should. I called you desperately all last week, and you never got back to us."

"I was at work," he said, "And I didn't have my phone."

It was just more bullshit. We were past excuses.

"I didn't want to have to write it," I said. "You're the head writer. This was *your* job. I would have loved nothing more than for you to be doing a great job with this. I've got a million other things to do."

Certainly this was logical, and authentically how I felt. But, like a politician on camera, I also had to watch my tone and be mindful of my words. The whole team was watching me, and my behavior needed to remain professional, collected, and composed.

I trembled to conceal the fact that I've rarely found an individual more infuriating.

Bradley proclaimed to want a shot at redemption, and like Tom Reagan in *Miller's Crossing* (1990), I decided to look in my heart. Besides, as I said, I didn't believe in the script

Brigitte and I had written. I couldn't bring myself to fight for it. I desperately wanted somebody

to nail it.

"This is your last chance, Bradley," I said. "And I need the script as soon as possible, in

just a few hours. No fucking around."

Waiting on pins and needles, the script came over the wire around 8pm that night—this

being the night before our gigantic, high pressure shoot, whose monumental importance I'd

amplified to epic proportions. It sucked. It was the worst one yet. Bradley had thrown out

everything Brigitte and I had done and basically returned to his last script with minor changes.

He remained vigilant upon portraying himself as this cool, in charge guy, with a dismissive,

patronizing attitude toward his co-hosts, Amber and Brigitte. I hated it, and that was it.

I *fired* him.

It's a strange thing to fire a student. You can't throw him out of the class. You still have

to live with the vexation. I suppose it's more like stripping a nobleman of all his lands and titles.

I didn't exactly clap him in irons, but I dramatically demoted him to a place where I thought he

could do the least harm. *I quarantined his infectious suckiness.*

The truth is: he took it rather well. I never understood that. After I moved him to the

Marketing team and made him Frank's problem, Bradley never seemed to harbor much rancor

toward me. In that regard, he demonstrated greater emotional generosity and forgivingness of

spirit than that which I would have been able to conjure. I think it's because he was used to

doing mediocre work, and he legitimately realized that mediocrity was not going to be

tolerated. As I've come to understand, students often forgive severity in teachers if they feel the learning environment is *fair*—and that the instructor's active involvement is sufficiently *credible*. In other words, they don't mind losing the game as long as it wasn't rigged. What's more, I think Bradley's was a genuinely unambitious personality, a true Winnie the Pooh.

Maybe he just didn't care that much, and he could tell the rest of us *cared a lot*, so he felt more comfortable getting out of the way. Perhaps that was it.

Bread & Circuses for the Internet Crowd

The night before the shoot, as the hour grew late, Mitchell, GZ's faithful Senior Production Manager—who, with his prematurely bald head, and his garish double earrings, bore an unfortunate resemblance to Mr. Clean—pitched a fateful idea.

"Why don't you consider Campbell for the lead role?"

"Campbell?" I asked. "Really?"

Until that moment, I had never considered Campbell an on camera type of person. Here was this tall, gangly, nerdy guy—a quiet, technically competent, dutiful GZ editor. He was, in my casual estimation, a solid foot soldier; non-needy, reasonably prolific, and reliable.

"He has a great sense of humor," said Mitchell. "And he's a super funny writer. You should give Campbell a shot, I think."

Desperate, I thought what the hell. I called Campbell, and he wanted in.

He came over to my apartment right away, and together, like a couple of maniacs pitched against a cruel deadline, we labored unto the darkest hours of night. With our Friday morning 8am call time fast approaching, Campbell and I reworked the mangled GZ news show script as if for our very lives. By this point, the script was on its fifth major revision. It had become a brain frying agony to sort through, synthesize, and make sense of all our various notes and best intentions. But Campbell was easy to work with, had damned funny instincts, and had the capacity to keep working late into the night, without complaining. This is what I was truly looking for—what made him the exact opposite of Bradley. It's the single most differentiating characteristic, in my experience, (especially as it concerns student-run projects); the unevenly distributed quality of *grit*.

With gritty people on your team, even if the initial product sucks—and yes, our first script was an unsalvageable disaster—you can trust you'll get it right eventually. To succeed in production—wherein the work can be sudden, brutal and gruelingly long—grit is where the rubber hits the road.

Campbell—who with his dark hair and sunken eyes, struck a certain semblance to the early 20th century master of physical comedy, Buster Keaton—could embody the dumped upon nerd, and was comfortable hamming it up, which opened up opportunities for all kinds of physical, self-effacing comedy. The goal was to play upon audience pathos, and hopefully appeal to gamer geeks across the web, steeped as they were in the *shadenfreude* of fail videos, nut shots, skateboarding wipeouts, and *Jackass* pranks. By way of example, an early gag we came up with we called the Slap Cam Cam, which, as you may have guessed, showcased

Campbell getting slapped in the face by his enthusiastic co-hosts in excruciating slow-motion,

over and over again, as the hit counter continued to rise. It wasn't Merchant Ivory, that's for

sure—more like good old-fashioned bread and circuses for the Internet crowd.

The idea was to give the web what it wanted.

Bendable But Resilient, Like Gumby

Via sheer force of will, and Machiavellian machinations, GZ's brand new gaming news

show secured it all:

1. HDTV studio access

2. A veteran studio engineer in Santa Stan

3. A massive, competent crew, (many of whom had previously taken the intermediate level TV production course I had formerly T.A.'d, and so were pre-trained), and

4. A trio of talented on screen hosts who were good people, had run the gauntlet to secure their positions, and were committed to the project.

There was only one problem: *the script sucked.* By this point, the core five-page script

had been through five drafts (see Appendix I), numerous all-nighters, and the input of Vanessa,

Frank, Vladimir, Brigitte, Campbell, and me, and after so much strife, equaled so much garbage.

I had the highest hopes for this project. It was my uncompromising goal that this show should

be on par with GameTrailers' *GTTV*, the most professionally produced original gaming news

show on the web.

Yet I couldn't do the writing myself; nor did I want to; nor was that a good idea.

For one, I was totally burned out with writing and wanted to focus on the collaborative production challenges of the project. For two, I had already tried to my hand at writing the damned script and failed miserably. As I said, I did not possess the right mindset or skills to do the work. The script had to be written by a died in the wool, true blue, gamer geek—the kind of devotee who followed gaming news voraciously, and whose words would pass the smell test of the Internet's savagely discerning consumers of game media. Yes, the thirteen-year-olds who haunt GameTrailers, IGN, and YouTube for breaking gaming news and the latest trailers, also seek to tear down and destroy those who would disappoint or deceive them. And for three, assuming the above rationale were insufficient, it would be *unwise*.

If I were to write the show it would defy my philosophy of education and project leadership, since it could give the impression that everybody was working on *my* show, instead of *their* show. The core ingredient of GZ's success has always been a feeling of ownership and *buy in* which I consciously nurtured in the hearts and minds of my ever-growing student army.

The bottom line was this: just as with every other major chokepoint in the history of the project, GZ needed to cast a wider net, reinforce the theme of *meritocracy and inclusivity*, and hire a real writer. As we'd done so many times before, we blasted out recruitment emails, put up posters everywhere, and put the word out on the street. Soon thereafter, I met with Seth. Instant catharsis—he was an immediate hit with the gang. He had geek credentials in spades, knew the gaming business, and embodied the perfect combination of confidence, squishiness, and reliability. Fresh-faced and sandy-haired, Seth looked the part of the forlorn staff writer with his nondescript gray hoodie and his five day scruff. Bendable but resilient, like Gumby,

Seth was determined to make it as a professional writer in entertainment, and so never complained about changes, quietly got his way, and always delivered the script on time.

We were saved.

Of Massive Hierarchies & Moving Parts

In the big picture, the GZ hierarchy emerged from people's working personalities, and my perception of them, and this was no clearer than during the intense build-up to the gaming news show shoots. As the project founder and leader, as well as teacher, I have always been the undisputed meta-boss, sort of grandiosely above the fray—what Tupac called the "boss of all bosses" in *Troublesome '96*, or the spray bronzed Brad Pitt, the "king of kings," as he does Brian Cox's cornrowed Agamemnon, in *Troy* (2004).

Next came Vanessa, in the studio shoot pecking order; she was the *student boss*. By virtue of her organizational skills, dutifulness, and natural people management instincts, she had risen from the status of Producer to Senior Producer. What's more—*people liked her*. This is no small feat when your job is to tell them what to do all the time. By comparison, my previous attempts at securing a producer had all failed miserably. Most notably, the cruel and mighty Madolyn had been a total crash and burn. Her style was just too out of sync with the culture I had worked to put into place—that of politeness, camaraderie, hard work, and grace under fire. Madolyn had just been *too damned mean*. A grad student with no patience or apparent empathy for undergrads, she snapped at everybody, including me. And like the God of the Old Testament, she treated my interns with lots of rules and no mercy.

Vanessa, by comparison, was a saint, jived with the culture of collegiality I sought to promote, and centered the project. And unlike her predecessor, she was an undergrad, making her what the mafia call "one of us," as seen through the prism of my undergrad army.

Next in line, came what you might call the floor generals, with boots on the ground.

I placed an unlikely duo in charge of the logistics of the Friday HDTV studio shoots:

1. the charming, tenacious Lynn became the Producer, and
2. the tough, scrappy Pierce served as the Technical Producer, Lynn's direct underling, as it were.

Lynn, who was all of five feet tall, dimpled and freckled, proved to be a feisty Producer for the show indeed. She was relentless about making sure everybody signed up to work the show that week, drew up the call times and roles, and laid down the law. She was equal parts charm, persistence, and bullshit-intolerance, and seemed to always get her way.

Next in line came Pierce, a scraggly haired Bloomington "townie" with a forceful personality, who wore vintage gas attendant uniform type shirts. He knew his way around the studio. I had initially shortlisted him for the role of show Producer. But Pierce actually self-selected to limit his responsibilities to the day to day tactics of running the shoots—a role I called the Technical Producer. As in production, the military, and life generally, it seems to me, there are some people who want to be responsible for the big vision—to carry that burden—and others who want no part of it. The latter sort prefers responsibilities of a more technical, specific, and limited scale at which they feel more comfortable and more likely to excel.

The Closest Thing to a Professional Operation

The Friday shoots were *the closest thing to a professional operation that I have ever seen at a university level*.

There were countless moving parts, and endless elements to bear in mind, making the whole experience thrilling, exhausting, and fulfilling in equal measures—and to the bone. The talent—Campbell, Amber, and Brigitte—tried on various costumes and prepped their lines as the crew buzzed around them. William, our talented lead motion graphics artist, steadily proved his broader indispensability by showing up early to set up a complicated lighting plot, directing his team as they rolled around giant ladders, moving and readjusting the massive scoop lights, and taping hotspots to the floor. Santa Stan and the student camera operators wheeled out the $100,000 high definition studio cameras, while Raymond experimented with complicated jib arm moves like it was a video game. Cedric, GZ's dreadlocked lead musician and audio technician, (a grad student volunteer I'd talked into showing up early), set up our sound by placing wireless lavaliere microphones on the actors, testing them, and meanwhile trained his undergrad assistants to man the soundboards. And every week, without fail, we confronted the colossal task of reconstructing our set again, with its brick walls, chains, dozens of broken bad TVs, and the godforsaken 100 lbs. podium, with its ill-conceived greenscreen broken TVs.

Living the Zombie

Not only did the academic year of 2008-2009, with GZ's expanding portfolio of ongoing projects and initiatives, represent the highest quality of production work that I have ever seen in an academic setting, it also represented *the most teacher-student contact hours* that I think is

possible to (un)reasonable demand in higher education. During the year that I ran GZ as an

Indiana University Adjunct Professor, I concurrently oversaw:

1. GZ's Interview Series, (including editing, releasing, and promoting exclusive coverage of E3, PAX, and GDC),

2. the challenge of launching our news show with professional level standards, and

3. the elaboration and codification of GZ's specialized teams, such as GZ Business, GZ Motion Graphics, GZ Audio, GZ Writing, and GZ Acting/On-Screen Talent.

In fact, I believe that only under those unique working conditions—*being a fulltime*

business runner and instructor of same, simultaneously—could anyone possibly spare that

amount of time, nor rationalize requiring it of students. Due to the fact that I was fully

committed to the project's future, and embedded in its culture and day to day operations, and

furthermore, that my financial future was linked to its success, I was able to *live* the project in

an academic setting, and bring my employees/students along for the ride.

Here's a quick rundown of the hours I was requiring of people, week to week:

Spring Semester 2009 – Meeting Times:

- Lecture: Tues 5:45-7:00pm (TV 250)
- Prod Mgmt Mtg: Tues 7:00-8:00pm (Hyper 155)
- Web Dev Mtg: Tues 3:30 – 5:30pm (TV 250)
- Writing Mtg: Mon 6:00-9:00pm (Telecom couch)
- Biz Dev Mtg: Wed 6:00-9:00pm (Hyper 155)
- First Editing & Mo Graphics Wkshp: Tues 7:00-10:00pm (Hyper 155)
- Second Prod Mgmt, Editing, Mo Graphics Wkshp: Thurs 5:45-10:00pm (TV 250)
- ButtonMashers Rehearsals: Thurs 9pm – 11pm (Telecom couch)
- TV Studio Production: Friday 11:00-3:00pm (Studio 5)

Remember, this was a three credit course!

When I pitched GZ's expansion to UW-Whitewater in March of 2009, despite the fact that the dean and faculty no doubt wanted to acquire GZ as a flagship piece of their new Media Arts and Game Development program, they politely informed me that that level of contact hours was both absurd and not possible at their university. Having worked as professional Lecturer (i.e. non-tenure track professor) at UWW for the past three years, 2009 -2012, officially teaching a 4/5 load, (i.e. four courses in the fall, five in the spring), I have since come to realize precisely what they were talking about.

But at IU, my naivety was also an asset—being unaware of formalities, practicalities, and perhaps even reason, I did as I pleased, with effects that far outstripped the typical impact of university courses. In addition to all the informal student meetings, outside preparation, and solo work, I attended and oversaw *every* official meeting—which rarely started early but often ended late—working a minimum of 80 hours per work on GZ, usually more than 100.

Given that the project was inseparable from my life, identity, job, and purpose, I was basically *always* working on GZ. To be honest, I did not even know how *not* to work on GZ. For me, everything else was wasted time.

The goals of the project were always on my mind, and when I bumped into people, I wanted to know how they were doing, and what they'd done for GZ lately. As I wandered the Wells Library to find 75% of the university's multimedia lab stations being occupied by GZ students and interns, I dropped by each one in turn, and practiced what business gurus call "management by walking around" (MBWA) (Peters & Waterman, 1982). I may have been a tad obsessive, and unable to unwind in a healthy work-balance sort of way, but students rarely

complained about that. In my experience, students feed off of passion and commitment from the instructor, and it's hard to err on the side of too much of the stuff. Credible in my demandingness, I commanded the unwavering respect of my troops; I led from the front while eating my own dog food and drinking my own Kool-Aid, as they say, (though rarely recommending the combination).

The Pressure to Keep Everybody Moving

Let me take a moment to discuss my philosophy of GZ project assignments since it gets to the heart of how GZ sparked to life, and then kept on going.

My undying goal was to assign meaningful, rewarding projects that students would find substantive, challenging, and educational. GZ work was meant to put hair on your chest, (yes, even the girls), but also be fun. High morale and positive word of mouth remained keys to GZ's success. So projects had to fit a fairly strict bill, to which I held my managers accountable.

I remember a time, in the spring of 2009, shortly after Mitchell had been promoted to Senior Production Manager. I charged him with giving meaningful work to his three Production Management trainees. I caught him assigning mini reflective essays exploring their thoughts on production management, or something similarly vacuous. Mind you, they had just started so they would have had nothing to say. It pissed me off. It was weak—a lazy assignment. His trainees needed real, active work, and he needed to think harder about what that could be. This dopey assignment didn't:

1. Push the project forward, or

2. Give the recruits something *authentic* to do, from which they would learn valuable, practical, applicable skills

To hell with reflective essays, I wanted GZ's foot on the gas pedal.

At the same time, a unique pressure of an interest-driven learning environment is that the leader/teacher, (and the student managers), must continuously come up with ideas for assignments. *You've got to keep everybody busy*. I've always felt this most acutely at the beginning of a given semester, when a room full of bright-eyed tenderfoots invariably looks up at me, imploring "what now boss? Where do we begin?" I've refused to cut corners by coming up with meaningless, time-consuming assignments just to keep people in motion, and off my back.

The Right Honorable GZ Assignment

A proper GZ assignment has had to fulfill the requirement of being challenging and time-consuming *and* substantive and rewarding. That's a tall order. And it gets further complicated when you consider the fact that some students actually desire mind-numbing repetitive work. They'd prefer it so they can know they've done their part, (toward the grade or internship hours), without having to excessively tax their creativity brain cells. I can sympathize with this inclination—not every piece of work we do need be the dome of the Florence Cathedral. Sometimes, tedious, repetitive work—that provides the sense that you're moving the ball forward—can be therapeutic and fulfilling in a fundamental sort of way. In a balancing act, GZ assignments have tried to be—like the pliable Mitt Romney—the servant of many masters.

In what Voltaire (2005) called "the best of all possible worlds," GZ assignments should be:

1. substantive, challenging, and educational

2. sufficiently time-consuming

3. occasionally tedious and repetitive, (when necessary or desired)

4. synergizing with the development goals of the larger project, and

5. tailored to the direct interests of the student who feels that he or she is working on something of *personal value*

In the next section, I'll explore a GZ postproduction session in order to illustrate, in action, how I put this philosophy to work to *spark the project to life.*

Anatomy of a GZ Video Editor Feedback Session

My process of giving feedback to editors has not changed much in nearly six years. Since it ain't broke, I haven't fixed it.

The ritual evolved organically—beginning with my first informal editing feedback sessions with my undergrad volunteers in Wells Library in the spring of 2007, the procedure became more formalized during the internship program in the summer of 2007, and had crystalized by the time the class launched in the fall of 2008.

It always begins the same way—the editor tells me they're ready for me to take a look at the video. I always answer the same way—I ask if their lead editor has already looked at it.

Regardless of their answer, I try to triangulate the truth by asking their lead editor the same question directly. If the answer is no—their lead editor has not yet reviewed their video—then I tell the editor that I want the lead editor to take a look at it first and then ask me again later.

Why the rigmarole?

In the Zone – Bring the Noise

A GZ Postproduction Meeting, which includes our Editing, Motion Graphics, and Audio teams working independently and in concert, is somewhat like a scene from *ER*, or better yet, one of those opening scenes to *The West Wing*, where Josh Lyman, the White House Deputy Chief of Staff, rolls from and fires back at the news of the day as it erupts at machine gun pace—ruffled feathers, policy gridlocks, PR meltdowns, and the like. In other words, it's *hectic*, and it just keeps coming. I like to play the game head's up. I've got a million questions flying at me and everybody's competing for my attention. Meanwhile, I have my own agenda of things I want to prioritize and make sure get done, and that's always bumping up against the emergent exigencies of the moment. My perpetual goal is to avoid getting *pinned down*.

Instead, I want to control the flow and energy of the meeting. If I sit down with an editor, usually the process will take fifteen to thirty minutes at minimum during which I need to focus on their work completely. It's a big chunk of a two to three hour meeting.

One of the key reasons the GZ Lead Video Editor review should precede my own is because there are a standard set of feedback notes that help shape the identity of a genuine GZ video, which my Lead Video Editors know by heart. They should and will catch missing elements

in novice GZ editor videos, and set them on the right course. It's the GZ Lead Video Editor's job to teach the less experienced editors certain core ideas. Once upon a time, I taught these Lead Video Editors these concepts, or otherwise I taught the Lead Video Editors that taught them, and so goes the GZ family tree of knowledge, as it's passed down the generations. The basics that I want my GZ Lead Editors to catch include things like:

1. If using HD footage, is the timeline properly set to 1920 x 1080p?

2. Is the length somewhere between 2 – 5 minutes?

3. Does the editor have <u>all</u> the necessary elements, including: the core interview footage from both cameras, the motion graphics intro and outro, the game capture from the video game in question, an original GZ game music remix, original sound effects, etc.?

If the editor and the lead editor both confirm that the video has been through the ringer and is ready for the big boss to step in, and if I can pull away at that moment from all other entanglements, then I sit down with the editor.

The editor, who's using noise canceling headphones, almost always invites me to listen to the project using their headphones, and I always react the same way. I politely say—no!

Instead, I pull the headphones out of the back of the Mac and crank up the volume about as loud as I can. Is this disruptive to all the busy GZ worker bees? Probably, a little. But it's my style. I like for other GZ students to see and hear and sense that another project is being worked on and is nearing completion. I consciously encourage *a loud, messy, collaborative*

production environment. I thrive off it—and my goal is that the same energy that enthuses me will infect the troops like a zombie virus. I realize it's a bit annoying to some people to hear this working edit blasting away. But most GZ folks have noise canceling headphones they can plug in at any time. So for me: *the ends*, (heightened energy and intensified serendipitous idea friction), justifies *the means*, (consciously being a little loud and disruptive).

With the edit playback set to full blast, I ask the editor:

"Do you have a piece of paper?"

I don't ask for a pen since I already have my Pilot gel ink G2 in my pocket.

If the editor doesn't have a piece of paper, (and they usually do), we scrounge one up from somebody close by, or otherwise I rip one out of the printer tray. This is an important ritual because I'll scribble all my blasted notes on that blank piece of paper. We start playing the rough cut, and almost immediately I slap the spacebar and have a note.

"You need to cut the motion graphics intro down to 7 seconds," I say. "Nobody will watch an intro on the web longer than that." You see, one of the many cool GZ motion graphic intros that William has made for us, one which is still a favorite, was exported from After Effects at 15 seconds of length. "Stylistically cut the motion graphics intro down, but also cut the audio, so the whooshes align with the movement of the GZ logo, you know what I mean?"

This type of ultra-specific editing feedback is invariably nonsensical to an outsider, and perhaps even to me, some weeks removed. The creative and technical feedback belongs to the

time and place of the interaction between the student, the project, and me. I scribble the

motion graphics trimming note down on the piece of paper and we move on.

"These audio levels need to be balanced," I say. "The music is too hot, and you can't

hear Cliffy's voice clearly enough. No matter how cool your video is; if you can't hear what the

developer is saying, it's ruined. The whole thing is ruined."

My stern warning is meant to stick in the editor's brain. Because it's true. No amount of

creative showmanship or motion graphics or anything else will salvage a video on the web if

you can't clearly hear what the people are talking about. It's instant death to the video—

especially in the brutally competitive environment of online video content, where people

browse whimsically, forever in pursuit of the next disposable amusement.

I slap (some say smash) the space bar and we go on.

"Where did you get this game capture?" I ask.

"I got this trailer from the media assets provided by Sony," says the editor, "but one of

the gameplay videos wouldn't work."

"It's probably because it's in a funky file format," I say. "Try to open it with iMovie,

which is like the can opener of the Internet."

The editor laughs.

"Seriously," I say, "because iMovie is made to be as easy as possible, as WYSIWYG (What

You See Is What You Get) as possible, it also has the weird ability to open virtually any file.

Import the game capture into iMovie and then export it out as a .mov. If that doesn't work, just try to grab it off of IGN. You can use my account."

When we shoot interviews on the floor at game conferences, many of our game company contacts give us media packets, or exclusive password protected links to their breaking news game assets online. I make a very specific point to ask for the game assets there and then, as much and as many as we can get. This is a habit born of experience. You see, once the GZ crew is back in the Midwest—Bloomington or Whitewater—it becomes exponentially harder to get video game marketing and PR representatives to respond to email requests for assets. But I can get the editor the game footage they need one way or the other:

1. We get it on the floor at the conference, or we get an exclusive press link,

2. We follow up with the game's representatives using my Gmail database after the fact, and get it sent over, or

3. We just grab off the web somewhere, someway, (either from IGN, GameTrailers, or otherwise ripped from YouTube, using an .flv conversion service like KeepVid).

I hit the space bar and we go on. Slap!

"I see you've stripped the audio off this game capture, and that's cool, but now it's silent, and kind of boring. I want you to go to SoundSnap or FreeSounds.org and find some cool sounds and sort of replace the sound effects as your own custom sound design. Don't overdo it," I say. "Just use the sounds effects to provide dynamism in various places, around the dialogue, and in different places where it works."

I scribble and scribble.

And after we've gotten all the way to the end of the video, usually two to three pages are full of my scribbles—my ultra-specific editing feedback notes.

Then I go back over every single note I made, one by one, making sure the editor can read my horrible writing, and making sure they understand explicitly what the note means, and what I'm talking about. My style is a bit repetitive, but I'm striving to negate the possibility of plausible deniability. I'm seeking to *squash ambiguity*—which is a concept undergrads sometimes like to use as cover. The next time we meet, the first thing I'll do is ask for that silly scribbled upon piece of paper, and reread my notes fastidiously, to make sure they've done exactly what we discussed, or otherwise made an effort. The idea is to avoid starting again from scratch, but rather to build from feedback session to feedback session.

During all of this I *never insist on anything*. I say things like, "you know what I mean?" or "What do you think about that?" or "Would that be a good idea?"

In the broad spectrum of GZ's expansive creative pursuits—from web development to marketing to original music composition—providing feedback on video edits is probably my primary area of expertise. I have my opinions on all the things above, and I say my piece, believe you me, but when it comes to the nitty-gritty of video editing, this is a place where I feel, (as opposed to Donnie in the *Big Lebowski* (1998)), in what Sir Ken Robinson (2009) calls my *element.* Having gone to film school at the University of Texas, being an affirmed film geek in my bones—who's watched a gazillion hours of movies and television—and having paid my dues with the software, not only do I enjoy the process of giving editing feedback, but I tend to get into the zone (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) when doing it.

Cultivating Inspiration, Originality, and Giving a Damn

My goal is to cultivate and nurture creative inspiration and originality in the editors, wherever and whenever it can be found. I strive to infuse a sense of ownership, a sense of buy-in. Each video, irrational and inefficient as it might seem, is meant to be a special, unique snowflake—a little gem of which our whole GZ village can be proud. And I want the editors *to give a damn.* This is why the Machinima, industrial scale uploading strategy that Vladimir advocated, could never work for us, and why I never got behind the idea. My precious approach to editorial direction is a key reason why GZ drifted inexorably toward the identity of critic's darling, focused on winning awards, and equally so, toward that of an educational environment that encouraged experimentation and expression. In this ideological inclination, we willfully disregarded the heart of true business, which should responsibly have sought for conformity to tight industry standards with proven market success.

Look! It's Moving. It's Alive, It's Alive!

Postproduction on *ButtonMashers* was uncompromisingly ambitious.

2008-2009 represented a peak competency for GZ postproduction during which all my countless hours of work with GZ editors began to come to fruition on a scale beyond prediction or expectation. All that *giving a damn* and all that *messy, dynamic synergy of collaboration* transmogrified into more than the sum of its parts. Like a flesh golem hit with a bolt of electricity to its neckline electrodes; GameZombie sparked freakishly to life.

The Creature Becomes Self-Aware - Initiating Independent Collective Learning

The fall of 2008 was first time that I experienced students becoming not only better than me at editing but also taking the initiative to research and solve complex technical problems on their own—creating collaborative resources to share their pioneering work.

It was during this time that my lead editors started the GZ Editing Manual, which has since become not only the first thing that GZ editing recruits are asked to read but also our collective editing reference bible. Thinking back to GZ's ancient history, it was alone, in the pale spring of 2007, as Grima Wormtongue (Tolkien, 1981) is wont to say—in the bitter watches of the night—that I figured out the best, lossless export settings from Final Cut Pro for standard definition digital video footage to upload to YouTube. But by the fall of 2008, the game had changed. Now we were shooting *ButtonMashers* in full 1920 by 1080p high definition resolution, and needed to figure out a way to compress our beautiful glossy footage down to less than 100 megabytes or so without a noticeable loss in quality. I didn't have the answer and didn't have the time to figure it out.

The passion, persistence, and ingenuity of GZ's lead editors saved the production by scouring the Apple and professional editor forums and attempting dozens of export experiments until they found the solution. It was a pretty damned complicated formula and to this day I don't know exactly how they came by it, but we've used it ever since. They dutifully transcribed their lossless 1080p export formula into the GZ Video Editor's Handbook Google Doc (see Appendix D), which every GZ editor has accessed and applied to their own videos, ever since.

By the spring of 2009, deep into postproduction on the second season of ButtonMashers, we had nine strong editors working in concert, and hard—editing GZ game developer interviews, GZ originals, and/or ButtonMashers episodes.

In the fall of 2008, the ButtonMashers Season One episodes required students to green screen composite video into the podium's broken TV screens. That had been *my* great idea. And what a nightmare it had proven. Since we were cutting between four different cameras, including the jib camera, which was not only moving but also had a slightly different color temperature, the compositing work could not have been more difficult. Such self-inflicted agony—all so we could Chroma key video loops of Internet memes like keyboard cats and double rainbows into the TVs, after the fact. GZ editors pulled it off, and they barely complained.

But by the second season, GZ got smart and trashed the nefarious and depraved podium; replacing it instead with a 32" HDTV upon which we ran a loop of pre-edited GZ footage. Once again, the students, on their own, did research and figured out that the HD studio cameras would pick up the HD screens with perfect fidelity, no postproduction required, as opposed to standard definition screens which reveal vertical lines when recorded.

They were solving complex technical problems, forging ahead with original research, writing it down in their collaboratively editable production documents, and teaching new generations these secrets of GZ.

In other words, my monster was alive—alive I tell you!

Getting Our Kicks before the Whole Shithouse Goes up in Flames

As the complexity of GZ's postproduction reached new heights during the academic year of 2008-2009, this included the integration of original motion graphics and custom-designed music and audio mixing.

The Proto Motion Graphics Team

William proved to be a very capable Lead Motion Graphics artist early in the fall of 2008, never missing a class, embracing the culture of collegiality and hard work that I encouraged, and demonstrating a nuanced sense of persuasiveness and soft power. He and his team created professional level original motion graphics at an aggressive clip, including all of the following for ButtonMashers: the Burning Up the Boards intro sequence, the rolling gate backdrop to the Dick Moves sequence, a mechanical scrolling ticker upon which we could place random witticisms, and an intro and outro animation theme that showcased the lead characters as if they were selectable from a video game menu.

It was really impressive stuff.

The Proto Audio Team

This period also represented the origins of the GZ Audio team, whose work and purpose solidified around creating original video game compositional remixes for GZ's various video productions as well as working with the editors to fine-tune their leveling, sound effects editing, and integration. Audio production students loved the work because they had the opportunity to narrowly focus on their craft. If and when I created the right environment, lines of

communication between the editing and motion graphics team to the audio team—as

hopefully catalyzed by the producing and production management team—stayed open,

assuring that the audio team always had a backlog of jobs.

Beginning early in the fall of 2007, I bent over backwards to talk new IU grad student,

Cedric, into collaborating with GZ. Once indoctrinated, Cedric significantly strengthened our

operation by providing the benefit of his formidable composition and sound effects recording

skills. Our collaboration with Cedric solidified into a process whereby editors working on a

certain edit—such as an interview with Ed Boon, the creator of *Mortal Kombat*—could extract

and isolate a piece of the new MK game score, as recorded either in game capture, or in a

trailer, and then email it as a high definition uncompressed audio file attachment, such as a .aiff

or a .wav, to Cedric. Then using the software programs, Reason or Fruity Loops, Cedric would

remix the track, adding a cool drum and bass electronic sound signature to the piece, and then

send it back to us. The editor would then stylistically integrate the remixed audio into the

original game video, crediting Cedric for the remix when we uploaded it to the web. It was win-

win, since we were getting strong original music and Cedric was getting significant exposure.

It's important to understand that ripped off music—like shooting in dorm rooms with

student actors, or recording sound that changes tone from shot to shot—are the dead giveaway

hallmarks of amateur videography.

To compound the issue, YouTube has always cracked down on noncommissioned used

of copyrighted music, such as the original music contained within videos games. And though

GZ's use of un-remixed copyrighted video game music could easily have been defended under

"fair use" laws—since we are a game media organization creating original game news and commentary—we circumvented any ambiguity in our position by creating *custom-designed video game music remixes* for virtually every one of our videos.

As a YouTube Partner seeking to turn on AdSense revenue sharing for our videos, we sent the following boilerplate letter in defense of our position:

> *Hi YouTube Partner Support,*
>
> *We shot this video interview with Naughty Dog Co-President Evan Wells, about the game Uncharted 2, at the 2010 Game Developers Choice Awards. Our talented musician Cedric remixed the Uncharted 2 theme from assets provided us by Naughty Dog's PR Dept. All of the B-Roll game footage and additional images were provided for us courtesy of Pinnacle Entertainment Limited's Public Relations Department, and fall under section 107 of U.S. Copyright law, 'Fair Use,' as this video interview is defined as 'game journalism.' Shosanna and William, our talented Lead Motion Graphics Designers, created the motion graphics used in this piece. Thank you for our much appreciated promotion to YouTube Partner!*
>
> *Very best,*
>
> *Spencer Striker,*
> *Executive Producer*
> *GameZombie TV*

Original Remixes

Certainly the idea of "an original remix" is a bit of a new media puzzle. The term suggests that while the music is partly ripped off, it's partly owned by the remixer too—so what the hell to make of this new mutant hybrid?

Regardless of the nuances of copyright law regarding remixing in the modern era, GZ's claims of "fair use" have never once been challenged by YouTube.

Utilizing original music remixes for GZ videos was cool and stylish. The technique improved our videos and provided our students with more meaningful work to do, thereby enhancing the educational experience of working on GZ. In another example of GZ's business be damned attitude, we favored artistic indulgence and fulfillment over the real demands of the game media industry. To this day, I have never seen a rival game media outlet remixing game music—they always simply lay down an unedited loop of a given game's music, taken from a trailer or game capture. To my knowledge, we are the only game media outlet that has ever taken the time or the energy to remix video game music—what's more, we've done it in hundreds upon hundreds of videos.

The Liabilities of Soft Power

While the strenuous application of soft power strategies to motivate and incentivize students can bring about extraordinary, self-perpetuating productivity and passionate commitment—it can also backfire in ways that ain't too pretty.

Beginning in the summer of 2008, and into that fall, a Music Business major named Frank became our PR Manager. He was dutiful, came to all the meetings, and definitely had some smart ideas. For example, based on a consultation with a local marketing professional, he encouraged me to boil down the goals of GZ into a single sentence, which ultimately became: "To become one of the top five creators of original game media content on the web." That was

a solid recommendation, and a positive contribution to the operation. But Frank could also be a real pain in the ass. He was *always challenging me.*

Issues I had with Frank highlight an ongoing theme of GZ's development—that is *the liabilities of a strenuous application of soft power*. By blurring the lines between teacher/leader/mentor/friend, I left myself open to attack from bold students, such as Frank, who found the idea of taking orders from me threatening. Even though I went out of my way to package what I wanted in the most palatable, non-prickly way (including lots of opportunities to incorporate others' ideas), certain students over the years, such as Frank, focused suspiciously on the underlying power dynamic—that I was quietly getting my way. These rare students found that whiff of manipulation annoying, and pushed back in various ways. Sometimes they blatantly disregarded what I'd asked them to do, while other times they'd argue with me publicly in front of the team. The first is easier to deal with, since it's a private drama; but the second can be quite unnerving, since it's public theater.

Throughout the history of GZ, a select few students have challenged me in this way, tactlessly crying out things like, "Spencer, that's just a really dumb idea!"

Teachable Moments in the Pits

It's infuriating and embarrassing all at once, but I never snap back. At such incandescent moments, the whole team maximally focuses on me. It's human nature. They're embarrassed too and want to see how the boss reacts. Just like Chicago's colorful mayor Rahm Emanuel says, "You never want a serious crisis to go to waste" (Seib, 2008). The shocked team that's watching is never more impressionable than in those few fleeting moments following the flashpoint. This

is an opportunity for beneficence and culture setting. By remaining calm as a Hindu cow, I relate that GZ is an environment where I'm comfortable having ideas challenged, that I'm cool under pressure, and that I don't overreact. Fissures of insecurity and spite don't dwell dangerously beneath the surface. And by virtue of demonstrating these traits, a culture of trust gets perpetuated, and reinforced. Self-control, restraint, maturity—these values instead get pumped into the project's DNA.

Then I wait them out, giving said troublemaker less and less important assignments, quarantining their poisonous insubordination. As a management strategy, you want to give them work that effects the least amount of students so their rotten attitude achieves minimal reverberation through the otherwise positively charged, interdependent ranks.

Inevitably, these sour grapes leave the team of their own volition.

Danger - Contents under Pressure

As the production work on GZ both accelerated and specialized, the sheer amount of digital assets under our direction ballooned exponentially.

In the dark ages of GZ, as I previously alluded, it got to a point where I had thirteen unique external hard drives, all named after famous zombie creatures and killers: Jill Valentine, Chris Redfield, Frank West, Leon Kennedy, Verdugo, El Wray, Captain Rhodes, El Gigante, Albert Wesker, Dr. Ashford, Carlos Oliveira, Ramon Salazar, and Bub. As a standing policy, I lent them out to GZ editors semester to semester.

But by the fall of 2008, storing assets on individual external hard drives wasn't going to cut it anymore. We had had hundreds of individual students working on the project in different interest areas for nearly two years; almost all of whom had had their own external hard drives (which was a strong recommendation for editors, motion graphics, and audio students).

In addition, my Gmail inbox hosted another 7 gigabytes of GZ innards, crammed with stores of important 2D graphics assets, in particular.

MegaUpload – Narrowly Escaping Pirate Death

In the fall of 2008, after researching various cloud-based digital asset community storage solutions, I chose MegaUpload. Immediately, we began uploading hundreds of gigabytes of data to their servers—backing up the old stuff, and pushing the new stuff to *the cloud*.

Flashing forward eighteen months—GZ fortuitously evaded total destruction when, upon expanding to Wisconsin, I decided to get everything off MegaUpload. Early in the spring of 2010, we back-breakingly downloaded all of our content from MegaUpload's servers, and then re-uploaded it, file by file, to our new UWW cloud storage solution. This exodus proved as miraculous as the Dunkirk evacuation when—shortly after GZ's data relocation—MegaUpload was seized by the FBI, its assets frozen, and its founders charged with piracy on the Internet's high seas (Sydell, 2012). Apparently there was a whole lot of illegal file sharing going on. And though we GZ innocents employed the site for untainted purposes, pure and proper; when MegaUpload got pinched, *all*—like Shakespeare's Captain Prince said—*were punished*.

So, there's a story of how GZ survived.

Beginning in the fall of 2008, I began sharing MegaUpload's single password with the entire team—a decision, born of necessity, with grand implications for GZ.

GZ's MegaUpload account grew and grew in size; and in the process, so did our dependency on the website. GZ had exposure—both to the integrity of MegaUpload's cloud servers, and to the risk of sharing such a vulnerable password with so many students, at the same time.

The Sacred Trust of the Undead

Sharing a sensitive password with as many as eighty individual students over the course of a sixteen week semester—wherein people will invariably get upset for various reasons—amounts to, none other than, the tempting of fate. But I really didn't have a better solution. In fact, the sharing of sensitive passwords with huge numbers of students is a liability that has always been a part of GZ's DNA, and continues to be to this day. For whole semesters, even years at a time, I have even given a trusted inner circle of loyal GZ lieutenants, both my Gmail and Facebook password, so they could access our YouTube account, press emails, and our professional contacts database. Only recently did YouTube change its settings so that you can re-connect a YouTube account to a random Gmail address, making it much safer to share your YouTube login credentials with a big group. For years, I gave out my personal Google account login information (and therefore my Gmail login information) to big swaths of the team, including producers, production managers, and editors, since there was actually no other way

to do it. I could not personally be responsible for logging everyone into GZ's YouTube whenever they needed in. It would have completely bottlenecked our efficiency, and killed the project.

Trust, therefore, was not only important, but *essential* to the success of GZ. Looking back on GZ's dynamic, inclusive six year history, the sheer lack of significant incident speaks volumes about the degree to which students have consciously sought to bear this trust intact.

But of course, there are always exceptions.

A Poet amongst Rocket Scientists

Going into the fall of 2008, the pressure on the students and myself to do professional level work had never been higher. While I think I handled a lot things and a lot people the right way—squeezing maximum amounts of potential out of everyone and everything—it's clear to me now that I kind of blew it that semester with the GZ Web Team.

Beginning in the spring of 2008, when our successful Informatics and Computer Science recruitment efforts resulted in the acquisitions of Cy, Cameron, and Nelson, in addition to a host of supporting characters, the web team really took off and began to achieve feats that beforehand were simply not possible. Simultaneously, I had been liberated from the horror of being at the perpetual mercy, first of Mason, and then of Roland—two brutal materialists who tried to take you humble narrator for all that he's worth, (at least in terms of patience).

Beginning in January of 2008, GZ put in place terrifically qualified web development student interns who, at long last, did fantastically competent work—and at same time didn't either push me for an ownership position, (Mason), or willfully ignore my requests, (Roland). It

was a hugely propitious turn in GZ's history, and the direct result, as I've discussed, of

aggressive, inclusive recruitment along specific talent verticals.

I managed the GZ Web Team very well through the spring of 2008. Then I did so again

through the summer of that year, when our webmaster, Cy, was away. But beginning in the fall

of 2008, I made two critical mistakes, rolled into one. First of all, I pushed GZ's beloved code

monkeys too hard without sufficiently being involved in the day to day operations to ensure

their loyalty. For the previous eight months, (from January – August of 2008), I had sat

through—and often prolonged—our tedious, exhaustive, two to three hour weekly meetings, in

which I held everyone accountable for every damned thing we discussed. I mean, I was really

thorough—partly because I needed to be to make sure I wasn't being bamboozled.

Being a poet amongst rocket scientists, my goal was ever to discern the what, where,

and how of our initiatives; to cut through the obfuscation of the jargon, if you will—or, more

aptly, the bullshit.

But in the fall of 2008, I ceded control of the GZ Web Team meetings entirely to Cy, with

the loyal, lanky Cameron D serving as his confident number two.

I mostly missed the substance of their meetings, and often wandered in midway

through. I'd come in, watch, and occasionally ask some questions, but my involvement was not

invasive or abrasive enough to provide me with sufficient intuition or credibility. Toward the

end of the meetings, I'd press for hard answers, bottom lines, and assurances, asking: where we

were, where were we going, but most importantly, *when will it be done*?

But I wasn't in the thick of it.

Meanwhile, somewhere along the line, I had decided to pursue an ambitious full-on redesign, including—wait for it—the construction of a proprietary *video-based commenting system*. In other words, users of the GZ site would only be able to comment on our videos by using their computer-mounted web cameras. It was ambitious as hell, and right on the edge of unrealistic. It was a good idea, but way ahead of its time. Even in 2012, a fully video-based commenting system like the one we proposed in 2008 would not be prudent. Despite the fact that the trend of the web has progressed toward more openness and sharing, and the fact that there's ever more multimedia content, especially video; text commenting remains the dominant form.

Can You Care too Much?

When the end of the semester came about, and the new (wildly ambitious) site was not finished, my solution was to simply give out *incompletes*. Truly, that fall of 2008 I gave out eight individual incompletes to students in that GZ class. Why so many? The reason was *I cared.* I wanted assignments to get finished. I didn't want students running the clock out on me and then abandoning important semester projects. Such a sorry scenario struck me as a monumental waste of time—and exactly the type of lateral, uninspired inefficiency I designed GZ to disallow.

Now, was I fanatical? I think so, at least a little bit.

Looking back, eight was a lot incompletes. But I wanted the work to get done, damn it. And seven out of eight of the students who received incompletes accepted it without so much as a word of complaint. The silent seven demurely, and non-confrontationally, conceded that they would have to finish their incomplete GZ projects in the first weeks of the spring semester 2009. They knew they hadn't finished their work, that I was paying attention, and that when that work was done they would get a high grade. They respected me, knew me to be reasonable—and calmly capitulated to the high standards that I had set for performance in GZ, which above all, included *finishing what we started*. And that was all well and good.

But the eighth one, well, he had a shit fit such as I have never seen.

Smoking out the Evildoers

It all began late in December of 2008, when I tried to log into the MegaUpload account and found I couldn't get in. Then I tried YouTube. But my username and password wasn't working. I tried a password reset but got no response. What the hell?

Then I got an email, a call, a text from various GZ generals reporting to me that they were locked out too. Then I tried password resets on more GZ accounts but the emails weren't coming back to me—somebody had taken the time to go into the accounts and alter the associated contact information. Ok, that was creepy.

I proceeded to cycle through the five Kubler-Ross stages of grief (1969) in rapid succession, sort of settling on wrath. To say that I was pissed would qualify as one of the great understatements of the 21st century. I was beside myself with unholy rage.

Who could it be? Thought I.

As Joe Pesci begs in *Raging Bull* (1980)*,* "where do you get your balls big enough" to pull a stunt like this? Who had the biggest axe to grind? Bradley, I thought, the rat bastard. In one of the dumbest moments in the history of my leadership of GZ, I called Bradley and accused him of locking us out.

In retrospect, it was a ham-fisted maneuver. But I was in the pits, my back against the wall. All I had at that moment was the force of my personality, and the fleeting power of my position as an Adjunct Professor, to wrest control of the accounts back. This was the ultimate nightmare: three years' worth of backbreaking work, involving hundreds of students, now being dangled by its ankles over a cliff.

Deep down, I knew Bradley hadn't done it. It's just that he was my only suspect. Without a clear target, I ripped a chapter from the sordid George W. Bush playbook, seeking to smoke the evil doers out.

As indignant and enraged as a falsely accused Dr. Richard Kimble in search of the one-armed man, upon getting my desperate voicemail, Bradley struck back. He hit me in the jugular, (the court of public option), when he hit *reply all* and blasted an open GZ email list—pretty much every damned body—declaring his innocence.

I was mortified. He'd made me sound like a real asshole. I supposed I deserved it. But as I've been developing in this dissertation, my soft power—my credibility and persuasiveness—

hinged on maintaining a strong reputation with my troops. This was not good. Not only did the culprit remain a mystery, but now I was suffering a PR crisis to boot.

Embarrassment and vexation swirled in equal parts in my heart and melon. What to do? How to rescue what *Trainspotting*'s (1996) Mark Renton called this "shite state affairs?" Do nothing. Go dark. Close your eyes. Be the samurai.

Yamamoto Tsunetomo (1980) writes in *Hagakure: In the Shadow of Leaves:*

> *One should be careful and not say things that are likely to cause trouble…when some difficulty arises in this world, people get excited, and before one knows it the matter is on everyone's lips. This is useless. If worse comes to worst, you may become the subject of gossip, or at least you will have made enemies by saying something unnecessary and will have created ill will. It is said at such a time it is better to stay at home and think of poetry.*

With trembling hands and a troubled brow, I withdrew.

I sought, like the horrorshow clairvoyant Kuato soothingly instructs Quaid in *Total Recall* (1990), to open my mind.

Welcome to Crazy Town

I did not have to meditate for long—within hours the answer jumped up in my face. And it came from the unlikeliest of places, and in the weirdest of forms: a sprawling, tortured email from GZ's webmaster, Cy, magnificently titled "The State of GameZombie and My Grade."

Sometimes you just don't know people the way you think you do. His was a contradictory manifesto—equal parts treachery, accusation, blackmail, respectful explanation, and reasonable plan for equitable resolution.

In the six year history of running GZ at two American universities—involving over five hundred students—Cy's letter remains the strangest, most perplexing message I've ever received.

A Goddamned Hostage Negotiation

First of all, let me remind you, patient, forgiving, and faithful reader, that Cy had been a Godsend when he first joined the team in January of 2008—twelve months before initiating this dramatic, and undeniably, hostile, showdown. And I'd always had the highest respect for him. While I thought he might be irritated to receive an incomplete, I now found myself blindsided; he was shockingly ready and willing to escalate things to a thermonuclear degree.

In retrospect, I must have suspected him—before the great revelation—at least a little bit. He was one of the only people on the team capable of doing such a thing. As Cy corroborated in his lengthy impeachment, Bradley would not have even known where to begin with a caper of this size and scale. You see, Cy had *all* the passwords. And, he thought about issues of Internet security all the time. I flashback to the moment I gave him a particularly sensitive password, assuring him that I trusted him. I'll never forget his face—he betrayed two things: 1. that he disapproved of my freewheeling attitude toward password sharing and 2. that perhaps he knew better than me that his undying fealty was not a safe bet. Cy knew better than anyone that GZ had a significant exposure to this type of attack. And when challenged, in

December of 2008, he could not resist the perverse pleasure of acting out this web administrator power play, this lockout fantasy.

And after he'd frozen us out—having stuck the dagger in to satiate the resentment simmering within—he must have then panicked, knowing his fingerprints were all over the crime. Like in a *CSI* episode, the trail of intrigue would lead back to him soon enough. But then he saw an out—after getting the email from Bradley he constructed the fabrication that he had taken control of all of GZ's accounts in order to *protect us* from the culprit. Now, I imagine he thought it through to the point where he felt that if I challenged him on the integrity of his spurious story, he could maintain plausible deniability. In effect, he would swear till his dying day that some mystery bandit had changed the passwords and that acting in the interests of GZ, he'd taken control of all the accounts, and that's how he'd got caught, as *Margin Call's* (2011) devilish CEO, John Tuld, says, "holding the…bag of odorous excrement." It was obvious that Cy had locked us out, panicked, composed a cover-up, and then sought to press for fresh demands.

The question was whether to confront him about his dishonest story.

I mean, he implicitly admitted to the crime in the second sentence of his letter when he unsentimentally described how, upon receiving his incomplete, he decided against "doing something drastic like burning down the whole project." It was this line that really gave me the chills. What cringe worthy arrogance for an undergrad to calculate that it was somehow within their power and discretion to destroy a collective student project, like GZ. Considering how bloody were his thoughts, I should be grateful he didn't melt us down into so much copper ore.

Then, he summoned the Academic Guide, claiming that I was guilty of improper ethics

for late night phone calls, voicemails, and texts, and for requiring meetings on weekends and

after hours. Against this accusation—as you know from the story of this dissertation—I am

guilty. As *Deadwood*'s antiheroic oracle Al Swearengen cautions against—he had me by the

short hairs.

It's true; I didn't treat GZ like a normal class. I had very high, quasi-professional level,

expectations; I pushed people to work harder than they were used to; I crossed traditional lines

by regularly requiring meetings in excess of those listed on the official course registrar; and I

leveraged various digital communication technologies, consciously, to make GZ a bigger, more

invasive part of students' lives, including, one of my oldest and best tricks, group text message

updates. And he was also right that my idiosyncratic, rule bending style was, arguably, more

appropriate when GZ was a private company internship, rather than an official class.

I acknowledge the rationality of his criticism, but not the spirit. The inspired nature of

GZ work and shared passion hinged on my aggressively, unapologetically orchestrating an *us

against the world, go big or go home* culture of ambitious *creativity and productivity*. That's

what made GZ *special*. It was not a clockwatching operation. Like the suit and sunglasses

adorned Elwood says in *The Blues Brothers* (1980), we were "on a mission from God."

And here's the thing, Cy loved it, or at least, he *had* loved it.

After attacking me in the first part of the letter, he proceeded to confidently present the

contributions of his team, sticking up for his core troops, while selling up the river certain

unproductive, fair-weather web team associates. I found no fault with his analysis (other than

that it was a little blame-heavy). It was to his credit that he had owned his role as GZ

webmaster so competently and self-assuredly, that he'd been paying granular attention to the

performance of his team. This is the type of autonomy and responsibility that I cultivate in GZ

team leads. Like Vincenzo Coccotti says in *True Romance* (1993), "what we got here is a little

game of show and tell. You don't wanna show me nothin, but you're tellin me everything." It

was as self-evident to me as a nervous lie told to a Sicilian Mafioso: while his GZ enthusiasm arc

has run its course, he nevertheless had drunk the GZ Kool-Aid, *taking pride in his leadership role*

and achievements, both individual and collective. Here's the rub—his swagger, his amour-

propre, his pride of accomplishment remained, inescapably, the direct byproduct of my

relentless campaign to get students to *give a damn*. And yes, that included, integrally, the

various iconoclastic methods for which he now indicted me.

But the whole thing was tragic, really. Even though I found his dissembling and veiled

threats insulting, I did not wish to "squash him like an insect" (2005) as Pompey Magnus says in

HBO's *Rome*. I just wanted to talk him off the ledge. I wanted him to calm down; to know that

his contributions were respected and appreciated; and to get the passwords back, post haste—

by which I mean, *fucking now.*

I politely but firmly asked him to relinquish the accounts back to me in text messages

and phone calls. Truly, I knew it might get ugly and I didn't want to debate the issue in an email

thread.

Stressfully, he didn't respond to my calls or texts, all of which courteously, and

painstakingly patiently, demanded back control of the accounts. He was dragging his feet, I

think, because he was loath to surrender his leverage. Let's face it, once he gave me back all the accounts what remained to stop me from turning around and giving him an F or reporting him to academic authorities, or whatever fire-breathing vengeance I secretly sought.

In retrospect, I was holding on too tight.

It seems strikingly absurd now, that even in the midst of my hostage negotiation for the integrity of the entirety of the project's assets; I found myself squeezing Cy for a couple more meetings to facilitate a smooth transition for the spring 2009 incoming GZ web team recruits.

There's no way around it—*I wanted GZ to win.*

Despite my posture toward clemency and reparation, the smoked out evildoer was in no hurry to surrender the accounts. I felt like the English magistrate in *Braveheart* (1995), "and this day's lawlessness is how you repay *my leniency*?" Those were the early days of Twitter, and Cy was an early adopter. So you can imagine how infuriating it was to be texting and calling him, increasingly less capable of pretending that regaining all my precious GZ accounts was anything other than the most important thing in the world—and meanwhile reading his indifferent tweets. As my frustration metastasized, he continued ignoring me, simultaneously tweeting inane comments about how he was enjoying a happy hour beer special here, or a casual lunch with some pals there. His compartmentalization seemed a little psycho. But maybe his callous nonchalance was a performance.

Either way, I never knew he could be so mean.

Mercifully, after a few more days of suffering an inexhaustible barrage of, by degrees, less civil demands for the return of all the accounts, Cy caved. And like the Kennedy administration during the denouement of the Cuban Missile Crisis, my top GZ commanders and I exhaled a collective sigh of relief—for I had brought the world back from the brink of complete and utter destruction.

Then again, maybe I put it there in the first place?

Part 4: Apotheosis and into the Rubble We Go

> *Willard: "They told me that you had gone totally insane, and that your methods were unsound."*
> *Kurtz: "Are my methods unsound?"*
> *Willard: "I don't see any method at all, sir."*
>
> *- Apocalypse Now (1979)*

The Second Triumvirate – GZ Arrives

When last we left our heroes; we had landed the $40,000 marketing buy for the *Darkest of Days* first person shooter game for Xbox 360. Delivering this campaign was to be our finest hour. It was our victorious flashpoint; whence "like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars…in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes "Awww!"" (Kerouac, 1957).

After I accepted the position at UWW, my first instinct was that GZ Indiana would necessarily fall into ruin in my wake. But, by now, having survived this catalogue, kind reader, it should come as no great surprise that I am prodigiously capable of wrong notions.

No, rather than leave GZ Indiana to the wolves, I began the intensive, involved process of grooming William as my successor. To begin, I made him shadow me at every single GZ meeting, of which there were so many. Since he was the Lead Motion Graphics artist, and the director of our HDTV studio hit, *ButtonMashers*, he had previously been exempted from attending all the meetings. As I've been saying, I was the only person who went to *all* the meetings. My time commitment was total. Knowing this, I was initially dubious that anybody

could perform my role. William had to learn, viscerally, how the running of GZ was a persistent, conscious, vigilant orchestration of momentum and morale, balanced by a continuous switching between the big picture, and the small. After spending months as my protégé, he got it—he *understood.* William accepted the challenge and performed the role admirably, far exceeding my expectations. He went on to run GZ Indiana for two straight years from 2009-2011, as a separate but complementary counterpart to GZ Wisconsin.

In that summer of 2009, the second GZ triumvirate came into being. Vladimir and I, (fifty-fifty ownership partners), signed William to a 20% profit-sharing contract to last for that first academic year, later extended for the second one. Numbering amongst William's myriad exemplary qualities were his advanced multimedia production competencies; his intense reliability; his rare ability to skillfully apply a soft power leadership strategy; and the fact that everybody liked and respected the hell out of him, (especially me). And William, Vladimir, and I got along like a house on fire. We were a great team, the three of us—we were the second GZ triumvirate; by far the bigger, better, faster, and stronger of the pair.

Delivering the ButtonMashers Season Two Campaign

In the summer of 2009, and into that fall, we successfully launched ButtonMashers Season Two across the web, accumulating many millions of impressions and unique video views, and in the process smashing a respectable dent in the Internet. As if opening the powerful, unpredictable bag of winds given Odysseus by Aeolus, we unleashed the full fury of our accumulated bag of guerrilla marketing tricks. Hard-earned through years of hand to hand

combat, we gave ButtonMashers, and our sponsor, *Darkest of Days*, the most coordinated, unceasing marketing blast (see Appendix L) of which we were capable:

- We landed an extended full page takeover of Dailymotion, one of the top video websites in the world

  - *Remember: we paid out of pocket for this one, and were on the hook for the dough*

- Via our connections, we featured heavily DoD branded GZ promotion on the footer of Dailymotion's front page

- Strong DoD promotion on GZ's Dailymotion channel

- Fully leveraged my highly interconnected Facebook profile in service of DoD social media marketing

- Consistent DoD branded content uploading and publishing to Facebook Stream: videos, pictures, events, and status updates

- Thousands invited weekly to GZ Facebook events, plus follow-up messages

  - This is the Facebook messaging strategy I explained in Part Two

- Aggressive use of Facebook viral tagging strategy

  - Here I leveraged the large size of the team, and the unusually active Facebook engagement of college students

- Front page YouTube Gaming Channel promotion, achieving hundreds of thousands of views

  - One of our greatest coups; we cashed in on years' worth of relationship building with YouTube's community managers to achieve peak exposure and our largest, and most valuable, unique video views to date

- Twitter campaign, averaging five tweets per day, one in three tweets promoting DoD; plus tweets from ten other GZ team member accounts

  - Manufactured conversations and the like

  - To this day, no idea if this moved the needle

- ButtonMashers featured on GameTrailers, accumulating over ten thousand DoD branded views, and targeted community engagement

- o Again, we leveraged our hard-won relationship with GT

- o Brand exposure in the GZ community is second in value only to YouTube

- ButtonMashers Newsletter: weekly email blast hit thousands of gaming insiders, resulting in positive press, including a *Tubefilter* (the *Variety* of YouTube) feature article

  - o Our notorious fly and the bazooka strategy

    - ▪ We called it in like an F-18 Charlie Sheen napalm air strike, deploying our ordinance to the ground

- DoD takeover of GameZombie's site

  - o Admittedly, and as I discussed in Part Two, since our homepage traffic is not monumental this could not have been that useful to them beyond cosmetics

- Carpet bombing viral uploading strategy:

  - o We continued and escalated our aggressive uploading of *DoD* branded GZ videos to a selection of the top video and picture sharing sites where GZ had established community presence, including Metacafe, Revver, and Flickr.

The *Darkest of Days* sponsored *ButtonMashers Season 2* embodied our best production, material, team, and marketing effort—rolled into one.

We put that in our proverbial GZ pipe and smoked it.

A 21st Century One-Room Schoolhouse to Call Our Own

Crucially, my hire at UW-Whitewater was attached to a $100,000 multimedia lab modification fund (see Appendix K). I developed the lab in the fall of 2009 and launched it in the spring of 2010. I custom-designed the lab—and everything in it—to support the success of GameZombie TV. We built our new studio over the corpse of a decaying foreign language classroom. It was a full-scale remodeling. First, I ordered 27" iMacs, decked out with Final Cut Pro Suite and Adobe Production Premium software packages.

One of my major production initiatives of the lab was that it should be a *fully self-reliant* web video production pipeline. Toward that end, we purchased two tapeless high definition digital cameras for the purpose of doing multi-camera production both on location, (at gaming conferences), and in the studio. In addition, I secured access to a three terabyte cloud storage solution, as well as access to an online sound effects library called SoundSnap. The idea was that we could shoot tapeless, capture the footage directly to the iMacs, upload assets and store them on the cloud, and meanwhile do all the postproduction, including sound effects editing, right there on the iMacs, without every needing to capture tapes or mess with physical media, such as CDs, DVDs, or DV tapes. I was adamant about this, and fought for it. Since we had shot hundreds of physical DV tapes at IU, and spent countless hours capturing them in labs, I knew the real pain of the old technology, and insisted on pushing forward. I wanted GZ and MAGD to be on the cutting edge of efficiency. I had them install a blue screen and black screen curtain directly into the wall, for studio shoots—as I had once had in my Evermann Apartment—and purchased a modest lighting and sound recording package. The conceit was that we could shoot, capture, post-produce, and upload to the web an entire web video series production from right there in that room, without ever having to walk out the front door.

To facilitate communication with IU, I had UW-Whitewater purchase a high definition, remote-controlled Polycom video conferencing unit. William and his team at IU had access to Polycom-enabled high definition video conferencing rooms, and therefore, I knew this way we could make use of the highest fidelity communications possible. In retrospect, this purchase was a mistake, since between 2009 – 2012, free and ubiquitous video conferencing solutions have gotten better and better, including Google Video, Google Hangouts, Apple iChat, and

Skype, rendering high end, proprietary video conferencing a tedious and inefficient waste of time and money. Using a free solution, you sacrifice a little in the way of quality, but what you gain in terms of ease of use makes it a no contest.

Between the fall of 2009 and the summer of 2011, William's team at Indiana and my team at Wisconsin video conferenced about once every two weeks, initially going out of our way to use the damned Polycom. In an absurd example of what behavioral economists, like Dan Ariely (2008), describe as the principal of *sunk cost*, I rationalized that we *had* to use the Polycom—despite the fact that the free video conferencing alternatives were far more convenient—because I'd spent so much blasted money on the thing. By the end, I came to my senses, and we moved entirely to Google Video, Skype, and Hangouts. And there the Polycom sits to this day, bound to the HDTV display in UWW's McGraw Hall 127, wasting away like an archaeological relic of the 1980s.

On the subject of the display, I secured a multipurpose 55" HDTV—connected to the professor's computer, stereo sound ceiling speakers, and (via a primitive switcher) to a PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, and a Nintendo Wii, which no self-respecting game development program can be without. Another flub I committed was to let a sales guy talk me into installing a distributed sound system that allows students to hear audio from the teacher's computer/main display channeled directly into their individual noise-canceling headphones. I've never used it and never will. As I've been saying, my teaching and production philosophy encourages *messy, interdisciplinary chaos*, which often begins with lots of overlapping loud madness. Toward this end, the professor's mobile lectern floats in the center of the large room,

while the professor can come and go, and wander about, seeking to orchestrate maximum creative synergy. The various GZ teams work in their respective areas, with their giant screens ever visible, so I can see what's going on. The room's layout and design facilitates and encourages restlessness, yelling, screaming, and serendipitous idea friction (see Appendix K).

The Decline and Fall of the GZ Empire

Looking back, the fault lines that killed GZ the business were all there, vehemently expressed by Cy in his wandering diatribe.

You see, he called my bluff. He got away with that stunt for two reasons. The first, and the more admirable, was my Buddha like compassion. Cy had done a lot of work for GZ and, prior to his disturbing meltdown, he'd been an invaluable contributor. He saved me in January of 2008 from a dysfunctional web team that was crumbling in the wake of Mason's departure that previous fall. As the purple eye shadow drenched Elizabeth Taylor (Cleopatra) asked old Rex Harrison (Caesar): "Catullus doesn't approve of you…why haven't you had him killed?" And Rex answers, "Because I approve of *him*" (1963).

There you have it; I approved of Cy still, even if he'd lost some of his luster.

But the second, less exalted, reason I didn't nail him to the cross was because he had his finger on the button. No, I don't mean just in terms of "burning down" the project. Once I'd rescued the assets from his death grip, he still had leverage on me. What if he had gone to university officials and pleaded his emotionally charged case that GZ had a genuine conflict of interest—as a for-profit web startup posing as a class?

Like a politician smeared by accusations, and forced into a mud fight, there was no way I could win such a brawl. Even if I won, I'd lose. GZ had the blessing of the department. It was a wildly popular student-fueled game media studio and interest-driven learning environment; it was authentic, award-winning, prolific, ambitious, and fun. The department was proud of the damned thing. And it had cost me buckets of blood, sweat, and tears to build GZ's status up to this rarified apex of esteem. As the Oracle of Omaha, Warren Buffett, (2008), warns— reputation takes a lifetime to build and a moment to destroy.

Cy didn't know it, but he had me by the short hairs.

Upon bringing the GZ operation to UWW the legitimate business aspirations of the project broke against the shore like a wine dark wave against the reality of the true purpose of the academy, which is to *simulate*—but not to *sell.* And yet, it was the very *authenticity* of building GZ as a *real* business, connected to the *real* world, and engaged in *real* media work, that sparked the zombie to live, igniting passionate engagement in students' hearts and minds, and my own. GZ the inspired interest-driven learning environment could only have been constructed under the circumstances of my being an outsider, a rule bending ruffian, smashing through boring convention—because I wanted to make something successful, and because I didn't know any better.

GZ as a New Culture of Learning

The student-fueled game media studio, GameZombie TV, is an example of *the new culture of learning* (2011) as passionately described by the "chief of confusion," and inexhaustible champion of creativity, John Seely Brown.

In that work, Brown and Thomas argue that learning in the digital age must navigate the tension between unlimited *access* to a massive information network on one end; and on the other, a bounded and structured environment that allows for unlimited *agency* to play, build, and experiment. The combination of this historically unprecedented access and agency—when properly combined—unlocks a powerful, meaningful, tactile learning experience. The new culture of learning, therefore, is about a fusion of the very vast with the very personal. It's about building a bridge between two diametrically different worlds—the public and information-based with the private and uniquely personal.

By connecting GZ to the real world of web publishing and video games—by injecting authenticity into the program—unusual levels of motivation and creativity burst into being. Forging a synaptic connection between the opportunities of the new web and the game business with the personal interests of GZ students ignited their imaginations, and pushed them along toward what researchers consider the ultimate goal of 21st century education—that of *lifelong learning* (Collins & Halverson, 2009). But a lifetime of curiosity starts small, with a single question, a simple hunch. But once that interest sparks to life—once passion forms for a topic—students will willingly read, write, and engage with content that is far more advanced

than material about which they are not passionate (Steinkuehler, Compton-Lilly, & King, 2010).

And it is the digital media revolution—our technological moment—that paves the path.

GameZombie TV does not teach students *about* the world. Rather, GZ creates the

opportunity for students to learn through *engagement* within the world—that is to say, the

worlds of multimedia and video games (Brown & Thomas, 2011). GZ ventures out into the wild,

engages with the authentic business of interactive entertainment, and then like a Stone Age

hunter-gatherer, returns home carrying the spoils that invigorate and nourish the tribe. GZ

absorbs the outside world and then recreates it. From engagement with the raw game industry,

we produce an original game developer interview series, and publish it to the web. Students

thereby become part of the industry by taking it in, recombining and remixing it, and making it

their own. In this way, they *own* the industry. And through this process, they learn the courage

to confront the world, and pursue their passions.

Via the process of *making*, GZ students learn how to craft context to articulate or

transform a message. And through this deeper interaction with multimedia messaging, they

internalize the critical information literacy essential to overcome the deleterious effects of 21st

century information manipulation, overload, and fatigue (Weinberger, 2011). Via producing and

remixing original content students develop *multimodal literacy*, learning to interpret and

analyze the language of images, colors, and sound (Hassett & Curwood, 2009; Kress, 2010;

Steinkuehler, 2007), as well as how information gets mutated via social media and viral memes.

And as this multimedia fluency enhances GZ students begin to see media as something infinitely

mashable, like the silly putty we had as kids. At the same time, they also become more mature

about it. For example, GZ editors initially delight in garish effects and in the guilty pleasure of making people look and sound ridiculous, such as through slowing down their voices or freezing them on an unflattering frame. But as they become acclimated to their new power of manipulation, they become more sophisticated, and recognize it as an ethical responsibility.

As GZ students' engage deeply with software they learn the power of the web's affordance of auto-didacticism. By "googling the error" they learn to tap into the massive, diverse networks of people around the world struggling with the same technical hurdles, and sharing both their tribulations and their discoveries. And through increasing experience with "just-in-time learning"(Collins & Halverson, 2009) GZ students learn to ask smarter questions to arrive at better answers, and which sources to trust.

GZ students learn to keep an eye on the bottom line (Squire & Jenkins, 2011). Just as gamers become fluent with complex embedded measurements and assessments (Steinkuehler & Chmiel, 2006), GZ students learn to use metrics to analyze the online performance of their videos, pushing them to improve. I learned early in the history of GZ that keeping an eye on performance metrics, and setting goals, energizes a healthy competitive spirit, and a focused motivation to break plateaus.

Working and playing in the GZ community cultivates *citizenship*—which includes the capacity for effective collaboration and the ability to learn from others. GZ inspires a heightened quality of work by bringing together a tribe of similarly minded people who, via their proximity, cause each other to raise their games (Brown & Thomas, 2011; Godin, 2008; Robinson & Aronica, 2009). And through this talent gathering, GZ teaches open-mindedness

and the value of diversity. Just as games like *World of Warcraft* require teamwork (Squire & Jenkins, 2011) to be successful, GZ students learn that strong multimedia production requires leveraging the unique skills and talents of the individuals within the group, to make the whole stronger. Students observe how the team grows stronger as the range of individual talents expands, becomes richer, and more diverse. Through intensive collaboration, they observe that the world is a contact sport, and that inclusivity has its liabilities—such as when someone as talented as Arnie melts down (as he did in the spring of 2009). Just as they learn to value the collective success of the group, and their contribution toward bringing it about; they also learn how to avoid being a cog in the machine (Lanier, 2010), developing their individuality and creative autonomy.

Zombified Participation Trajectory

Students in the GameZombie TV digital media learning environment follow a natural progression—n00bs are truly expert producers and peer mentors in the chrysalis (Ito, 2010).

Zombie Recruit

Students drift toward GZ, often with nothing more than a vague idea of what they want to do, or why they are there. Slowly, they begin to participate, learning the social practices of the community, and in the process begin shaping their own social identity. Before long, an idea jumps in their face, and they suddenly know where they fit and what job they want to do (e.g. Editing, Biz, Producing, etc.). They learn to be with others in a space mediated by rich digital technology, building a foundation for learning and personal growth.

An ember of passion ignites.

Zombie Marine

Next, as they drift toward the center, GZ students increasingly take an interest in the workings and content of the media and technology—tinkering, exploring, *getting* it. They begin to perceive the gap between the way something is and the way it could be. And this is the beginning of creativity and imagination. They begin to focus more clearly on topics of personal interest, self-directing their exploration, beginning to feel how they can personally express themselves through the media—that the technology is an extension of themselves.

Zombie Veteran

The student begins to engage with the media and technology in an intense, autonomous, interest-driven way, navigating the esoteric domains of game culture and multimedia production—learning to talk the talk and walk the zombie walk. They learn to participate authentically in communities that traffic in these forms of expertise, such as covering a professional game conference or interacting with a Final Cut Pro forum. The community and the individual come together like flint against steel.

The student and the learning community become one. Within the community of shared experiences and passions, where deep exploration, creativity, and productivity emerge from the networked imagination, the student ignites.

The Principle of Trust

GZ students become engaged in an intensive joint activity, working together on a shared project in which everyone has skin in the game—everyone has an emotional investment. And as

I have explained in this dissertation—and as Kurt Squire experienced giving Joystick101.org administrator access to strangers on the web, and as Constance Steinkuehler writes about WoW guilds (2011)—the principle of trust is axiomatic in self-organizing learning communities. You just don't mess with other people's work when we're all in it together. And it for this reason that the Cy incident was such a dark episode in the six year story of GameZombie TV.

But in the end, the power of the project—of the self-organizing, interest-driven learning community—was bigger, stronger, and fiercer than the bad behavior of a single individual. And like a good zombie, it kept right on going. Let's face it—GZ's damned hard to kill.

This Ain't Your Grandma's Constructivism

Seymour Papert (1980) wrote that we learn best through *constructing* our understanding by engaging with personally meaningful projects. In this sense, GameZombie is a constructivist learning environment, as defined by Jonassen (1994), matching up with most of his core characteristics of CLEs:

- GZ's media work avoids oversimplification and represents the complexity of the real world

- GZ emphasizes authentic tasks in a meaningful context rather than abstract instruction out of context

- GZ provides a real-world simulation instead of predetermined sequences of instruction

- GZ enables context—and content—dependent knowledge construction

- GZ supports collaborative construction of knowledge through social negotiation, not competition, among learners for recognition

In the preceding pages, I have illuminated what GameZombie strives to be and what successes it has achieved at its height of morale and operational efficiency. And like a stunned witness to a car wreck, I have also faithfully recounted a selection of GZ's most gruesome disasters. But while GZ has occasionally shown its ass—as *The Color of Money's* (1986) pool shark Arnie is wont to say—its successes far outmatch anything I have seen in traditional, didactic, fully guided multimedia classes. Combining the ingredients of GZ's interest-driven, constructivist curriculum in the proper proportions—the "secret zombie sauce"—unleashes powerful motivation, productivity, and momentum toward the aggregation of a huge body of creative knowledge work.

Stress Tests and Sour Grapes

As with the Treasury Secretary, Timothy Geithner's "stress tests," GZ's assorted micro-traumas have not brought down the system, though they have at last taken a little piece out of me. Many factors have contributed the final tapering of my enthusiasm curve, including the changing nature of my role in the project, the amount of time I have had to devote to it, and the pressures of student evaluations for job security. But like the song says, nothing lasts forever. It's the circle of life—even zombies have to be put down, to make room in the world for new zombies.

Criticism of Constructivist Learning Environments

Researchers have questioned the effectiveness of constructivist learning environments, especially as it applies to the educational development of novices (Kirschner, 2006; Mayer, 2004). These critics argue that little empirical evidence exists to support the claim that "learning by doing" works for those who have not yet developed underlying skill sets. Researchers such as Paul Kirschner, John Sweller, Richard Clark, and Richard Mayer claim that novice learners do not possess the requisite, underlying "schemas," or bodies of contextual knowledge, necessary to construct relevant meaning (2006).

Mayer (2004) reviewed fifty years of empirical data and concluded that that there was insufficient evidence to support the effectiveness of constructivist learning environments, advocating instead for a more assertive role for the instructor—a technique he termed "guided discovery." He claims that many educators misapply constructivism, requiring learners to be behaviorally active when traditional, didactic instruction would be more effective. He calls this misapplication the "constructivist teaching fallacy" arguing that instructors should utilize guided discovery techniques instead to make sure students are actually cognitively engaged (Mayer, 2004). Essentially, Mayer believes that constructivist learning promotes behavioral activity too early in the process, when students require more hand-holding, scaffolding, and direct instruction. Evidence supports the claim that practice by novices during early schema acquisition distracts learners with superfluous inquiry-based activities when the young learner should be focused instead on building core knowledge (Sweller, 1988).

Critics describe constructivist teaching as nothing more than unguided instruction, exhorting the need for less ideology and more educational practice rooted in valid research (Kirschner, 2006). Peter Slezak (2010) goes further, arguing that the "radical constructivism" of Ernst Glasersfeld is emblematic of a fashionable, hip educational philosophy that is actually unsuccessful in classrooms when practically applied. Research into cognitive load theory also suggests that novices are not equipped to handle the ill-structured problems characteristic of constructivist learning environments (Kirschner, 2006). Since the novice learner often cannot properly evaluate and make sense of the challenges of the ill-structured problem, Jonassen (1997) suggests early stage students instead be taught using well-designed, well-structured learning environments that provide scaffolding for problem-solving.

Other criticisms (2004) include the following arguments:

1.   constructivist learning environments favor students from privileged backgrounds who have been conditioned to be assertive and curious, and know how to take advantage

2.   CLEs lead to "group think" wherein there exists pressure to conform to majority opinion, and

3.   since constructivist instructors such as myself utilize subjective observation techniques of assessment, there is little hard evidence to support the effectiveness of CLEs.

GZ's 2 Cents on Constructivism

I agree that novice learners can be unsuccessful in constructivist learning environments. Actually, in my experience, they can be wildly, dramatically unsuccessful in CLEs, failing not with a whimper, but with a bang. However, I have also seen some of the most successful students in GameZombie TV start out as complete novices, but rise quickly through the ranks, to become amongst the best talent on the team. This speaks to the unique power of the learning community to ignite the student's confidence and curiosity. Regarding multimedia production—specifically software—students learn the most through working on successively more challenging projects, and researching answers to questions as they come up. Students learn from Internet research (googling the error), peer mentorship (team leads), and from asking me (just-in-time learning). Therefore, I disagree with the broad claim that novice learners are unsuccessful in CLEs; under the right conditions, they can be fabulously successful.

These critics of constructivism overlook the importance of the teacher's passion. In my case, it was my ambition to create something successful and real that lit the first match. The gasoline was the technological moment. And everything else was set to burn—an environment that stimulated enthusiasm for the material; the motivation to advance through the ranks and earn status; the opportunity to build professional relationships in the professional game industry; and the desire to be an integral part of a winning team.

As to the sweeping claim by Kirschner et al. that "even for students with considerable prior knowledge, strong guidance while learning is most often found to be equally as effective as unguided approaches," I believe I have presented significant evidence to refute it. In my life,

I have both taken and taught many guided, structured, didactic multimedia production courses, and I have never seen the level of work ethic or consistent, overall quasi-professional quality of work being produced by students in those classes as I have seen in GameZombie TV.

GZ is special. But I also think its special magic sauce can be bottled up and reformulated by mad scientists everywhere.

Constructivism in a World of Constant Change

Thomas Popkewitz (1998) argued that while contemporary constructivists' pedagogies draw on the writings of John Dewey and Lev Vygotsky, they fail to examine the early 20th century historical space in which these architects of constructivism were thinking and writing. This is an ironic omission for an intellectual endeavor concerned with cultural-historical theories. Popkewitz (1998) argues that today's constructivists assume a continuous evolution between the ideas of the past and the current progressivism. But this is wrong. Education in the age of technology occurs within a conflagration of institutions, ideas, and technologies radically different than those of a hundred years ago. As Galadriel, the greatest of elven women, said, "The world is changed. I feel it in the water. I feel it in the earth. I smell it in the air" (2001).

The world *is* changed. And the world is *changing*.

Learning in the digital age disrupts, remixes, and recombines established ideas. While the 20th century was about achieving stability in an accelerating world, the 21st century is about embracing change in a world accelerating *exponentially*. Video games, participatory media, and GZ's interest-driven learning environment embody Dewey's pragmatic philosophy, "that which

is true is that which works in the world." With that in mind, I have come up with 48 themes that

have emerged from my autoethnographic study, like Athena from the bloody head of Zeus.

Emergent Themes in Focus

Leadership

Reflections on Project Leadership in an Academic Environment

Theme 1: Passion and Neurosis

It strikes me—a few hundred pages later—that a touch of misery and madness can be quite helpful at the beginnings of things. You can't be too cautious, or too precious in your planning. It's far more useful to summon *unreasonable desperation*. Complacency is death. Also, if you think too logically about how much work you're really going to have to do—and how despairing the odds of success—you will swiftly collapse into a fetal position, convulsed by self-pity and horror. You must channel your inner Captain Ahab here, your Hernan Cortes— after all, delusional fanatics can teach us something about drive, commitment, recruitment, and follow through (De Botton, 2012). Authentic enthusiasm, undiluted by rational self-doubt, is a rare opium flower, and people know it when they see it. If you want to gain followers for your mission to Mars, you could do worse than a mad glean.

Theme 2: Live the Project

One of the reasons GZ succeeded at IU, and yet has slowly declined at UWW, is that I *lived* the project at the former university. At the latter, GZ transmogrified into a more prosaic form—one class amongst many, a single piece of a heavy 4/5 teaching load.

At IU, I considered the success of GZ as inseparable from my own identity, self-worth, and sense of ambition. I leveraged a unique nexus of opportunities, but it's nevertheless a

situation that others could replicate. I made myself studio chief, show runner, internship supervisor, and instructor, all at once—and though I wasn't making any real money, GZ was a *real* business, buoyed by the invigorating sense of building something practicable and potentially profitable. I had skin in the game; the project was the central piece of my life, and inexorably interwoven with my reputation.

GZ incorporated scalability, inclusivity, and a subject matter about which students are rabidly passionate; but it was my total zombie war—as Carl von Clausewitz (and Max Brooks) might say—that ignited the combustible elements. And when your commitment is total—when you're all in, so to speak—you command the unwavering respect of your troops since you're in the front lines, day to day, and you really know what's going on.

Finally, when the teacher's role is that of leader, coach, and deeply invested stakeholder, you must navigate the following tensions:

1. your burning desire to see the project succeed

2. the various goals of the students involved

3. and the unique constraints of the university environment

Theme 3: Attila the Professor

Like Attila the Hun, confront the gnawing pressure to keep your motley student crew interested, head on—feed them more glory than they can handle. By embracing agnostic inclusivity, the project stays interesting, unpredictable, creative, and productive, like a great city over time. Meanwhile, the project continues to scale in terms of people, ideas, ambition, size

and influence. In the story of this dissertation, restless expansion grew GZ from a grad student project employing undergrad volunteers into an official university program spanning two universities, (and in a separate but concurrent identity, into a respected, prolific, quasi-professional game media studio). Confidence in forward progress sustained the dream that GZ could just keep going, and like a particularly virulent zombie, could not be stopped.

Setting big goals keeps your foot on the gas and the pistons of ambition firing. But beware; with the pedal to the medal and no end in sight to the growing, you could drive off the cliff of outsized aggrandizement. Instead, keep the plan liquid and just try to guide the project's organic growth, mutation, and expansion.

Little Victories

In an effort to sustain high morale and cultivate a culture of winning, propagandize little victories, incrementally, along the way. It gives your troops the opportunity to experience the impact of their work and to feel that they are part of a winning team—of a movement (Godin, 2008) even; a freight train of momentum and potential. A continuous trickle of news of collective achievement allows students to share in what Bruce Lee called "all that heavenly glory" (Clouse, 1973).

Theme 4: Soft Power

Practicing the conscious application of what Joseph Nye called soft power (Nye, 2004) can prove an essential skill when leading a student-fueled project, since your "employees" are taking their compensation in the formless form of glory. "Bread, cash, dosh, dough, loot, lucre, moolah, readies, the wherewithal: call it what you like, money matters," argues financial

historian, Niall Ferguson (2008). In place of the inherent hard power money buys, you must cultivate your personal magnetism; your ability to incentivize; and your empathetic capacity to put yourself in the mind of the *other*—letting things go, as *Mad Men*'s Bert Cooper (2009) advises, "so you can get what you want." Employing a soft power strategy, you only get what you want by giving people what they want; namely, the opportunity to self-select an area of interest, and succeed within it.

In this nation building exercise—this campaign for hearts and minds—stamp out any dreary suspicions of a totalitarian system in the works; an Orwellian structure whose central purpose is to elevate the status of a single individual through coercion and intimidation. Just the opposite: actively encourage the appealing philosophy that everybody's in it to win it, and that every individual profits through association with the operation.

Continuous Communication

In order to build cohesiveness, and to keep the project on everybody's mind, aggressive—borderline annoying—amounts of communication, including emails, text, calls, meetings, and presentations, are *vital*, especially at the beginning of things.

Theme 5: Buy In

Unlike our former self-proclaimed war president, never publicize unilateral initiatives. Instead, encourage a sense of buy in, and mutual ownership, in an ongoing fashion—and make a big show of getting input and feedback from the troops. As with improvisational comedy, or Osborn's *Mad Men* era brainstorming method (1953), the key is to *never say no*, but to affirm everything, and to build upon every piece of creativity offered. Even if a great many members

of the team ignore the opportunity to exercise their democratic option—and most won't lift a finger—the underlying message has a strong, culture-making effect; *this is a place where freedom reigns*.

When giving feedback on projects, never tell people what to do. Rather, *make strong, informed suggestions* and thereby guide them to the glory. Most times, they'll do what you suggested anyway. But via this strategy, students maintain their pride of creative autonomy whilst casting the widest possible net for good ideas:

1. If they have a better idea than the one you suggested, they'll act on it, thus enhancing the piece, (and their confidence)

2. If they have a worse idea, they'll either act on it, and realize yours was better, thus strengthening your credibility

3. Or, they'll try out losing alternatives and then revert to your suggestion, but feel they came to this conclusion on their own, thus maintaining their sense of ownership

So no matter what, they'll take more pride in the piece than if you had dictated your creative opinion and compelled them carry it out. Bottom line: you want people to feel that they're getting their way; that the projects are theirs; and that, as creative contributors, they're important to the process. This creates a culture of *giving a damn;* loyalty to a project that nourishes creative fulfillment; and consequently, an *us against them* "groupish" (Haidt, 2012) mentality.

Theme 6: Payment in Glory

When running a student-fueled game media studio, glory becomes *a real currency.* Getting individual videos spotlighted on major web video sites, landing feature articles, and winning prestigious awards can all serve to strengthen emotional investment, passion, and loyalty. What's more, as Daniel Pink (2009) points out, intrinsic motivation is often a far more valuable commodity than raw cash for services, since the latter can prove a cheapening misdirection. Arguably, (witness the NCAA Division I athlete commercialization debate), paying students is antithetical to the true purpose of academia, which could be defined as intellectual and spiritual development through engagement with meaningful work and ideas. Given the fact that, like me, you probably won't have money with which to pay students anyway, remuneration in prestige remains a key motivational strategy any leader of a student-fueled operation must master.

Theme 7: Mindfulness of Vulnerability

As Oliver Burkeman writes in *The Antidote* (2012), the power of positive thinking can be vastly overrated. By contrast, insecurity and worry about what exactly you have to offer your troops can be a valuable trait in a leader. As always, the great samurai, Yamamoto Tsunetomo (1980), says it best:

> *Meditation on inevitable death should be performed daily. Every day when one's body and mind are at peace, one should meditate upon being ripped apart by arrows, rifles, spears and swords, being carried away by surging waves, being thrown into the midst of a great fire, being struck by lightning, being shaken to death by a great earthquake, falling from thousand-foot*

> *cliffs, dying of disease or committing seppuku at the death of one's master.*
> *And every day without fail one should consider himself as dead.*

A touch medieval perhaps but the theory holds—mindfulness of the perpetual proximity of disaster, and of the fleeting fragility of what Neville Chamberlain called "peace for our time" (Thornton, 2011), awakens the mind from the solipsistic somnolence of contentment and by extension, complacency.

Meditating on the vulnerabilities of the project, such as the possibility that students could just as easily break off and form their own rival game media studio—in other words, *what the hell did they really need me for?*—pressured me to increase and consolidate both my *real authority*, and my *real ability* to make things happen for students, such as GZ's capacity to:

1. Obtain media credentials to gaming conferences

2. Get videos featured on top websites via our connections and

3. Access all the best university resources, such as the HDTV studio

Ironically, while apprehension of the fragile nature of my hold on power pushed me to make my influence more real; the gradual drift toward automatic hard power is tangled up with how my intrinsic enthusiasm for GZ ultimately waned. My advice then is to remain vigilantly cognizant of vulnerabilities; strengthen your position by securing real influence; but also strive, like Google, to maintain the soft power culture of incentivization that drove the inspired creativity of the original startup culture (Levy, 2011).

Theme 8: Control the Spin

Like a campaign manager attempting to navigate the torrential storm of the 21st century 24 hour news cycle, try to control the flow and spin of news streams as they blast through the ranks. You *want* the oxygenating news of great victories to circulate healthily through the legions' arteries. And, given the destructive power of negativity bias, you *do not want* the deoxygenating gossip that GZ has once again narrowly missed a sponsorship contract or a prestigious award coursing through the legions' veins—towards its heart. Yes, you want transparency and open lines of communication. That's important. But as a leader, your most important job is to maintain morale at a slow boil, stirring occasionally.

Bcc's and Facebook Groups

One smart move is to Bcc email the GZ team list, making a *reply all* response impossible. But the downside of this tactic is that its top-down rigidity also limits internal communication amongst the troops, (at least via email threads). A workaround is to set up Facebook Group where the gang can communicate. Bottom-up interaction becomes more *opt in* this way, serving as a pressure valve for griping and mild discontent—let's face it, people need to bitch. But the advantage of a Facebook Group is that it's not as invasive as an email list which hits lots of people who are only casually following the latest drama.

Theme 9: Inject Authenticity

Connecting the student project to the world via an injection of star power energizes motivation to a miraculous degree, and acts like an adrenalin shot to your recruitment program. The mighty industry with its illustrious titans becomes visceral, tactile—*real.*

And students want a piece of that action.

Death Ground

Sometimes it is in your best interest to put your troops on what Sun Tzu called *death ground* (2007). By heightening the stakes, you can shatter the cozy notion that your project's all fun and games, the difficulty is set to easy, and there's a cheat code in place with which to endlessly generate new lives. Instead, shake things up. Radically redefine the rules—from tag football to full contact blood bowl. Make the wager authentic. Upshift gears from simulation to *real consequence,* via such means as:

1. Delivering a real marketing campaign, for which the company is getting paid

2. Chasing prestigious awards, such as the Webbys

3. Publishing high profile content to the web against a deadline to soak up maximum SEO juice—such as an exclusive interview with a celebrity designer soon after a big product launch

Theme 10: Set Your Own Mark and Enforce It

Goal setting can prove an effective way to focus the agenda. Paying close attention to the analytics of online performance achieves three goals:

1. You must be brutally honest about the impact of the series online, (therefore, banishing profitless wishful thinking)

2. You can track progress, seeing the clear impact of promotional and marketing initiatives, and

3. You can institute a restless dissatisfaction with the status quo, thus inspiring the

   team to break plateaus

Cumulative global view count, current Alexa Ranking, or the number of GZ links

returned in a common gaming related Google search all qualify as metrics worth pursuing.

Theme 11: Jiu-jitsu Flip

Turn a primary weakness—that of heavy-duty turnover, semester to semester—into a

primary strength, by leveraging the influx of fresh blood as a means to keep enthusiasm and

innovation at a sustained high level. A real company keeps its employees around a lot longer

and therefore negates the need to continuously train new people. But this also means that old

hats can get used to the grind, and start clockwatching. A student-fueled university operation

such as GZ does not have that problem. Quite the contrary, as I have illustrated, new recruits

are often highly motivated to reboot the GZ website, original series, or assets, such as our

music or motion graphics. These newbies reject the project's legacy because they want to build

something of their own. So, go with it. Nurture this creative energy to keep the project

dynamic, fresh, and unpredictable.

Theme 12: Maintain Creative Autonomy

Fight for creative autonomy in the face of the temptation to sell out, since this is the

stuff that keeps the project fresh and cool and fulfilling. Of course, as in the case of GZ, this may

also mean kissing goodbye to the legitimate business aspirations of the project.

Maintaining the right to do whatever the hell you want is a great feeling—like Wheaties,

it's the goddamned breakfast of champions. But such stubbornness can also lead to endemic

(arguably self-indulgent) inefficiency, such as unnecessary change (e.g. excessive website iterations) or inefficient overwork (e.g. lavish original remixes). But those are the stakes. Sometimes you'll get stellar new ideas, other times just more work. But no matter what you'll never have to say you spent your time mass uploading third party content to YouTube in order to perpetuate a content farm engineered to soak up SEO juice. Instead, like the hard to break McMurphy, in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (Kesey, 1962)—after his failure to lift a massive control panel—you'll be able to say, "at least I tried."

Theme 13: Pick Strong Rivals

They say you will be judged by the quality of your enemies; given that they say this, it follows that you should single out as rivals organizations, companies, and institutions that are bigger, better, stronger, and faster than you. Champion the notion that these goliaths are in fact *your* rivals, and rally the troops to outstrip them, and take them down. Competition with giants will elevate the status of your team, in turn.

ScrewAttack was our rival samurai—though we never caught them, "Down with ScrewAttack!" became our battle cry, and helped crystallize the professional game media aspirations of our organization.

Theme 14: Consult Experts

Reach out early and often to whatever experts are within your vicinity and shamelessly syphon wisdom from their cerebellums. Remember, you don't need to take their advice—but hearing it widens your options and thought structures.

In a university setting, there's a unique wealth of experts.

Theme 15: The Guy Kawasaki Principle – Know Thyself

When choosing partners, be mercilessly truthful with yourself about your talents and limitations and seek to partner with people who genuinely possess the capacities, fascinations, and inclinations you do not. And when you find that special someone, don't be afraid to award them an ownership stake, since this is a path to solidification and progress. But, like the Zuck (Kirkpatrick, 2010), play chess, not checkers, and remain lucidly incremental, and ever cautious. Don't give away more than you're willing to lose. And retain control.

Stay Lean and Mean

Building on the Know Your Limits principle, but from a more tactical point of view, gather the needed people, *and no one else*. Remain lean, mean, and ferociously efficacious— free of the burden of excessive voices or vetoes.

Theme 16: Lay Down the Law

It's a strange thing to fire a student. In fact, it's fundamentally impossible—the student in the modern university is sort of like a finicky paying client; they don't know what they want, but they *want what they want*, and they aren't gun-shy about expressing their dissatisfaction.

At the same time, we know they want integrity, consistency, and enlightened authority from their instructors and project leaders. They respect strength, wisdom, and guidance—and in fact, they crave it. Accepting this premise, miscreants and unrepentant underperformers must be dealt with harshly. Well, not *that* harshly; and the punishment should fit the crime. As

in the curious case of Bradley, demoting and quarantining said infectious lotus-eater proved a humane and remarkably uncontroversial solution.

Occasionally dropping the hammer of judgment reinforces the worldview that this is an environment of fairness and consequence—where hard work and exceptionalism gets rewarded and the opposite of that gets its due.

On Suckiness Containment

Demoting and quarantining the infectiously lackluster has worked for GZ. The key is to give the brazenly bad work upon which the work of other students does not depend. That's how you contain the suckiness. A collaborative interest-driven learning environment such as GZ is entirely interdependent, with the students at the top of the hierarchy carrying the most interconnectedness of all. In this meritocracy, student interconnectedness should be directly proportional to talent, passion, and work ethic.

The size of the institution and the relative placement of the course in the degree program are also important factors:

1. The larger the university, the greater the talent pool and interest specialization
   a. With bigger numbers, you can make enrollment competitive and portfolio-dependent, thereby mitigating suckiness probability
2. And the relative placement of the course within the curriculum matters too
   a. If the course is a low-level requirement for the degree, as is GZ at UWW, then you're going to get *everybody*
   b. If the course is a high-level non-requirement, as was GZ at IU, then you can be more exclusive about enrollment

Regardless, you've got to have heart and give people a chance. GZ's greatest stars often began as total n00bs. Look beyond the portfolio—for the *ember of passion*. But know this: the more inclusive the project, the greater the likelihood of both surprise *successes* and miserable *failures* (which must then be contained!).

Theme 17: Expect the World

Set sky high level expectations, and hold students to them. Meanwhile, build up their confidence by awarding them status, autonomy, and power. At its best, this unorthodox strategy of confidence-building and empowerment can lead to dynamically replicating self-organization and to big, bold, unpredictable breakthroughs. At its worst, it can be like giving the outlaw Jesse James a gun, a badge, and license to be a pain in the ass.

But those are the stakes.

Philosophy

Philosophy of Project Development and Management

Theme 18: Combine Your Interests

Since the grueling work on project development will nearly kill you, it's a good idea to stuff the project full of ideas that will sustain and animate your focus. In the case of GZ, the student-fueled game media studio leaves very few of my interests out—it's video games; new media; web video; social media; entrepreneurial business development; the university; and the real world. The weakness, of course, is twofold: the focal point is a bit fuzzy, and those last two are pretty much at odds. Nevertheless, by synthesizing elements you dig into the swirling nebulous project core, the work will remain stimulating and allow you to grow.

Theme 19: Keep Everybody Moving

A unique pressure of an interest-driven learning environment is that the leader/teacher, (and the student leads), must continuously come up with new assignments. *You've got to keep everybody moving*. Never allow the momentum reservoir to run dry by assigning projects that students will find:

1. substantive, challenging, and educational

2. sufficiently time-consuming

3. occasionally tedious and repetitive, (when necessary or desired)

4. synergizing with the development goals of the larger project, and

5. tailored to the direct interests of the student who feels that he or she is working on

   something of *personal value*

Theme 20: Fly Below the Radar

In much the same way that sharp design flows from constraints, the oft-times oppressive bureaucracy of the modern university can be turned to an advantage, if you can optimize its red tape and fly below the radar. Much of the productive, entrepreneurial maneuvering I pulled off in the first eighteen months of GZ's history fueled the project's momentum for the next four and a half years.

As a perceived non-power—and thus an assumed non-threat—you can adroitly sidestep all the procedural wrangling and inquisitions that grind progress to a halt. Flourish and build a beautiful home in the gray by *never asking permission*, unless you absolutely have to. Meanwhile, if *and when* you hit a chokepoint whereby you find yourself compelled to beseech a gatekeeper for his or her blessing—as did I with Howard and later Bruce—then be prepared to present a compelling case by having painstakingly established your credibility over time.

Finally, as a rhetorical device of persuasion, it works to strategically overreach and then accept your original goal as a perceived compromise.

Theme 21: Clarify a Design Theory

Along the same lines as employing a zombie survivor metafiction, it helps to clarify and unify the design themes for the project early on, such as palette, music concept, and motion graphics style guidelines. Organizing a theory of design early in the project's life cycle can help

keep the team productive within a broad spectrum, without necessitating micromanaging or allowing the operation to go off the rails into Never Never Land.

Not to get too cosmic, but for projects that are not production-focused like GZ, clarifying a design theory could be as simple as answering questions like: what should the project look like? What's its vibe? What types of things does it emulate? And so on. This is about getting everyone on the same page—toward a networked imagination.

Here is GameZombie's established palette:

Your trusted source in post-zombocalyptic game videos!

Trebuchet MS
ABCDEFG
abcdefg
1234567890

Trebuchet MS Bold
ABCDEFG
abcdefg
1234567890

Verdana
ABCDEFG
abcdefg
1234567890

#000000	#491A13	#881A08	#F22F0F	#DDD5D4

Theme 22: Close the Bullshit Gap

In the opening days of the war, inspired bullshitting and resourceful self-reliance are critical blunt force tools worth leveraging to give the project liftoff. But then, you must hustle to

inch by inch close the bullshit gap by steadily filling your once empty treasure chest with credible victories.

Until one day, no one will remember a time when it wasn't full.

Theme 23: Play the Student Card

Maintain flexibility via identity switching. Sometimes play the student card while at others portray the operation as professional. This is a question of spin. Game industry folks want to think that your operation is a professional one, like theirs. So, let them think it. Regarding that relationship, all that matters is the work, anyway (not your behind the scenes narrative). Journalists, on the other hand, love that story—an inspired group of students kicking ass on the web. So give them what they want, too.

Mindfulness of audience expectations and prejudice can allow you to migrate, like a Bull shark, from the open ocean into freshwater estuaries.

Theme 24: Throw Events, But Beware!

Throwing events provides the opportunity to build loyalty, brand awareness, morale, and camaraderie. But it's a hell of a lot of work, and the stakes are high. In a constructivist project—where the whole house of cards leans on vigorous (secular) faith-based initiative—in the pitiful circumstance whereby the event is poorly attended or otherwise a disaster, the net result can be staggering splash damage to people's confidence in the popularity and potential of the project.

So, go big or go home. There can be *no half-measures.*

Theme 25: Don't Be the Dragon

On the subject of piles of treasure, when working on an interest-driven project involving hundreds of students over a series of years; sleep-inducing, dragon-like fatalism can manifest for the instructor, who's seen it all.

But there are ways around this:

1. Give open-ended exploratory project assignments, challenging the students to surprise you

   a. Keep your students within their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978); but keep yourself there too

2. Surrender to students who, facing the problem of the project's vast arsenal of legacy assets, plead to start things over again, (such as I have done with the GZ website). After all, who the hell knows what they'll come up with?

3. Heighten the stakes by connecting the project to the real world through such means as:

   a. covering professional game conferences, chasing industry awards, and engaging in real media work with professionals, or

   b. by pursuing a legitimate business agenda.

While this last point is where GZ and I hit the skids—it might be a good option for others, especially if entering into a formal business relationship with the university strikes you as practical and appealing.

Theme 26: Practice Management by Walking Around

Engage with the troops; get involved; be in everybody's face—right in their goddamned business. It might seem uncouth to be so invasive, but the reality is less obvious. The risk of not being a tangible force—of appearing like an aloof general, in the rear with the gear—corrodes into a toxic environment, like a stagnant swamp rife with mosquitoes, or a puddle of ooze in which microorganisms gleefully grow.

The central infection that led to my regrettable showdown with Cy was, quite simply, my lack of sufficiently *obnoxious engagement* with the minutiae of that semester's web team initiatives. Constant wrestling with the devil's details creates two key outcomes:

1. You have credibility when you insist on something and

2. The troops will like and admire you

Even if they think you're an intrusive, demanding son of a bitch, they will know that you know what they're working on, and more importantly, that *you care.*

There are two caveats, of course:

1.   Though you've got your nose in everybody's business, you must restrain

yourself, however tempting, from issuing authoritarian directives.

Strike your Buddha pose, oh enlightened one, and from your lotus position, mostly just observe, encourage, and provide sage suggestions

2.   Maintain the respect of the students by being friendly but not *too friendly*.

Be the kindly esteemed general, equal parts approachable and intimidating—occasionally unpredictable—and usually generous with his time. Don't be the despicably familiar field officer, who carelessly leaves himself open to challenges by the insolent, bold and bloody-minded. Certain students mistake informality for weakness, and an invitation to attack.

Culture

On Cultivating a Community of Good People and a Culture of Innovation

Theme 27: Make a Mess of Awesome

Orchestrate a rambunctious, clamorous, disruptive, messy, chaotic environment in which interdisciplinary collaboration can proliferate, uncontrolled. While some students will occasionally find this annoying, hold fast to this philosophy of loosely directed creative destruction since it will give rise to a culture of dynamism, exploration, rapture, uninhibitedness, and camaraderie.

And once the madness has momentum, ardently strive to keep everyone, and everything, *in motion.*

Try Everything

In the beginning, it's essential simply to get started, and make something. Next, grow that energy into an environment where students feel comfortable failing early, often, and upward. The GZ business team was a web video monetization laboratory. In a larger context, GZ remains in its soul a game media experimentation factory run by mad scientists. Reinforce the startup culture of crazy, inspired energy by encouraging risk-taking and allowing for mangled abominations to come off the assembly line to make room for the big winners.

Theme 28: Recruit Unreasonable People

In full fighting trim, GZ is like the *Bad News Bears*—an energetic alliance of scrappy misfits united in their rejection of the boring and conventional; bound together in their passion for video games, multimedia, entrepreneurialism, and productivity.

In the history of GZ, the transference of responsibility for the project from my grad student colleagues to my undergrads volunteers lit the fuse that blew the project wide open. *But why?* It was not simply my acquisition of real authority, of hard power—which happened— far more importantly, it was that the profile of the GZ soldier changed. The undergrads were grittier, less snotty, and more willing to roll up their sleeves and do the burdensome, unglamorous heavy lifting.

More to the point, there's a crucial set of characteristics that define the ideal GZ recruit. These include:

1. Being a certified Steve Jobsian *crazy one*—an individualistic thinker with a positively charged creative ion core

2. *Grit*—that is to say: the elusive quality of grittiness, including the masochistic will to grind out long, desperate hours learning software or working through the night to deliver an assets package for the greater glory of the GZ Empire

3. Team spirit, or the non-cynical ability to believe in a dream; to drink the Kool-Aid; to jump on board for the big win

Students who volunteer to promote GZ before classes of their peers during recruitment drives exemplify this trait of loyalty and commitment. For these true believers, the project is a fine thing, and worth fighting for. It goes without saying that these students are pure gold. No, better than gold—iron cobalt—since they are *magnetic* and attract like-minded students, hardworking devotees looking for a worthwhile project with which to engage.

As you might expect, there's also a tragically a wrong recruitment profile:

1. Stubborn independence—students who don't want to render their work unto the purpose of the greater project

Truth be told—I would make a terrible GZ recruit because I fit in the above category. As an undergrad, in an alternative universe, I would never have worked on GZ. I would have thought it was cool and impressive, but I would not have enlisted. What I mean to say is: I'm the kind of person who cannot work on someone else's project. Succeed or fail, I have to do my own project, and run it. That's why people like me make bad GZ soldiers.

2. Students who are rude, or don't play well with others

While rudeness is unacceptable since it threatens the culture of the project, withdrawn or reclusive behavior is less pernicious since playing in GZ reindeer games is not required, only productivity, and often such hermit crabs are simply shy, and they secretly enjoy the company of fellow media geeks, they just don't know how to express it.

3. But then there's the perfect storm of wrongness: stubborn, rude, (often lazy) students who perceive informality and rapport as a sign of weakness to be challenged

Once identified, quarantine this last species since, like a slowly spreading zombie virus, insolence is poisonous. As I've touched on, most students will never be so rude or bold as to challenge you. But they will perceive that others are doing it—and if the rotten apples get away with it, the good ones will internalize the lesson that you're too weak to stop it. The unaddressed disrespect will linger in the air like a putrid fart; it will restrict your freedom and

discretion to behave informally and casually, (which is an essential soft power technique for promoting a culture of unselfconscious creativity and collaboration), since you will be wary of leaving yourself open for attack. For this reason, these students must be demoted, given isolated work (upon which the work of others does not hinge), and quarantined, like the bubonic plague.

Theme 29: Monitor the Enthusiasm Curve

The minute you acquire somebody good is the minute you start losing them. Despite this tragic condition, *great people* are the gears that keep the GZ machine grinding.

My takeaway is twofold.

On the one hand, keep the project sticky by giving people *the opportunity to be great*. Incentivize their creative energy by unleashing them on worthwhile projects of appropriate level difficulty, and give them autonomous free reign to carry out the objective. Then shower them with praise, status, and glory when they succeed. This inspires a sense of ownership and loyalty, since they get to carve off a piece of the zombie cake to call their own, and eat it too. Meanwhile, in the big picture, the project benefits from the enhanced motivation.

But on the other hand, you must not be afraid to let your best and brightest go when their enthusiasm curve unavoidably passes its expiration date, and turns south of cheese. In a student-fueled digital media project that's run off enthusiasm and rational self-interest in improvement through meaningful hands-on work, *everybody burns out.*

Saddle up, holster your guns, and start looking, again.

Theme 30: Practice Uncompromising Meritocracy

Recruit students from ever larger talent pools and along increasingly specific talent verticals. Develop lucid bullshit intolerance about internal weaknesses, and a critical eye for talent in development. It's far less important that the student has experience; and far more important that the student shows passion for a specific area of multimedia work.

Avoid the lazy temptation—as egregiously committed via my decision to install Bradley as Head Writer—of choosing what's in front of your face and then rationalizing the choice, later. This is profound foolishness for three reasons:

1. Obviously, it hurts the interests of the project

2. It denies the job to someone more motivated, prepared, and deserving, (simply because they have not heard about the opportunity)

3. It's cruel to the person you've promoted beyond their capacity because they will suffocate, in blindsided horror, under the pressure of being in over their head

Do the hard work of recruiting from the biggest available talent pool, and in as targeted a talent vertical as possible. Finally, and unfortunately, forever bear in mind that your best people are going to burn out; and so always be preparing to replace them with meritoriously recruited, developed, and promoted fresh talent.

Theme 31: The Zombie Particle - Empowerment and Automation

Resist the temptation to take the assignment away from a student who's bumbling incompetence is grating on your last nerve. Let the student dig themselves out of their own grave.

Over time, this will establish the precedent that you must own the role you've been given, and the responsibility that goes with it. This empowerment will prove self-replicating. Most importantly, students who both master their job, and take pride in it, are the likeliest and most effective teachers of future generations of GZ recruits—thereby perpetuating a self-organizing educational environment.

The Frankenstein Flashpoint – It's Alive!

And then one day, zap, the interest-driven learning environment, existing between the network and the bounded space, hit a critical mass of energy, and the monster sparks to life. The interplay of the teacher, the tools, and the students—thriving on dynamic change—synergizes into more than the sum of its parts.

Theme 32: Enforce the No Asshole Rule

As articulated by Stanford professor of Management Science, Robert Sutton (2007), rudeness in the workplace can damage morale, hobble productivity, and creep along corruptingly, like a poisoned blood transfusion. Instead, consciously cultivate a culture that rewards politeness and looks askance at prickly behavior.

Here's a real opportunity to be a leader, since you can set a culture-defining precedent by your behavior. My preference is for *chillaxed severity*. On the one hand, I promote the unpretentious vibe that we should enjoy ourselves and the creative process, and that anybody can say anything; but on the other, there's an underlying awareness that *we care* about the outcomes of our work, and though we're having fun in the process, we mean to follow-through

and succeed. Be prepared, work late, and never lose your cool no matter how intense or emotionally embroiled the situation.

Corny as it sounds, tirelessly bookend every request with *please* and *thank you*. This ritual recalls Patrick O'Brian's (1969) *Master and Commander* wherein the sailors of His Majesty's British Royal Navy, no matter how exigent the calamity, unfailingly end every order with, "if you please." Be cool, like Jack Aubrey. Personify grace under pressure. Treat everybody with dignity and respect—especially if you don't feel like it. It's always better to err on the side of excessive politeness than a noted insufficiency. Critically, you never want anyone to feel they're being commanded to do anything—*especially if they are*.

Flashpoints of dramatic insubordination are terrific opportunities to establish precedence. Don't' let your crisis go to waste—transform it into a teachable moment.

Finally, despite the unnerving exposure to thermonuclear ruination posed by the necessity to share password access with large numbers of students—to both cloud based asset databases, as well as to key accounts, like Google, Gmail, YouTube, and Facebook—if the No Asshole Rule has been scrupulously honored, you need not fear the apocalypse by a wild eyed discontent gone postal.

Theme 33: Conjure an Us against Them Contrivance

In the history of GZ, the zombie narrative backstory proved a valuable means of inspiring fellowship, loyalty, creativity, and an *us against the (undead) world* state of mind. Shakespeare (2003), omitting the zombie factor, said it best:

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;

For he today that sheds his blood with me

Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile

- Henry V, Act 4, Scene 3

Romantic? *Perhaps*. Quasi-nationalistic in its exhortation to suspend individualistic skepticism in favor of allegiance to a militant common identity? *Sure.* Valuable for a leader trying to rouse the blood and fire of his motley crew? *Priceless.*

For the purposes of future educators and administrators, the undead fantasy could be substituted for a less decrepit scenario, tailored to the situation at hand.

Theme 34: Cultivate Imagination for a World on Fire

Digital media holds the potential to unlock the old progressive ideas of Dewey and Montessori (Squire & Jenkins, 2011)—that students learn by doing, watching, and experiencing.

Beginning work on GZ is like starting a new video game; you don't read the instructions (J. P. Gee, 2003), you just start playing with the software, learning by absorption, and making tacit connections (Brown & Thomas, 2011). The body is involved. It's both experiential and cognitive. It's about internalizing knowledge, and constructing it. Students begin to develop expertise that is beyond words—it's too big to know (Weinberger, 2011). Rather, they embody knowledge, as the technology becomes an extension of themselves. Fluency with the ideas, practices and processes of multimedia production becomes second nature as they forge

synaptic connections among tacit dimensions. And students' becoming one with digital media—

like Neo merging with the Matrix as he *begins to believe*—is the critical first step toward

mastering the essential 21st century skills of imagination, innovation, problem-solving creativity,

and adaptability to a world of constant change.

Industry

Inside the Sausage Factory – the Making of a Game Media Studio

Theme 35: Seize the Technological Moment

We live in an age of historically unprecedented multimedia ubiquity—in terms of both the opportunity for consumption and for production.

The video game industry serves as a premise around and toward which you can easily recruit students, who find the topic endlessly fascinating. But, I predict, you could substitute another area of inquiry and production in its place—such as *film, baseball,* or *politics*. You might not conjure the same rabid response that students summon at the prospect of interacting with the interactive entertainment industry, but as long as you triangulate the students interested in said content vertical, you can recruit a small, focused army.

Regardless of the topic being pursued, the transformative power of *Do It Yourself Media* is that tool you will leverage—the instrument that has leveled the playing field for everyone. The new web unlocks the historically unprecedented technological opportunity to both learn any software skill and, for better or worse, publish voluminous quantities of digital media content to the world. In the end, the goal of this dissertation is not to show you how to recreate the GZ curriculum with perfect implementation fidelity. Rather, it is to distill GZ's essential principles which you can then creatively apply to the unique circumstances of your own community and context.

Theme 36: Build a 21st Century One-Room Schoolhouse

In an academic environment, a worthwhile and practical goal is create—as I did with GZ's McGraw 127—a self-reliant, self-contained, one stop shopping digital media studio, whereby the means to develop, produce, publish, and promote the original content is centrally located in a single room.

In the old days, students were taught in one-room schoolhouses, where novices and experts together engaged in joint problem solving. Some scholars claim this was a better form of learning than the industrial scale classroom regimentation of the 20th century. In the GZ lab, students of diverse ages and interests come together, with differentiated and overlapping learning trajectories—collaborating, competing, and sharing their varied expertise. The challenge for the instructor is dealing with diverse dispositions. This is where the application of soft power becomes so important. As a project leader and teacher dealing with varied personalities; turn diversity into synergy by building a networked community centered on interests and shared passion. Via meritocracy, any student with particular knowledge or experience may become a peer mentor at any time. Once passion is unleashed in the constant interaction among group members, their varying skills and talents function as a peer amplifier, synergizing, making the group smarter and stronger. A self-organizing learning community like GZ therefore is a collection of people, skills and talent that produces a result greater than sum of its parts. The zombie sparks to life when it hits a critical mass of active engagement.

Theme 37: From Carpet Bombing to Precision Tactical Nuclear Deployment

In the beginning, carpet bomb the web with content like Royal Air Force heavy bombers over Dresden—mercilessly deploy your ordinance to the ground. As time goes on, target a few key sites whose invaluable communities and visibility you cannot do without, such as YouTube, Facebook, Dailymotion, and Metacafe.

But pay special attention to your homepage.

Incendiary Grenades

Throwing incendiary grenades—via unsolicited comment spotlighting—remains a tricky, unexpected stratagem to get valuable web communities to come to you.

Theme 38: Schmooze Content Managers

Locating and schmoozing content managers for major web video portals remains one of the best, if not *the best*, method to get your content to the front of the line—and therefore, in front of the world. It's a slow seduction, but if you're in it to win it, accept no substitutes.

Theme 39: Press Flesh

Engaging with professional game conferences consistently around the country; pressing flesh; exchanging business cards; regularly inputting said cards into digital databases; and lastly adding these new connections on social networks continuously expands your influence, and connectedness, and therefore is an indispensable way to make yourself a seat at the table.

Theme 40: Diversify Your Wares

As we did first with the Perseus Network, and later with Digital Media Innovation, Inc., in light of the ultracompetitive environment of original content for the web, it behooves new

media creators to construct an umbrella company through which you can diversify your offerings to potential sponsors, whose needs are diverse and divergent.

Theme 41: Develop a Thick Skin

Putting lots of content on the web coarsens your hide—or at least, your hide had better coarsen, if you are to survive.

Theme 42: Find or Make a Star

Discovering and developing a legitimate web video *star*—like Felicia Day, James Rolfe, or Veronica Belmont—remains the premier way to viralize an online hit; to build real community; and consequently, to break free of the YouTube hordes languishing in the obscurity of what Alexandra Juhasz calls "NicheTube" (Striker, 2012). An online star is your unfair advantage; your Manhattan Project; your BFG—it *obliterates the competition*.

In game media, the unique problem is finding someone who possesses the trifecta: charisma, media skill, and credible knowledge of the games industry. Plus, perhaps a fourth element—a spark; *it*; something you only recognize when you see it.

Theme 43: Navigate the Gold Rush

Web video in the early 21st century is a gold rush because so many people have the same get rich, get famous, (or just get seen), opportunity at the same time. The vanishing of the barrier to entry to media production and distribution is a paradoxical blessing/curse. The main pain point is this: it's excruciatingly difficult to carve out a real advantage, no matter how hard or smart you work, since new competitors, at any time, can spring up out of the ground. As Tim Wu (2010) writes in *The Master Switch*, American media industries tend to inevitably drift from

a period of disruption and widespread opportunity toward consolidation and monopoly. We

have seen this phenomenon occur in the recent history of web video portals, which in 2005

were many, and by 2010, were few, (YouTube, Dailymotion, and Metacafe). The same event is

currently happening within YouTube, where the major content farms, meticulously engineered

to soak up SEO juice, like Machinima, are proving to be the dominant business model.

GZ, as a business, failed for two big reasons, among others:

1. Nobody wants to pay for web content, since there's no scarcity, and

2. Despite rhetoric to the contrary, most successful YouTube content is not new

media—it's old media that's coopting and dominating the new platform

Examples include the music videos posted by record labels that now overshadow the

most viewed lists; game trailers produced by game companies that are uploaded via Machinima

at an industrial scale; or ripped off original film or TV content that's reposted, rehashed,

repurposed, or simply regurgitated by the YouTube masses.

True Community

In the midst of this feast for crows, there exists an antidote to the malaise: the

achievement of *true community*—real people really following your content, as measured in

views, website traffic, likes, shares, or what the marketing professionals call "touches." This is

the Holy Grail. If you can achieve a genuine community, like our nemesis ScrewAttack, you can

win the game. For this reason, it makes no sense to worry about money or profits until you've

got an authentic fan base—the kind that clamors for you to make new content, and misses you

when you're gone.

Money on the Table

Nobody wants to pay you for web content because they know they don't have to; and with no money on the table deals based on promises of promotion tend, like age-old zombies, to crumble and fall apart. If you want your web video business to succeed, you've got to fight to get paid for your original content. Otherwise, with a little effort, crumbly, breakable promotional contracts can be had by the bushel. But for educators and project leaders unconcerned about the success of the project as a business—wherein the operation is a simulation, pure and simple—then promo contracts might be precisely what you're looking for.

The Value of Soft Deals

By signing soft deals—in which you are remunerated for exclusive content in promotion rather than money—you can achieve the type of guaranteed exposure needed to pay your students in *glory*.

Survival

Meditations on Crisis Management and Resolution

Theme 44: Worlds at Odds

In the original sense, I imagine, the campus was meant to be a bounded place, protected as if by a spell, beyond which *the real world* could not pass—a sacred interior space of intellectual exploration; sex, drugs, and rock and roll; and respite from the exigencies of the prosaic and the mundane. In this conception, the real world was off limits, its boring realness an unwelcome distraction. The campus remained sacrosanct, unstained by coarse realities.

During its first three voyages around the sun, GZ was a business posing as a student project; during its second three, GZ morphed into a student project playing at being a business. That is the journey of the project. My conclusion is that the true purpose of business and the true purpose of the university are at odds. Ironically, however, it was the awesome challenge of building an authentic business that breathed life into GZ's self-organizing learning community.

Theme 45: The Arrhythmic Chokepoint

Students *hate* promotion. Yet, promotion is an essential piece of the process when publishing original web content. It's the electric Kool-Aid acid test—testing whether or not you're for real.

This fundamental tension—between its necessity and its despicableness—beats arrhythmically at the heart of the project, threatening business prospects, acutely, while obtusely blunting the project's authenticity. On the one hand, wielding a big, mobilized team is a huge opportunity. On the other, the team hates every second of the crucial, unromantic work.

You can choose to force the issue, or let it go. If, like a cruel and mighty warlord—a true Genghis Khan—you decide to compel them to carry out the guerilla marketing, and you do it right, you can get good results, and move the needle. But you leave yourself wide open to ugly criticism. As a roguish, independent startup founder at Indiana it's ok; as a professor at Wisconsin, it's not.

Perhaps there is a way to gamify promotion using badges?

Theme 46: The Dangers of Standing Tall

The Japanese say that the nail that stands tallest gets hammered in.

As you grow in power you lose the flexibility once enjoyed when living in the gray area. Rules that previously were inapplicable, suddenly apply. You start seeing red tape. But interest-driven digital media learning environments require leverage and deep commitment over long periods of time. The rigidity of the academy can threaten to suffocate the space needed for the project to burn. Fight for that flexibility since you'll need it in a world of constant change.

Theme 47: The Liabilities of Soft Power

As Chinua Achebe said, *things fall apart*.

Inclusivity implies liability—sometimes you'll get stellar prodigies and every now and again, you'll get the Texas Chainsaw Massacre. Soft power incurs liability too—certain students will view your easygoing rapport as a sign of weakness and an invitation to war. Finally, sharing passwords with lots of students, semester to semester, is a thermonuclear risk—any one of them could wake up one day and say, "today's the day I want to bring this project to its fucking knees."

But those are the stakes. The world is broken. As Oliver Cromwell said, "trust in God…and keep your powder dry" (Mead, 1942). Accordingly, accept risk as an element inseparable from running a dynamic digital media learning environment. Mitigate that risk by creating a positively charged culture of shared passion and networked imagination.

Theme 48: Mind the Credibility Gap

Lastly, don't push students hard unless you're so thoroughly involved that there's no question as concerns your credibility. Like a 19th century one-room schoolhouse teacher, master empathetic thought, and always know exactly how much leverage you really have.

Afterward: Beheading the Zombie & Future Implications

> *"Listen to me. Learn from me. I was not the best because I killed quickly. I was the best because the crowd loved me. Win the crowd and you will win your freedom."*
>
> *--Gladiator* (2000)

At the end of this semester—in December of 2012—I will be *killing the zombie.*

Six years and four months since first breathing life into the beast, I will be putting it down like Old Yeller. Of course, there is only one way to kill a zombie so perilously unwilling to die—and that is to *cut off its head.*

The Ghoul in the Mirror - Monitoring Your Meta-Enthusiasm Curve

GameZombie TV is going strong to this day. In fact, I currently have eight volunteers in my GZ class at UWW, in addition to 32 students enrolled for credit. It seems that more volunteers drift toward the class every week. GZ remains the most popular course in the MAGD program—and our weekly, all-hands-on-deck interdisciplinary sessions burst with energy and enthusiasm. But it's the students who are keeping the zombie going, not me. In the old days, as I've attempted to ferociously describe, I worked ungodly hours to establish GameZombie's momentum. And I was forever afraid that it would run out of steam and grind to an ignominious halt. But at last, I have both utterly succeeded and quietly failed. The business aspirations of GZ—which once animated the project, and made it *more* than a class—have become a vestigial organ, a shadow no one remembers but me. But, in the same breath, GZ's

interest-driven digital media learning community has become almost completely self-organizing, and just keeps going…with or without me.

Just as I have watched over five hundred students engage with GameZombie's unique trajectory of *zombified participation*—surfing through the GZ experience for anywhere from one to five semesters, learning from the project, engaging, riding out their enthusiasm curve till they've had enough—in my way, as the principle architect, executive producer, head cheerleader, zombie king, and so on; I seem to have finally hit the end of my authentic fascination with GZ as well. And to return this dissertation to its humble beginnings: all three major components must be in place for the project to sustain its wild energy—the students, the learning environment/technology, *and* the teacher. They are codependent and synergistic. These days, the students and the learning environment are going strong, but the teacher is not. I have reached the sunset of my driving interest, which seems to wrap around the entire life story of the project like some meta-enthusiasm curve.

And I would not advise future teachers running interest-driven digital media learning environments such as GZ to grind out the life cycle of their own projects if, like a tragically troubled marriage, the passion begins to fail. To go on once the real fun is over is to miss the whole goddamned point. The teacher has to get his or her kicks too.

And so I'm taking my advice—and lopping off GZ's once pretty head.

GZ and Teacher Education

As I prepare to end GameZombie this fall of 2012, I consider whether, how, or if to hand off the project to other professors in the MAGD program at UWW.

As I have written, GZ has been replicated successfully on *two separate occasions*. For one, I managed to reconstruct GameZombie in the fall of 2009 at UWW, officially re-launching the curriculum as a core component of the MAGD program. What this transition highlights, as I have explored, is that though GZ had previously worked as an optional advanced practicum at a Division 1 university, it once again proved successful as a repeatable core-level course at a Division 3 university. For two, I successfully trained William in the dark art of running GameZombie at Indiana University, and much to my surprise, he managed to take control of the existing team and learning community that I developed there and ran it for *two full years*, from August of 2009 – August of 2011, as a sister project to GZ at UWW. The fact that William was able to take over the zombie reins proves two things: 1. GZ can be successfully replicated and, more importantly, 2. GZ is not entirely dependent upon the idiosyncratic leadership of a single impassioned individual.

But there's a catch.

In the first instance, I was there to painstakingly reintroduce GZ to the new university, applying every trick in the book (as outlined in this dissertation) to get the project up and running again in the new environment. And in the second instance, I spent five full months grooming William to be my successor as the head of GZ at IU. And in his case, not only was he a uniquely competent individual, but he had also drunk the zombie Kool-Aid, so to speak, and

was a fully indoctrinated true believer. He'd been a core piece of the *GZ tribe* for nearly two years before I tapped him to be the new boss. And William knew the culture of the project intimately, commanded the respect of troops, and possessed an embodied sense of how to implement a soft power strategy of project leadership—including motivating, culture-building, and incentivizing.

None of the MAGD faculty understand how I keep GZ going. It's too proprietary. None of their classes are run like GZ. Mine is the only truly constructivist, interest-driven curriculum in the program. So, when I leave—effectively cutting off the zombie's head—GZ will suffocate and die as an official course. However, there is a chance that GZ's self-organizing learning community could sustain and morph into something new. And here we stumble upon the potential for *a fourth level* of the Zombified Participation Trajectory—the students go beyond what I have started, what I have taught them, throwing it off, and reconstructing, recombining, and recreating their own project; their own baby. In other words, they will say "screw GameZombie, let's do our own thing." And that would be awesome.

That would be the circle of zombie life.

Building Your Own GZ

Education Technology professor, Beth King, asked me a great question at my dissertation defense: *could you have created GameZombie TV as it is now while working fulltime at UWW?* And the answer is: *no.*

I have created numerous courses at UWW during the past three years, but none of them are constructivist, interest-driven learning environments like GameZombie TV. None of them are carried forth by the raw, intrinsic passion of the students. In fact, I tried to make my UWW Social Media Optimization and New Web class constructivist in its flagship semester and it proved an unmitigated disaster. So many of the magic elements explored above were not present to bring about the fabled spark. Ultimately, I reshaped the Social Media course as a straightforward, didactic class and the students were much happier. And I don't regret it—an interest-driven digital media learning environment must be done right or not at all.

The Need for a Significant Course Release

First and foremost, I think a college teaching professor attempting to create their own GZ needs a *significant course release*. The teacher needs *time*—time to obsess; time to enculturate; time to get in everybody's face and make them believe in a dream. As I've divulged, when I was building the culture of GZ at IU, I worked on the project as much as 100 hours per week. I was totally irrational. And the project was inseparable from my life. By contrast, my current teaching conditions totally prohibit that type of fiery project development. Like all non-tenure track faculty in the Communication Department at UWW, I teach a *heavy* 4/5 course load, and am under constant pressure to maintain both a cumulative student GPA of around 2.8/4.0 and a teaching evaluation score of around 4.4/5. Under these restrictive conditions, I could never have built GZ from scratch at UWW. A teacher attempting to recreate the inspired madness of GZ needs both time and latitude, in spades.

Producing, Project Leadership, and Management Training

Teachers looking to create interest-driven digital media learning communities, like GameZombie, also need to learn to be *more* than teachers—they must become digital media producers, project managers, and motivating leaders as well. For my part, I think of myself as more of a digital media producer and project leader than a teacher, per say. The former comes more naturally to me than the latter. But for many teachers I imagine the equation is flipped. Therefore, I recommend teacher training in digital media producing, project management, and organizational leadership—with a specific emphasis on developing the soft power skills of motivation, incentivization, culture-building, and of course, crisis management, since as we have seen: empowered students can be unpredictable.

Creating the Future of Education Technology

And once again, teachers looking to reboot GZ should not attempt to do so with perfect *implementation fidelity* (Squire & Jenkins, 2011). The purpose of this dissertation was to unearth the principle elements that conspired to spark GZ to life. But like subatomic electrons that seem to be everywhere and nowhere at once, the exact ingredients of the zombie particle are context-dependent and interpretable. You must work with the opportunities of your situation and meanwhile combine your unique interests in order to sustain an authentic fascination with the project over time.

Incentivization and the NCAA Head Coach

Seize opportunities to make the project a valuable part of your life.

There should be rewards for working like a beast—for taking it more seriously than a normal class. You should unapologetically leverage the project to obtain status and glory for yourself. The analogy is that of the *NCAA head coach*. The goal of the coach is not that her students should learn to play basketball well and then go on to a successful life of quality basketball playing. *The coach's goal is to win!* The coach's goal is to obtain for herself accolades, status, respect, and financial rewards. But, in a healthy scenario, the coach's success is her player's success—and everyone involved benefits from winning. As I've illustrated with my story of building GZ at IU, defining an interest-driven digital media learning environment first and foremost as an *authentic business* with a *real-world* agenda was central to getting students to *wake up* and take it deadly seriously. This is a way of smashing through *the disconnect* between learning and its purpose. And by way of counterexample, I've shown how GZ's drift toward institutional traditionalism has threatened its burning uniqueness—squelching in particular, incentives for the teacher/leader/producer.

An Open Business Relationship

Bearing the above in mind, teachers seeking to create an interest-driven learning environment in the vein of GameZombie should probably seek to go into an open business relationship with the university. I built GameZombie by living in the gray area, bending every possible rule, breaking others, and mostly getting away with it. But that's because for the longest time I viewed GZ as a real business pretending to be a student project. That was its core identity. That was GZ's scrappy, guerilla, new media startup culture. But it was less than ideal. As I've illustrated, getting permission—despite the severe danger of asking—is usually better

than sneaking around. A teacher building their own GZ could do the hard work of negotiating an open business relationship with the university—in the vein of the NCAA—allowing for transparent profit-sharing and therefore sustained incentivization for real world success.

The University's Gotta Have Your Back

This type of open business relationship could protect the leader/teacher/producer from accusations that the project is exploiting student labor for private business gain. Like the NCAA arrangement, profit-sharing would be a known quantity—and the whole operation would be opt-in for all parties, including plain language waivers. As I have described in gruesome detail regarding the Cy incident; even spurious student accusations can threaten the project whose underlying infrastructure resides entirely on trust and soft power. The leader/teacher/producer *needs* to know that the university has her back and that sour grapes won't ruin the whole enchilada.

GZ VS MOOCS

In much the same way that GZ represents the constructivist new culture of learning, the new movement called massive open online courses (MOOCS) represents the connectivist new culture of open education (Koller, 2012; Norvig, 2012; Vetterli, 2012).

Interest-driven digital media learning environments, (such as GZ), and MOOCS have much in common and many differences as well. As I have argued in this dissertation, GameZombie is something of a 19th century one room schoolhouse—hopped up on Adderall. GZ returns education to the interdisciplinary, collaboratory, mixed age and skill dynamic of the

one room schoolhouse, but then invigorates it with 21st century digital production and

communications technology. And by way of parallel, MOOCS reflect the 20th century dream of

industrial-scale, one-to-many, regimented education—pumped up on steroids. GZ and MOOCS

transcend their 19th and 20th century limitations by leveraging the latest 21st innovations in

educational technology, yet both have respective strengths and weaknesses.

Massive Scalability, Market Need, and the Charm of Old-fashioned Constraints

MOOCS overcome the limitations of GameZombie TV's passion-fueled curriculum in one

very important way—they are *massively scalable* and have the potential to touch many more

people. As I have demonstrated in my theme of *Attila the Professor*, GZ has indeed restlessly

scaled, but in a far more modest, strenuous capacity. At its peak size, GZ incorporated the

combined efforts of about 100 students at IU and UWW collaborating synergistically. And

cumulatively, over the course of six years, about 500 students contributed meaningfully to the

project. But in the fall of 2011, over 160,000 people signed up for the flagship MOOC on

Artificial Intelligence offered by Sebastian Thrun and Peter Norvig (2012). The powerful success

of the course led to creation of the rapidly expanding company, Udacity. Following on the heels

of Udacity's breakaway success, Stanford's Daphne Koller and Andrew Ng launched arguably

the most successful MOOC company to date, Coursera (2012). A strong example of a for-profit

partnership between faculty, business, and the university; in less than one year Coursera has

"enrolled" more than 1.7 million "students" from 196 countries for at least one of their growing

collection of 200 courses to date (Koller, 2012). By any measure, Coursera's growth is explosive

and reflects a genuine market need—that is: there are lots of people out there who want

access to good learning but aren't getting it.

What fundamentally differentiates MOOCs from the random, ubiquitous mélange of the

Internet's available free resources—such as its bounty of software tutorials, TED talks, lectures,

and interviews—is a singular, simple, smart idea: the classes are structured like normal classes,

with weekly assignments and due dates. So the web's awesome power of autodidacticism gets

combined with the charming constraints of a regular old college course.

Let's face it—it's a billion dollar idea.

Radical Openness, Inclusivity, and the Mess of Awesome

MOOCS are by definition *radically open*.

They represent the extension of open and distance learning to its most massively,

radically open and distant extremes. Truly, the scalability is off the charts. However, novice

learners can experience frustration in MOOC learning environments due to the lack of the *social

presence* of fellow students and the teacher. Equally, students can become overwhelmed by

the raw, messiness of the discussion forums. At last, here is where the skillful, tactful,

embodied role of the leader/producer/teacher in interest-driven digital media learning

environments reveals itself to be a crucial factor. When executed optimally, I purposefully

orchestrate a GZ *mess of awesome*—intentionally stirring up the chaos, dynamism, and creative

energy of the learning environment. But I am always there to squelch arguments, facilitate

synergies, and guide the individual students and the collective toward what Bruce Lee called

"all the heavenly glory." By contrast, in MOOCS you're home alone—and you're on your own. And this can easily lead to frustration and burnout in students for whom self-directed learning, including active participation in online forums, does not come axiomatically.

GZ and MOOCS differ on the subject of inclusivity as well. While GZ has always been extremely inclusive, including implementing an aggressive campus-wide interdisciplinary recruitment program, the project has had its share of problems when opening up beyond the academy. A key illustration is when I brought Arnie into GameZombie in the spring of 2009. He was a thirty-six year old, talented motion graphics artist living in Bloomington that I integrated into a more or less official university learning environment. And though he was a terrific recruit for a while, under the creative pressure of our ambitious game media studio, and close-knit learning collective, he dramatically (and embarrassingly) melted down within a few short months. This incident reveals the limits of radical inclusivity in the 21st century one room schoolhouse. By contrast, the lack of social contact—the distance factor—of MOOCS makes them a much stronger educational format for massive, scalable inclusivity, since breakdowns in interpersonal communication are less dangerous and more controllable in an online format. Witness, for example, how mean-spirited and evil are YouTube and Destructoid comment threads—where people flame and rage with abandon—but the damage in cyberspace is *usually* fleeting and ethereal. By contrast, when Arnie melted down before our eyes it was viscerally disturbing for those of us who experienced it IRL, in all its corporeal tragedy.

Another key difference between GZ and MOOCS is that the latter only requires an Internet connection to get going, since most of the learning occurs via watching lectures,

videos, and readings; engaging with crowd-sourced feedback, online forums, and peer-review; and taking quizzes and exams. By contrast, GZ students require an Internet connection but then *also* a whole suite of DIY Media production software, in addition to a massive arsenal of production assets. MOOCS represent more of a *lean back* learning experience versus GZ which by definition requires engagement with the authentic industry of video games and the production of original content for publication on the web. Assessment in GZ has *nothing* to do with performance on tests. Student grades on GZ have *everything* to do with how effectively and meaningfully they have interacted with, negotiated, and taken command of a loud, messy, collaborative digital media work environment—which is, after all, a simulation of the type of environment in which they will one day find themselves doing real media work.

Towards a Balance of Embodied Collaboration and Online Digital Literacy

GZ and MOOCS both require students to *self-regulate* their learning environments. And to the degree to which they require students to take responsibility for their own development, they are radically similar. But MOOCS take place on the *Internet* and GZ takes place in a *media lab*. Students working in MOOCS learn the increasingly essential digital literacy skill of effective human communication in virtual online spaces. By contrast, GZ students are learning the critical 21st century skill of embodied interdisciplinary collaboration in a loud, messy, dynamic environment. Research (Turkle, 2011) suggests that the valuable skill of embodied interpersonal communication is under threat from the ubiquity of 21st century digital communication technologies. GZ pushes back against this research by forcing students to work together, to build their capacity for empathic peer mentorship, and to develop their

effectiveness in dynamic social collaboration. Nevertheless, I do think that the ability to efficaciously communicate and collaborate in online virtual spaces is a critical information literacy that students should possess—in addition to embodied interpersonal communication skill. In fact, well-rounded members of the 21st century workforce should possess a balance of both embodied and online communication fluency.

The explosive growth of MOOCS reveals a genuine hunger for rich, online learning experiences and two things are likely: 1. they will continue to grow in popularity around the world and 2. the richness of the virtual experience—its verisimilitude to real life—will continue to improve in the years to come, evolving towards perfect simulation. We are already seeing this trend of exponentially improving simulation and rich media experience occur simultaneously in multiple industries including: lifelike 3D modeling in video games and movies; reliable high definition video streaming; and ubiquitous video conferencing. Ironically, as the online experience of MOOCS becomes more and more similar to the embodied experience of real life collaboration, it will become increasingly localized again. In other words, as online communication experiences become more real and lifelike, they will also become more like the 21st century one room schoolhouse learning environment of GameZombie TV. In which case, the distilled principles I have outlined in this dissertation will become applicable to MOOCS as well—as the massively open, public, and distant converges back to the visceral, tribal, and local community-based.

Towards a Zombie Hydra whose Heads Come Back

The above convergence of MOOCs toward the local will occur but for one key caveat: MOOCS will probably never be able to muster one expert teacher for every forty students or so—which is the involved role I play in GameZombie—and so they will necessarily require self-organizing peer mentorship to facilitate effective collaboration. In this last sense, MOOCS could ultimately manifest the potential of GZ's fourth level of zombified participation trajectory—that of students starting and running their own passion-fueled learning collectives. In other words: efficiently localized MOOC learning communities would rely on smart, savvy, responsible leadership and mentorship by *peers.*

Finally, the above scenario has another benefit over the strenuous, embodied way in which I have run GameZombie TV for the past six years, and that is the following: you might be able to cut off its head—ie. a founder/leader such as myself quits the project—but like a thousand-headed hydra, replacement leaders could quickly emerge, filling the void. A MOOC learning environment of such scale has a unique advantage over the current structure of GZ in that it need not rely on the passion, energy, and commitment of a single individual over a sustained period of time. Realistically, it would be more efficient to distribute that responsibility amongst the meritoriously promoted peer mentors emerging from within the massively connected MOOC learning collective.

GZ & Badges for Lifelong Learning

The digital media and learning's movement toward *gamification* via the implementation of *badges* represents a potentially powerful solution to GZ's problem of assessment, which is

traditional and outdated (Davidson, 2011). Toward that end, I submitted a proposal to the 4th Annual Digital Media and Learning Competition for GameZombie TV to build a badges-based system of assessment. GZ was a finalist in the competition and finished in the top twenty-eight entries in the world—out of over 500 (Angileri, 2011). Badges remain a ripe opportunity to reward GZ work effort and performance in a substantive and motivating way. Here are three ways badges could be implemented to provide incremental, motivating incentives:

Team Lead

As described extensively, GameZombie TV utilizes a system of peer mentorship and leveling up. Students who work hard and prove themselves to be capable, reliable, talented, and prolific are eventually asked to serve as Team Leads. Every team has a student leader: Producer, Head Writer, Lead Editor, Lead 2D/Graphics, Lead Audio, Senior Production Manager, Social Media Manager, etc. The process by which students are named "Lead" is too amorphous and subjective. A badge system could make the process of becoming a team leader a sort of game. It could demystify the process and incentivize meaningful work.

Conference Team

As described in detail, GameZombie TV has covered every major video game conference of the past six years, including GDC, E3, PAX, CES, and Comic-Con. For every conference, more students want to go than is possible, since GZ's floor team consists of a maximum of about five people: a host/VJ, two videographers, a producer, and a production manager/PR manager. The selection process is competitive. Students campaign hard for the opportunity since they feel, rightly, that attending a major video game conference as press will bring them closer to their

goal of breaking into the professional game/media industry. The process of selection is a subjective interpretation of a student's overall reliability and the quality of their effort. A badge system could clarify this selection process; make it transparently fair, incentivizing students to build incrementally toward the goal of being chosen to cover a conference.

Jedi Badge - Get a Job!

Due to GZ's consistent, energetic engagement with both the worlds of web video and the video game industry, as I have extensively described, the project has accumulated a network of professional contacts, including: video game marketing and PR professionals, game developers, and video game and web video industry executives. This process of building a GZ portfolio toward leveraging into a job remains organic and non-codified. A badge system could be implemented to incentive students to iteratively build their GameZombie TV portfolio toward obtaining a valuable internship or job. And then of course, as alumni they would remain connected to the GZ organization by virtue of having obtained the ultimate GZ Badge—having elevated into the world of professional media, effectively going *beyond the badges.*

Editing Badge Progression

Badges are a natural fit for the curriculum of GameZombie TV. The iterative, gamified, incentivizing quality of a badge system would clarify for students how to advance in the "system," breaking this process up into actionable goals. Here a few examples of badges a student on the *Editing Team* might earn:

- The editor completes his or her first video to unlock a badge

- The editor completes 5 videos to unlock a badge

- The editor attends a video game conference as videographer to unlock a badge

- The editor's video achieves 5,000 unique views on YouTube to achieve a badge

- The editor's video is voted by the class as GZ's best video of the month to achieve a badge

- The editor is named Lead Editor to achieve a badge

- The editor is named Producer to unlock two badges – one for being named Producer, and another for holding the "Lead" position on two separate teams (a rare feat)

- The editor gets a job at a major game/media company to obtain the ultimate "Jedi" badge (moving beyond the badges!)

Public and Dynamically Cool

The badges should be public, in the manner of Xbox Live Achievements or Foursquare Badges. They can be displayed on GameZombie.tv, the MAGD homepage, and anywhere else that students will enjoy seeing them, sharing them, bragging about them, measuring up against them, and using them as incentive to step up their game. They could also be video-based, incorporating stylish motion graphics, sound design, and cool branding so that when you go to the badges database online it's an enjoyable visceral experience to experience them. And via this audiovisual enhancement, students will value their achievement badges even more, and take great pride in them.

GZ & Alumni Interviews

Finally, as I mentioned, by virtue of having graduated over 500 students from GZ's close-knit, collaborative game media studio, the project has accumulated a kind of *mafia*, which can self-organize, network, and help one another achieve professional media work. This dissertation—as a first pass at the six year project that is GZ—did not incorporate student interviews for the sake of both practicality and clarity. But an interesting future study would be to interview GZ alumni five, ten, or fifteen years down the road to see how their experience of working on GZ impacted their ability to succeed in professional media environments.

References

21st Century Skills, Education & Competitiveness: A Resource and Policy Guide. (2007). Partnership for 21st Century Skills.

Aczel, A. D. (2010). *Present at the creation : the story of CERN and the large hadron collider* (1st ed.). New York: Crown Publishers/Harmony Books.

Anderson, L. (2006). Analytic autoethnography. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 35*(4), 373-395.

Angileri, J. (2011, December 15). Student web series nominated for $200,000 grant. *UWW University News*. Retrieved from http://www.uww.edu/news/archive/2011-12-gamezombie-grant

Apted, M. (Writer). (2005). The Stolen Eagle (Season 1, Episode 1). In J. Milius (Producer), *Rome*: HBO.

Ariely, D. (2008). *Predictably irrational : the hidden forces that shape our decisions* (1st ed.). New York, NY: Harper.

Atkinson, R. (2007). The life story interview as a bridge in narrative inquiry. In D. J. Clandinin (Ed.), *Handbook of narrative inquiry : mapping a methodology* (pp. xix, 693 p.). Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications.

Balzac, H. d., & Raffel, B. (1994). *Le Père Goriot = Old Goriot* (1st ed.). New York: W.W. Norton.

BBC. (2010, June 17, 2010). Bebo sold by AOL after just two years. *BBC News*. Retrieved from http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10341413

Bernstein, A. (Writer). (2007). Babylon (Season 1, Episode 6). In M. Weiner (Producer), *Mad Men*: AMC.

Bluth, D. (Writer). (1988). The Land Before Time. United States: Universal Pictures.

Bochner, A. P. (1984). The functions of human communication in interpersonal bonding. In C. C. A. J. W. Bowers (Ed.), *Handbook of rhetorical and communication theory*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Boyle, D. (Writer). (1996). Trainspotting. United Kingdom: PolyGram Filmed Entertainment (UK), Miramax Films (USA).

Brown, J. S., & Thomas, D. (2011). *A New Culture of Learning: Cultivating the Imaginatin for a World of Constant Change*: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

Bruner, J. (1993). The autobiographical process. In R. Folkenflik (Ed.), *The culture of autobiography: Constructions of self-representation*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Burkeman, O. (2012). *The antidote : happiness for people who can't stand positive thinking*. New York: Faber and Faber.

Burns, A. (2011, September 20). Rick Santorum contacted Google, says company spreads 'filth'. *Politico*. Retrieved from http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0911/63952.html

Buzard, J. (2003). On auto-ethnographic authority. *The Yale Journal of Criticism, 16*(1), 61-91.

Campbell, J. (1949). *The hero with a thousand faces*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Campbell, J., & Moyers, B. D. (1988). *The power of myth* (1st ed.). New York: Doubleday.

Carveth, R., & South, J. B. (2010). *Mad men and philosophy : nothing is as it seems*. Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley.

Cave, D. (2000, July 24). I want my own .tv. *Salon*.

Chandor, J. C. (Writer). (2011). Margin Call. United States: Lionsgate, Roadside Attractions.

Cherones, T. (Writer). (1994). The Stall (Season 5, Episode 12). In L. David (Producer), *Seinfeld*.

Christensen, C. M. (1997). *The innovator's dilemma : when new technologies cause great firms to fail*. Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business School Press.

Clouse, R. (Writer). (1973). Enter the Dragon. Hong Kong, United States: Warner Bros. Pictures.

Collins, A., & Halverson, R. (2009). *Rethinking education in the age of technology : the digital revolution and schooling in America*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Cooper, D. (Writer). (2011). Digital Media: New Learners of the 21st Century. USA: Mobile Digital Arts

PBS.

Coppola, F. F. (Writer). (1979). Apocalypse Now. United States: United Artists.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow : the psychology of optimal experience* (1st ed.). New York: Harper & Row.

Davidson, C. N. (2011). *Now you see it : how the brain science of attention will transform the way we live, work, and learn*. New York: Viking.

De Botton, A. (2012). *Religion for atheists : a non-believer's guide to the uses of religion* (1st U.S. ed.). New York: Pantheon Books.

Delamont, S. (2009). The only honest thing: Autoethnography, reflexivity and small crises in fieldwork. *Ethnography and Education, 4*(1), 51-63.

Denzin, N. K. (1989). *Interpretive biography*. Newbury Park: Sage.

DePalma, B. (Writer). (1983). Scarface. United States: Universal.

DePalma, B. (Writer). (1987). The Untouchables. United States: Paramount Pictures.

Didion, J. (2005). *The year of magical thinking* (1st ed.). New York: A.A. Knopf.

Duckworth, A. L., Peterson, C., Matthews, M.D., & Kelly, D.R. (2007). Grit: Perseverance and Passion for Long-Term Goals. *Personality Processes and Individual Differences, 92*(6), 1087-1101.

Ellis, C. (2004). *The ethnographic I : a methodological novel about autoethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

Ellis, C., Adams, T., Bochner, A. (2011). Autoethnography: An Overview. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research, 12*(1).

Ellis, C. B., Arthur P. (2000). Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. xx, 1065 , 1057 p.). Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications.

Ellis, C. B., Arthur P. (2006). Analyzing analytic autoethnography: An autopsy. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 35*(4), 429-449.

Ellison, R. (1953). *Invisible man*. London: Gollancz.

Ende, M., & Quadflieg, R. (1983). *The neverending story* (1st ed.). Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday.

Ferguson, N. (2008). *The ascent of money : a financial history of the world*. New York: Penguin Press.

Florida, R. L. (2004). *The rise of the creative class : and how it's transforming work, leisure, community and everyday life*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Gardner, H. (1983). *Frames of mind : the theory of multiple intelligences*. New York: Basic Books.

Gardner, J. (1971). *Grendel* ([1st ed.). New York,: Knopf.

Gee, J., & Hayes, E. (2010). *Women and gaming: The Sims and 21st-century learning*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Gee, J. P. (2003). *What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy* (1st ed.). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Gee, J. P. (2010). *New digital media and learning as an emerging area and "worked examples" as one way forward*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.

Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures : selected essays*. New York,: Basic Books.

Gibson, M. (Writer). (1995). Braveheart. United States: Paramount Pictures (USA), 20th Century Fox (non-USA).

Gingrich-Philbrook, C. (2005). Autoethnography's family values: Easy access to compulsory experiences. *Text and Performance Quarterly, 25*(4), 297-314.

Gladwell, M. (2000). *The tipping point : how little things can make a big difference* (1st ed.). Boston: Little, Brown.

Gladwell, M. (2008). *Outliers : the story of success* (1st ed.). New York: Little, Brown and Co.

Glatter, L. (Writer). (2009). Guy Walks Into an Advertising Agency (Season 3, Episode 6). In M. Weiner (Producer), *Mad Men*. United States: AMC.

Godin, S. (1999). *Permission marketing : turning strangers into friends, and friends into customers*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Godin, S. (2008). *Tribes : we need you to lead us*. New York: Portfolio.

Goodall, H. L. (2000). *Writing the new ethnography*. Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press.

Goodall, H. L. (2006). *A need to know : the clandestine history of a CIA family*. Walnut Creek, Calif.: Left Coast Press.

Greene, R. (2006). *The 33 strategies of war*. New York: Viking.

Grossman, L. (2006, Dec. 25, 2006). You — Yes, You — Are TIME's Person of the Year. *Time*.

Haidt, J. (2012). *The righteous mind : why good people are divided by politics and religion* (1st ed.). New York: Pantheon Books.

Harkin, T. (2012). *FOR PROFIT HIGHER EDUCATION: The Failure to Safeguard the Federal Investment and Ensure Student Success prepared by the COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR, AND PENSIONS UNITED STATES SENATE*. Retrieved from

http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/browse/committeecong.action?collection=CPRT&committee=health&chamber=senate&congressplus=112&ycord=0.

Harris, T. (1981). *Red dragon*. New York: Putnam.

Hassett, D. D., & Curwood, J. S. (2009). Theories and practices of multimodal education: The instructional dynamics of picture books and primary classrooms. *Reading Teacher, 62*(4), 270-282.

Hemingway, E. (1964). *A moveable feast*. New York,: Scribner.

Hendrickson, M. (2008, February 6th, 2008). Revver Making Last-Ditch Attempt to Avoid Deadpool? *TechCrunch*. Retrieved from http://techcrunch.com/2008/02/06/revver-making-last-ditch-attempt-to-avoid-deadpool/

Hoade, S. (Producer). (2010) Zombies! The Living Dead in Literature. Audio Podcast retrieved from http://itunes.apple.com/us/itunes-u/zombies!-living-dead-in-literature/id394644389

Holman Jones, S. (2005). Autoethnography: Making the personal political. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. xix, 1210 p.). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Hooks, B. (1994). *Teaching to transgress : education as the practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge.

Hunter, T. (Writer). (2007). Indian Summer (Season 1, Episode 11). In M. Weiner (Producer), *Mad Men*: AMC.

Hunter, T. (Writer). (2008). Three Sundays (Season 2, Episode 4). In M. Weiner (Producer), *Mad Men*: AMC.

Isaacson, W. (2011). *Steve Jobs*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Ito, M. (2010). *Hanging out, messing around, and geeking out : kids living and learning with new media*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Jackson, N. (2011, February 25, 2011). 10 Notorious Google Bombs*. The Atlantic*. Retrieved from http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2011/02/10-notorious-google-bombs/71731/

Jackson, P. (Writer). (2001). The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring. New Zealand

United States: New Line Cinema.

Jenkins, H. (2003). Transmedia Storytelling. *Technology Review*.

Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence culture : where old and new media collide*. New York: New York University Press.

Jenkins, H., Clinton, K., Purushotma, R., Robison, A.J. & Weigel, M. (2006). Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education For the 21st Century Available from http://www.newmedialiteracies.org/files/working/NMLWhitePaper.pdf

Jobs, S. (Producer). (1997) Apple Steve Jobs The Crazy Ones - NEVER BEFORE AIRED 1997. retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8rwsuXHA7RA

Johnson, S. (2010). *Where good ideas come from : the natural history of innovation*. New York: Riverhead Books.

Jonassen, D. H. (1994). Thinking Technology: Toward a Constructivist Design Model. *Educational Technology 34*(4), 34-37.

Jonassen, D. H. (1997). Instructional Design Models for Well-Structured and Ill-Structured Problem-Solving Learning Outcomes. *Educational Technology Research and Development, 45*(1), 65-94.

Jones, S. E. (2008). *The meaning of video games : gaming and textual strategies*. New York: Routledge.

Joyce, J., & Herman Finkelstein Collection (Library of Congress). (1916). *A portrait of the artist as a young man*. New York,: B. W. Huebsch.

Kael, P., & Schwartz, S. (2011). *The age of movies : selected writings of Pauline Kael*. New York: Library of America.

Kawasaki, G. (2008). *Reality check : the irreverent guide to outsmarting, outmanaging, and outmarketing your competition*. New York: Portfolio.

Kerouac, J. (1957). *On the road*. New York,: Viking Press.

Kesey, K. (1962). *One flew over the cuckoo's nest, a novel*. New York,: Viking Press.

King, E. (2009). Tom Sawyer and the gang: Practicing productive 21st century literacies while playing in the great indoors. Unpublished Dissertation Proposal. University of Wisconsin at Madison.

Kirkpatrick, D. (2010). *The Facebook effect : the inside story of the company that is connecting the world* (1st Simon & Schuster hardcover ed.). New York: Simon & Schuster.

Kirschner, P. A. S., John.; Clark, Richard E. . (2006). Why minimal guidance during instruction does not work: an analysis of the failure of constructivist, discovery, problem-based, experiential, and inquiry-based teaching. *Educational Psychologist, 41*(2), 75-86.

Koller, D. (Producer). (2012) What we're learning from online education. *TED Global 2012*. retrieved from http://www.ted.com/talks/daphne_koller_what_we_re_learning_from_online_education.html

Kress, G. R. (2010). *Multimodality : a social semiotic approach to contemporary communication*. London ; New York: Routledge.

Kübler-Ross, E. (1969). *On death and dying*. New York: Macmillan.

Kubrick, S. (Writer). (1964). Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb: Columbia Pictures.

Kuratko, D. F., & Hodgetts, R. M. (2007). *Entrepreneurship : theory, process, practice* (7th ed.). Mason, OH: Thomson South-Western.

Kuratko, D. F., & Welsch, H. P. (2004). *Strategic entrepreneurial growth* (2nd ed.). Mason, Ohio: Thomson/South-Western.

Kurosawa, A. (Writer). (1950). Rashomon. Japan.

Kurzweil, R. (2005). *The singularity is near : when humans transcend biology*. New York: Viking.

Landis, J. (Writer). (1980). The Blues Brothers. United States: Universal Studios.

Lanier, J. (2010). *You are not a gadget : a manifesto* (1st ed.). New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Lawler, R. (2011, Jan 25, 2011). Orange Buys Into Online Video With Dailymotion Deal. *GigaOM*. Retrieved from http://gigaom.com/video/orange-dailymotion-deal/

Lederman, L. M., & Teresi, D. (1993). *The God particle : if the universe is the answer, what is the question?* Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Levy, S. (2011). *In the plex : how Google thinks, works, and shapes our lives* (1st Simon & Schuster hardcover ed.). New York: Simon & Schuster.

Lewin, T. (2012, July 29). Senate Committee Report on For-Profit Colleges Condemns Costs and Practices. *New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/30/education/harkin-report-condemns-for-profit-colleges.html

Luís Bettencourt, J. L., Dirk Helbing, Christian Kühnert, Geoffrey West. (2007). Growth, innovation, scaling, and the pace of life in cities. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, 104*(17), 7301-7306.

Mankiewicz, J. L. (Writer). (1963). Cleopatra. United Kingdom, United States, Switzerland: 20th Century Fox.

Marshall, M. (2007, September 10, 2007). Crackle, after dropping user-generated video, sees money roll in. *VentureBeat*. Retrieved from http://venturebeat.com/2007/09/10/crackle-after-dropping-user-generated-video-sees-money-roll-in/

Mayer, R. E. (2004). Should There Be a Three-Strikes Rule Against Pure Discovery Learning? *American Psychologist, 59* (1), 14–19.

McTiernan, J. (Writer). (1995). Die Hard with a Vengeance. United States: 20th Century Fox (USA), Touchstone Pictures (International).

Mead, M. (1942). *And keep your powder dry; an anthropologist looks at America*. New York,: W. Morrow and Co.

Mezrich, B. (2009). *The accidental billionaires : the founding of Facebook, a tale of sex, money, genius and betrayal* (1st ed.). New York: Doubleday.

Milius, J. (Writer). (1982). Conan the Barbarian: Universal Pictures (United States), 20th Century Fox (others).

Nietzsche, F. W., & Ludovici, A. M. (1924). *The will to power, an attempted transvaluation of all values*. New York,: The Macmillan company.

Nolan, C. (Writer). (2005). Batman Begins. United States, United Kingdom: Warner Bros. Pictures.

Nolan, C. (Writer). (2012). The Dark Knight Rises. United States, United Kingdom: Warner Bros. Pictures.

Norrington, S. (Writer). (1998). Blade. United States: New Line Cinema.

Norvig, P. (Producer). (2012) The 100,000-student classroom. *TED 2012*. retrieved from http://www.ted.com/talks/peter_norvig_the_100_000_student_classroom.html

Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft power : the means to success in world politics* (1st ed.). New York: Public Affairs.

O'Brian, P. (1969). *Master and commander* ([1st ed.). Philadelphia,: Lippincott.

O'Reilly, T. (2005). What Is Web 2.0, Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software. from http://oreilly.com/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html

online, t. e. (2004). Constructivism as a Paradigm for Teaching and Learning. *Concept to Classroom*, from http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/concept2class/constructivism/index_sub5.html

Osborn, A. F. (1953). *Applied imagination; principles and procedures of creative thinking*. New York,: Scribner.

Palmer, S. (2008). *Good in a room : how to sell yourself (and your ideas) and win over any audience* (1st ed.). New York: Currency/Doubleday.

Papert, S. (1980). *Mindstorms : children, computers, and powerful ideas*. New York: Basic Books.

Pariser, E. (2011). *The filter bubble : what the Internet is hiding from you*. New York: Penguin Press.

Pelias, R. J. (2000). The critical life. *Communication Education, 49*(3), 220-228.

Peters, T. J., & Waterman, R. H. (1982). *In search of excellence : lessons from America's best-run companies* (1st ed.). New York: Harper & Row.

Pink, D. H. (2009). *Drive : the surprising truth about what motivates us*. New York, NY: Riverhead Books.

Plummer, K. (2001). The call of life stories in ethnographic research. In P. Atkinson (Ed.), *Handbook of ethnography* (pp. xviii, 507 p.). London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE.

Popkewitz, T. S. (1998). Dewey, Vygotsky, and the Social Administration of the Individual: Constructivist Pedagogy as Systems of Ideas in Historical Spaces. *American Educational Research Journal, 35*(4), 535-570.

Puzo, M. (1969). *The godfather*. New York,: Putnam.

Richardson, L. (2000). Writing: A method of inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. xx, 1065 , 1057 p.). Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications.

Robinson, K., & Aronica, L. (2009). *The element : how finding your passion changes everything*. New York: Viking.

Schonfeld, E. (2011, April 12). TubeMogul Relaunches As A Video Advertising Platform. *TechCrunch*. Retrieved from http://techcrunch.com/2011/04/12/tubemogul-video-advertising/

Schroeder, A. (2008). *The snowball : Warren Buffett and the business of life*. New York: Bantam Books.

Scorsese, M. (Writer). (1980). Raging Bull. United States: United Artists.

Scott, R. (Writer). (2000). Gladiator. United Kingdom

USA: DreamWorks Pictures (United States)

Universal Pictures (international).

Scott, T. (Writer). (1993). True Romance. United States: Warner Bros.

Sebag Montefiore, S. (2008). *Young Stalin* (1st Vintage Books ed.). New York: Vintage Books.

Seery, M. H., EA; Silver, RC. (2010). Whatever does not kill us: cumulative lifetime adversity, vulnerability, and resilience. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 99*(6), 1025-1041.

Seib, G. F. (2008, November 21, 2008). In Crisis, Opportunity for Obama*. The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from http://online.wsj.com/article/SB122721278056345271.html

Shakespeare, W. (2003). *Henry V*. Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications.

Shelton, R. (Writer). (1988). Bull Durham. United States: Orion Pictures.

Shirky, C. (2010). *Cognitive surplus : creativity and generosity in a connected age*. New York: Penguin Press.

Slezak, P. (2010). Radical Constructivism: Epistemology, Education and Dynamite. *Constructivist Foundations, 6*(1), 102–111.

Snyder, Z. (Writer). (2004). Dawn of the Dead. United States: Universal Pictures.

Squire, K., & Jenkins, H. (2011). *Video games and learning : teaching and participatory culture in the digital age*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Standring, G. (Writer). (2010). Old Wounds (Season 1, Episode 11). In S. S. DeKnight (Producer), *Spartacus: Blood and Sand*. United States.

Steinkuehler, C. (2006). Massively multiplayer online videogaming as participation in a Discourse. *Mind, Culture & Activity, 13*(1), 38-52.

Steinkuehler, C. (2007). Massively Multiplayer Online Gaming as a Constellation of Literacy Practices. *E-Learning and Digital Media, 4*(3), 297-318.

Steinkuehler, C., & Chmiel, M. (2006). *Fostering scientific habits of mind in the context of online play*. Paper presented at the 7th International Conference of the Learning Sciences.

Steinkuehler, C., Compton-Lilly, C., & King, E. (2010). *Reading in the context of online games*. Paper presented at the Learning in the Disciplines: Proceedings of the 9th International Conference of the Learning Sciences (ICLS 2010)

Steinkuehler, C., & Johnson, B. Z. (2009). Computational literacy in online games: The social life of a mod. *The International Journal of Gaming and Computer Mediated Simulations, 1*(1), 53-65.

Stone, O. (Writer). (1986). Platoon. United States: Orion Pictures.

Stone, O. (Writer). (1987). Wall Street. United States: 20th Century Fox.

Striker, S. (Producer). (2007a) GameZombie.tv Interview - Daniel James CEO of Three Rings Design. *GameZombie TV*. retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2RVla6UhMvA

Striker, S. (Producer). (2007b) GameZombie.tv Presents A Conversation With Alexey Pajitnov. *GameZombie TV*. retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jrHp-_l6vrA

Striker, S. (Producer). (2012) Alexandra Juhasz- a TechZombie TV interview. *TechZombie TV*. retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1b8s9n0B4DM&feature=share&list=UULpJnuIhFaWi1ipnGpFXfhw

Sutton, R. I. (2007). *The no asshole rule : building a civilized workplace and surviving one that isn't* (1st ed.). New York: Warner Business Books.

Sweller, J. (1988). Cognitive load during problem solving: Effects on learning. *Cognitive Science, 12*(1), 257-285.

Sydell, J. G. a. L. (Producer). (2012, January 19, 2012) Megaupload Shut Down By The FBI. *NPR The Record with Ann Powers*. retrieved from http://www.npr.org/blogs/therecord/2012/01/20/145474712/megaupload-shut-down-by-the-fbi

Tarantino, Q. (Writer). (1994). Pulp Fiction. United States: Miramax Films.

Thompson, C. (2011, July 15). How Khan Academy Is Changing the Rules of Education. *Wired*.

Thompson, H. S. (1971). *Fear and loathing in Las Vegas; a savage journey to the heart of the American dream* ([1st ed.). New York,: Random House.

Thornton, B. S. (2011). *The wages of appeasement : ancient Athens, Munich, and Obama's America* (1st American ed.). New York: Encounter Books.

Tolkien, J. R. R. (1954). *The lord of the rings*. London,: Allen & Unwin.

Tolkien, J. R. R. (1981). *The return of the king : being the third part of The lord of the rings* (Silver anniversary ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Trinko, K. (2012, February 10). Romney Calls Himself a 'Severely Conservative Republican Governor'. *National Review Online*. Retrieved from http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/290818/romney-calls-himself-severely-conservative-republican-governor-katrina-trinko

Tullis Owen, J. A. M., Chris; Adams, Tony E. & Vitale, Alisha. (2009). truth troubles. *Qualitative Inquiry, 15*(1), 178-200.

Turkle, S. (2011). *Alone together : why we expect more from technology and less from each other*. New York: Basic Books.

Tzu, S. (2007). *The art of war*. Berkeley, CA: Ulysses Press.

VanPatten, T. (Writer). (2007). Pharsalus (Season 2, Episode 7). In J. Milius (Producer), *Rome*: HBO.

Vetterli, M. (Producer). (2012) From Socrates to MOOCs. *TEDxHelvetia*. retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lkyNRgBdyfI

Voltaire, & Raffel, B. (2005). *Candide, or, Optimism*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Vygotsky, L. S., & Cole, M. (1978). *Mind in society : the development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Weinberger, D. (2011). *Too big to know : rethinking knowledge now that the facts aren't the facts, experts are everywhere, and the smartest person in the room is the room*. New York: Basic Books.

Welch, J., & Welch, S. (2005). *Winning* (1st ed.). New York: HarperBusiness Publishers.

Whale, J. (Writer). (1931). Frankenstein. United States: Universal Pictures.

Wu, T. (2010). *The master switch : the rise and fall of information empires* (1st ed.). New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Yamamoto, T. (1980). *The Hagakure : a code to the way of samurai*. Toyko: Hokuseido Press.

Appendices

Note: For the reader's convenience, I have included some selections from Appendix A and B within the body of the final dissertation draft (October 8, 2012), which you can find below.

The full Appendix, including Appendices A – M, is compiled in a massive 7" offline binder, which I will bring to the dissertation defense, and which we will be freely available for any committee member interested in seeing the raw data referenced throughout the dissertation.

Appendix A: Screenshots and Images
(selections)

GZ Team at Indiana University – May of 2008

GZ Featured on the Front Page of Herald Tribune, May of 2008

'Zombie' gamers among the caps and gowns

Creators of Web 'Oscar' winner among those getting degrees today
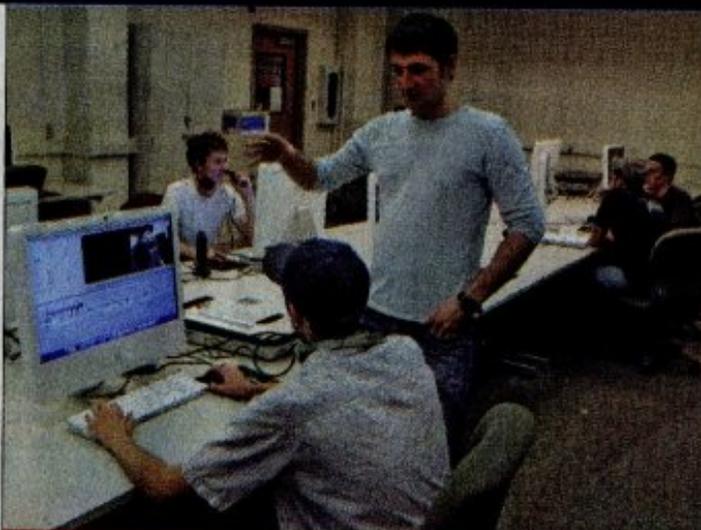
By James Boyd
331-4307 | jboyd@heraldt.com

His name is Spencer Stuart, but you may know him better by his alter ego, Spencer Striker.

The Indiana University student will earn his Master's in Immersive Mediated Environments (MIME) today, but that's only one among many recent accomplishments.

Fifteen months ago, as a student in the department of telecommunications, Stuart created a Web site called GameZombie.tv.

In an industry in which many start-up ventures fail, GameZom-

SEE ZOMBIE | PAGE A9

Spencer Stuart, who started GameZombie.tv, talks with video editor Stan Sevostyanov while their team works on an upcoming issue of the online video game review and broadcast.

JEREMY HOGAN | HERALD TIMES

More inside

LOCAL
Graduation by the numbers | PAGE A9

More online

Visit HeraldTimesOnline.com/media throughout the day today for videos and photos from the IU commencement ceremonies.

HTO

GZ's 21st Century One-Room Schoolhouse in Action – May of 2008

Interviewing Clint Hocking, Creative Director of Far Cry 2, at E3 2008

Interviewing Naughty Dog at the 2010 Game Developers Choice Awards after they won Game of the Year for Uncharted 2

Shooting ButtonMashers in the HDTV Studio

Directing ButtonMashers from the Control Room

Building the ButtonMashers Set

A GameZombie TV Editing Timeline Showcasing over 20 layers of Audio Editing

Appendix B: Brag Sheets and Key Lists
(A selection)

Key Milestones
Exclusive Coverage of the E3 Expo for Dailymotion (the world's 2nd largest web video site) – June 2011
3rd and 4th Webby Award - May 2010
GameZombie launched at UW-Whitewater – September 2009
2nd Webby Honoree Award - April 2009
200 Completed Original Game Videos - Dec 2008
YouTube Partner - June 2008
1,000,000 views - April 2008
Webby Honoree Award - April 2008
GameZombie launched at Indiana University with first published video - March 2007

Selected Awards
2010 Webby Award
2010 People's Voice Webby Award
2010 Mashable Award, Finalist – Best Web Video
2010 Davey Silver Award
2009 Webby Honoree Award
2008 Webby Honoree Award

Selected Press
Student-produced GameZombie.tv is a Webby Honoree for second straight year, IU News Room, May 14, 2009
Web site a hit with gamers, real-life education for students, Walworth County Today, Lisa M. Schmelz, January 26, 2010
GameZombie reviews come with tech lesson, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, Stanley A. Miller II, April 24, 2010
UW-Whitewater students head to New York to accept Webby Awards, Wisconsin State Journal, Patricia Simms, June 11, 2010

Video Selections
GameZombie's 2010 Webby Award reel
GameZombie's Coverage of E3 2011 on Dailymotion
ButtonMashers Season 2 - Episode 1
Mario Chaplin

Game Developer Interviews – Selections

Over 400 original videos produced and webcast, March 2007 – Present

Credentialed Gaming Conference Coverage

GDC 07, GDC 08, GDC 09, GDC 10, GDC 11, Austin GDC 07, PAX 08, PAX 09, PAX 10, PAX 11, PAX East 11, Showdown LAN 08, E3 08, E3 09, E3 10, E3 11, Comic-Con 2011, GLS 2011, GenCon 08, GenCon 09, WSVG KY 07, CES 2010, CES 2011

Appendix C: Dark Age Docs

Appendix D: Production Management Docs and Handbooks

Appendix E: Recruiting Templates and Materials

Appendix F: Business Outreach Templates

Appendix G: Contacts Spreadsheets

Appendix H: Original Game Video Scripts

Appendix I: ButtonMashers Production Docs and Scripts

Appendix J: Web Development Docs

Appendix K: Syllabi, Program Proposals, and Lab Design

Appendix L: Business Development Docs

Appendix M: Wiki

As aforementioned, all of the above Appendices will be available to the committee during the defense—as well as the complete Appendices A and B.