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Games Development Mentoring Programme

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Case Study Title:	Games Development Mentoring Programme
Higher Education Organisation:	Institute of Technology Tralee
Enterprise Partner(s) where applicable:	BitSmith Games
Category of interaction: (tick those that apply)	Mentor
Graduate Formation	Site Visits Work Placement Work-based project
Workforce development	Work-based Learning Industry mentoring
Enterprise development / Research and Innovation	Consultancy Incubation activities Other: Mentoring
System Structure or Process	

- **Background:**

The aim of the Games Development Mentoring programme is to provide students with access to professional advice on; workflows, project management, professional development and an awareness of current requirements in the Games industry.

The advantages of the Mentoring Programme are that it provides students with valuable access to mentoring from recognised industry experts. This real-world experience is essential in order to develop the student's professional skills. It also inspires students and provides them with an opportunity to develop a network of professional contacts which ultimately improves their employment prospects once they graduate.

- **Rationale:**

The rationale for this initiative was driven by the motivation to develop the professional skills of Games Development students at IT Tralee. The Games Industry in Ireland is primarily focused in Dublin at present, this presents an obvious difficulty for institutions based outside of Dublin. However, efficient and well designed interaction mediated using ICT combined with site visits can help to overcome these issues in a manner which is effective and produces quality results demonstrated by student work.

The initiative also demonstrates the possibility to develop engagement with industry experts on a national and international level, opening up opportunities for students to work with experts from around the world.

- **System, structure or process implemented:**

In January 2014 two teams of third year Creative Media and Games Development students (as part of their work placement module) began a 12 week work placement to develop two games (titled *Aurora* and *Duality*) with the aim of creating a viable games by the end of the project (May 2014). The students were in regular contact with the mentor Owen Harris of BitSmith Games based in Dublin.

The students visited the offices of BitSmith on two occasions during the project development stage and Owen Harris made two site visits to IT Tralee in order to develop the projects. Most of the weekly interaction was via skype and email with regular feedback between the mentor and students. Two emails were sent per week in advance of two Skype conversations with the mentor.

Regular contact between the students, mentor and academic supervisors was maintained via the use of online blogs which document the development of each project

The initiative was funded by the REAP project, funding covered student travel costs and the mentors input.

- **Resource commitment:**

IT Tralee provided a suitable group project work area, the required software and hardware was provided. Recording studio facilities and staff support were also made available. Students were permitted to use their own laptops for much of the project, this depended on the nature of the work, for example; some students were able to use free versions of industry standard software to complete much of the work. The projects were then finalised on professional versions of the same software for which the Institute has licences.

- **Challenges encountered:**

Student expectations as to what was feasible within the time frame and their skills presented some challenges. One of the groups was over-ambitious in what they considered achievable and were forced to redesign their game midway through the placement. This however was an essential part of their learning experience and they gained considerable experience in managing deadlines and expectations from this.

There were occasional issues with group dynamics which arose partly due to inexperience as group members may have expected tasks to have been completed sooner, however, as was pointed out to students, this 'real-world' experience will stand to them in the long run – particularly as they prepare for Final Year Projects beginning in September 2014.

- **Enablers:**

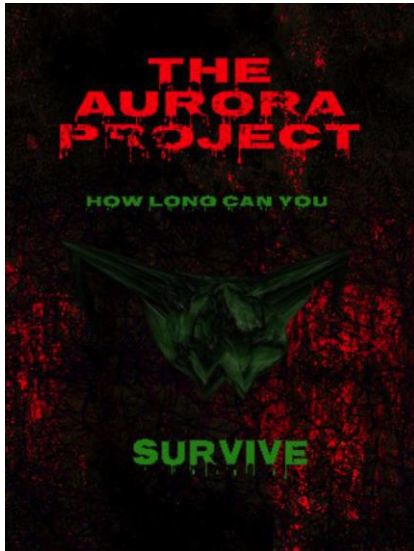
Owen's engagement with the students, staff and institute was excellent in so many ways. He supported the students via Skype and during visits. His focus on game mechanics was particularly beneficial. He provided the type of professional advice that institutions such as IT Tralee lack. There are a number of factors which this project highlighted and helped to address:

1. Geography - the games industry in Ireland is almost exclusively based in Dublin. As a result, institutions based in peripheral regions face challenges when trying to engage with industry.
2. Pace of change - the games industry is particularly fast-moving and evolves quickly. As a result it can often be difficult for academic staff engaged in full-time education to keep up to date with emerging technologies, future trends and industry best practice.
3. Inspiration – students respond very positively when inspired. Owen's engagement with students at IT Tralee created a buzz and excitement which is virtually impossible to create in the classroom. When students can see the professional situations where they would like to apply their skills on completion of their studies, they are more likely to push themselves in order to achieve the goals they set for themselves.

The merit of the Games Development Mentoring Programme in highlighting and addressing the above cannot be overstated.

- **Measurable outcomes**

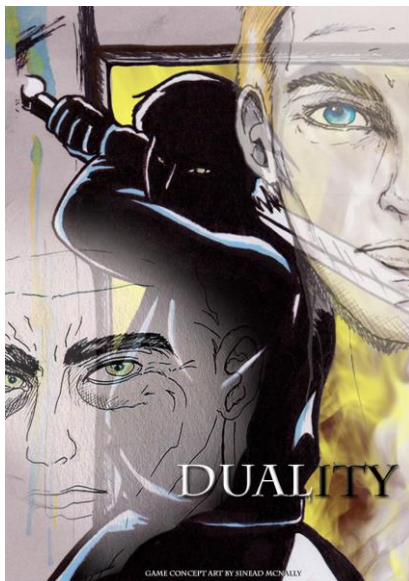
Each group presented their work at the CMIT Dept end of year show at Kerry County Museum from Thursday 15th to Tuesday 20th of May 2014. This deadline for ‘publication’ of their work was an integral part of the skills development aims of the initiative. The games presented were as follows:



The Aurora Project:

You play as Alex Pennon, a level 2 Engineer working for Quailian Industries. While on deployment in the research station Aurora, which is located in the Binary star system Antares. The project comes under heavy scrutiny from the company's shareholders to get more results. The scientists then rush the research and end up cutting corners. This scrutiny causes a chain reaction of events that leads up to the station being overrun by mysterious entities. From here it's a race against time to survive and fight your way to the escape the station and to safety... How long can you survive?

This game was designed and developed by Creative Media department work placement students at IT Tralee: Alan Kelly, Chris Quain, Shaun O'Donnel, Daniel Bannon and Eoin Murphy.



Duality:

Duality is a platform game where the player must use their skills and wits to complete an obstacle course without getting killed... in the shortest amount of time!

How fast are you?



This game was designed and developed by Creative Media department work placement students at IT Tralee: Sinead McNally, Martin Benson, Aidan Prendeville, Daniel Sheehan and Liam Flynn.

- **Suggestions or advice**

Feedback from Mentor (Owen Harris of BitSmith Games)

- Less regular contact over a longer period – perhaps one meeting every 2 weeks over 2 semesters (24 weeks in total instead of 12), increasing to 1 meeting every week towards the end of the project
- Heavy involvement in the start - the mentor should be there to help form and shape more realistic projects and project plans
- Maybe consider a workshop in game design - A 5 day game design workshop would go a huge way to upping the quality of the game ideas

- Incorporate regular peer reviews - Making the students review each other adds accountability

Feedback from IT Tralee staff:

“Owen was excellent in so many ways. He supported the students via Skype and during visits. His focus on game mechanics was brilliant! He provided the type of industry focused professional advice that we lack at the college and in Ireland in general. During this (bootstrap) period, the ability to learn from professional game devs is extremely valuable to the college” Ed Sheldon, Lecturer at ITT

- Stipulate that each group works together on-site for a number of hours each day, this would help to resolve many of the issues encountered
- Permit 1st and 2nd year students to support the 3rd year students (not on site visits to Dublin, but within the Institute). They can provide incremental feedback, act as testers, help with coding, help with models, learn from the 3rd years, be better prepared for 3rd year, have more realistic expectations, learn to work as team members.
- Bottom line: continuing the Games Industry work placement Mentoring programme would be excellent for our Creative Media & IT department students, particularly those studying degree courses in Computing With Games Development, Music Technology and Multimedia.
- It may be possible to integrate the initiative with Final Year Projects at IT Tralee. Running over 24 weeks in a group context would require a lot of design and planning but could yield better outcomes

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