

An expansion scheme
for games with an online component
from pre-production to post-production

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This scheme was made to give an overview while preparing the production planning of something we usually call addon or DLC for an existing game, within the scope of 5-7 features or similar additions (think Secret World content patches).

The scheme is oriented on a producer's point of view, **it is not scientific, but rather casually written** and inspired by the work of Jesse Schell, talks of Gary Vaynerchuck, Dan Ariely and Raph Koster, as well as numerous other sources (e.g. books on game design and my work in the industry).

1. **What's in? - A sanity check.**

Games may vary wildly, but nevertheless certain elements can be applied to any addon of an online game – an expansion is not like a box of chocolates. From my point of view any game with an online component should try to cover the following content (here turned as much as possible into abstract form).

New Features (= the core)

* new high level / endgame content

mainly to expand the game; extend players' lifetime or convince them to return

* new low level content

even if a player never tried your game, 6-12 months after release your early game is not “new” anymore; fresh early accessible content facilitates campaigns to recruit new players and gives existing players an incentive to start over on a new shard, perhaps recruiting friends to join in the process

* plus “the cool stuff”, the big X (= stay true to your IP, but bring something new / innovative / fresh to the table)

User Feedback

* always try to release at least one change or feature your community asked for

* try to fix bugs you frequently get reports of (it might be only a nuisance, but people are crazy about this stuff)

* take feedback as kind of a root idea and let your designers refine / iterate on it

Sell the fact that you incorporate feedback via PR / your forum – players will love you for it (remember what his father said to Arthas: “True power my son, is to stir the hearts of your people.”).

Tribe Features

I take the expression coined by Seth Godin (2009) here, as we all know that social media made people create their own tribes, which exceed the boundaries of their guild – and we want to tap into these connections. Obviously “invite a friend (on Facebook)” is mandatory but kind of overdone and we need new creative ways to pull people together. User created

content (see below) would be great, as people like to show off their creations.

Now we have these people in our game, but a lot of products underestimate the power of guilds. People in nice guilds login more often and stay longer – besides playing they meet their friends there. Nevertheless I see MMORPGs over the last 5 years become so much casual, that a player hardly needs support from his ingame tribe. A contradiction, as bonds are easily formed if people need to overcome problems together.

Bottomline is: built more features that interconnect your players and give them opportunity to advocate your game.

A few thoughts on tribe features:

- * automatically propose guilds / contacts based on common activities
- * guild tools (e.g. a calendar or blog-style wall ingame)
- * circle functionality on friend lists (like google+)
- * quests to promote the advantages of guilds (PWE even made new players join a “starters guild” in one of their MMOs)
- * a social currency, earned for social or group activities
- * messages on loading screens related to my tribe (like “Jonny was raided by XYZ and seeks revenge” or “MrFlic has beaten your achievement score by 100”)

Monetization (if applicable)

- * intertwine game design and monetization, avoid the feeling of “tacked on” cash items (especially if they negate a design flaw); this is easier if you plan cash items early on
- * monetization based solely on frustration is bad design; minimize the use of cash items that serve as a remedy, rather concentrate on effects that enhance an aspect of the game that the player experiences as positive

User Generated Content

Since the days of Doom or Neverwinter Nights we know of its power (look up the history of Counter Strike or DayZ), but hardly anyone touches this area in MMOs or Browsergames – it is difficult and seems like a huge effort. Still you might want to give it a try, Cryptic is doing it since Star Trek Online and we can be sure that SOE will lead the way comes Everquest Next (at least John Smedley is talking about it all the time).

A side-note on “What is quality”

I learned “my” quality definition from Paul Palmes (pdcauditing.com), and the whole section “What's in?” originated from me thinking how the application of these rules would shape my proposed content.

Quality is

- a) knowing exactly what your customer wants
- b) providing more than expected (= deliver plus 1)
- c) doing so in the most efficient and effective manner possible.

I feel this is a great code of conduct, even if you don't deal with players but with internal customers (aka other departments).

2. **Pre-production**

Besides obvious tasks (e.g. estimate and confirm your budget) it is recommendable to turn anything you plan upside down before an artist or programmer wastes time on it in the actual production phase.

Take advice from Janus Anderson (Disney Mobile) on game design:

"Perfection is not achieved when there's nothing left to add. Perfection is when there is nothing left to take away."

Market Research

What's currently "hot" in the genre? Which features did our competitors recently release? Does our planned content separate us from the competition or do we look like a clone?

Planned Content (see also chapter 1)

What are the problems or weak spots of our live game?

Did we miss a must-have feature upon release?

Do we have any previously ditched stuff or reusable code and artworks?

Do we need new middleware / tools ? Do we need to expand the functionality of existing tools to support a new feature?

Does any new feature affect an existing one, thus forcing us to change old content?

Estimate and confirm your budget (time, money, staff)

Create a roadmap with milestones

GDDs and TDDs (game / technical design documents)

Most likely a lead designer and a lead programmer will write these documents, but especially GDDs should be confirmed with the producer and afterwards be "locked" as much as possible, mainly to avoid feature creep during production. Some changes are inevitable, but rather keep a cool idea that comes up during production for a later add-on than letting it blow up your schedule.

Determine which of your features depend on each other and mark this in the GDDs. If you need to cut something later on, you should realize the aftermath at a glance.

To share a vision via a document is harder than you might think. Therefore mechanics outlined in the GDD should be supported by mock ups, also add artwork from the live game and drawings of new content to set the overall tone.

Start a glossary

You want everybody from marketing and PR to writer and programmer use the same terms / names as soon as they talk content-specific topics. Having a good glossary also facilitates localization into another language greatly.

Production Plan

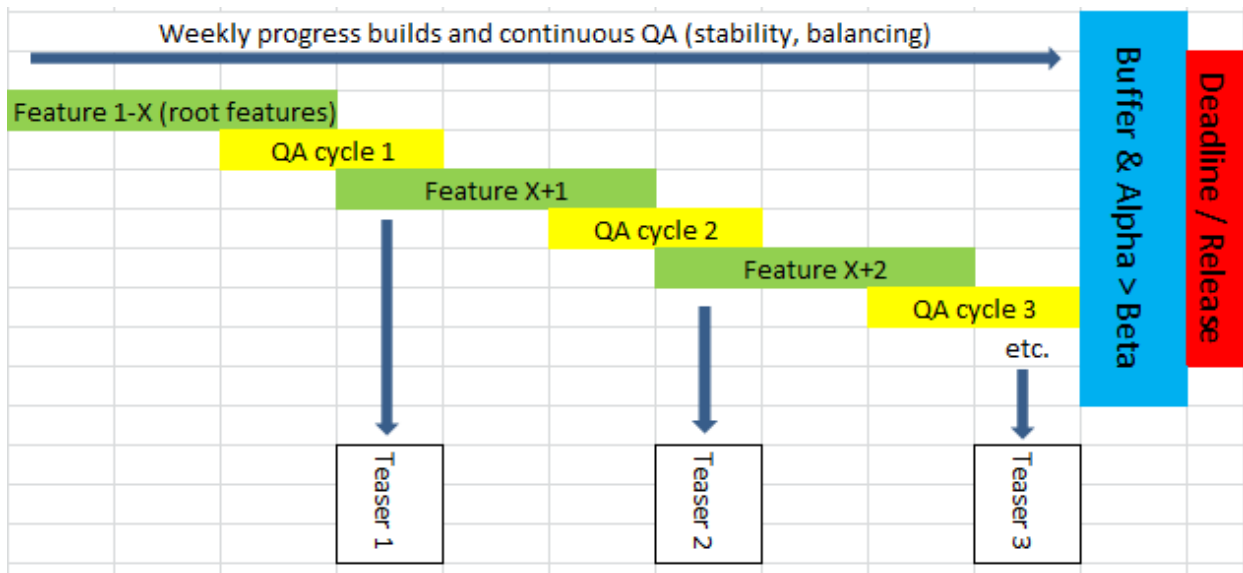
Have your responsible team leads break down concepts and mechanics into actionable tasks and bind these into a schedule. This ongoing effort leads and follows us into the production phase.

3. Production

Besides overseeing and coordinating the development process, checking milestones, as well as keeping the project on schedule, you should:

- * Keep GDDs always up to date and easily accessible (e.g. via an internal wiki).
- * Get everyone excited about the project (unlike programmers and artists, your PR and Marketing are not daily in touch with the project and might need some extra “love”).
- * Resolve social roadblocks (a lack of communication or arguments sealed the fate of many games already).
- * As soon as a future Product Manager is available, feed him with formulas and mechanics to support his pricing and strategy planning.
- * Keep track of dependencies and mind the full picture – a small change somewhere might have a huge ripple effect.

The following is a simple scheme to visualize the production process, reality will be more complex:



Thoughts on alpha and beta phases

Typically all features are locked latest upon entering alpha status, leaving room for further bug fixing and balancing during alpha and beta. Remember? Avoid feature creep.

Since statistics have shown that games sell better if they only have a trailer, but no demo (see Jesse Schell, Dice 2013), and we know from experience that people don't like wipes, I highly recommend that you avoid an extended public beta. Restricted access also causes attraction. Prolonged beta phases, sadly used by several F2P publishers as an excuse for critical bugs, damage the trust in your company. Better admit a few shortcomings and get the critical stuff straight asap.

As a band-aid (or part of your strategy) you might consider a staged roll-out of the new content. A gating mechanic, e.g. a joint effort of your players to unlock parts of the new content, is a great opportunity to create a memorable experience (think “Ahn Qiraj”), but only if players have influence on it.

4. **Post-production**

After we survived the release party, further tasks expect attention:

- * adapt the content to local markets
- * analyze impact, e.g. on economy and balancing
- * bug fixing (don't forget to publicize your effort to minimize damage)
- * optimize processes for the next addon (= learn from previous mistakes)

Thank you for reading!

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