

# BAFTA Games Lecture: Dan Hay

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**Keza MacDonald:** Hello everybody, good evening. Welcome to BAFTA's annual Games Lecture, thank you very much for coming.

[Applause]

Thank you also to everybody watching on stream. The BAFTA Games Lecture aims to deliver valuable insights into some of the best creative minds in the video games industry and beyond. It gives people the opportunity to share their experiences as well as their personal vision for the direction the industry's going in. My name is Keza MacDonald, I'm the editor of Kotaku UK, but we're not here to see me, we're here to see Dan Hay. Dan Hay is Ubisoft Montreal's executive producer and creative director. He's well known for working on the *Far Cry* series. Over his career he has worked as a modeller, a texture artist, an animator, obviously producer. He's been in games since 2003 and has spent six years with Ubisoft working on the *Far Cry* series. So without further ado, I'd like to introduce Dan.

[Applause]

**Dan Hay:** OK. It's a big room! It's a little bit more intimidating when you guys are all here. OK, so 'Rooted in Reality: How the Real World Can Make Your Creativity Soar,' that's what I'm talking about today. And there's a few caveats before I get started that I want to talk about. Four things, basically.

Number one: Thank you for having me here, it's super cool. This is a really interesting thing to be able to do and I want to say thank you to BAFTA and all of you for inviting me here. This is great, so thanks.

Number two: It's important to understand that these are just my thoughts. This is not a proscription, this is not a recipe. This is just stuff that I'm thinking. Take the parts you like, throw the parts you don't. That's how this goes.

I don't want to talk about just game systems, I want to talk about all the things that kind of surround it in terms of creative and building characters and building moments and just building an experience.

And lastly, I swear. Sorry, it's going to happen.

[Laughter]

So, using the real world to fuel your vision. And it's interesting because I want to break it down into three parts:

First: vision fuel. What is it? How do you find it? How do you mine it? How do you weaponise it? How do you turn it into what you need? And then a process. A process that I use that you might want to be able to use, or elements that you can use. And finally, I want to actually try to put it into practice, because what I dislike is sometimes folks will get up, and they'll give you your thoughts, their thoughts, and then basically they'll walk off and you can't test it. So I'm going to actually try to test it at the end, and we're going to see how it goes – it could go crazy.

OK, so first the vision fuel. I get asked a lot 'Where do you get the inspiration for a game?' And it's kind of a strange question because to be honest, and it's a little cheesy to say, it's everywhere. It's everybody that you meet, it's every moment that you have. So to be able to understand the nature of this question, I went online and I took a look at what people think creative is and apparently it involves light bulbs and colours... Crayons are a big thing, and rainbows. Gears. I don't understand – these gears aren't actually hooked up to anything. They're just colourful, I don't think it does anything. I don't know what the fuck this is. So I'm looking at it and what I think people think is that there's just this creative brain and you kind of squeeze it and all this cool shit comes out and then the money falls. And I don't think that's the way it is at all. For me, this is not that, that's not what I'm talking about. What I'm talking about is a system or a process or a methodology where you can look at things differently, you can look at the world differently and you can use it to fuel your vision. So, bringing the idea and the money. How close are they? Well to me they're pretty far apart and there's a whole bunch of stuff that goes in between.

Let me explain: There's you. And there's what you already know. There's the real world, there's a tonne of stuff that you can data mine. There's the idea and how you transfer it into the vision. There's the team, because you can't do this alone, you've got to surround yourself with smart people. There's the idea of iteration, there's feedback, there's the pitch, which can be really daunting, and there's a sound that I'm going to talk about that I hate with the heat of a nova. And remember that, this sound drives me nuts, it's creative kryptonite, OK? And then there's the player, you can't forget about the player, and then finally we'll get to the money.

So, first, leveraging what you already know. Sometimes when I think about creative I think sometimes we make it overly complex and we

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forget that we know a lot of this stuff. This is you, this is me, this is us, and we are a remarkable piece of hardware. We've got thousands of years of programming built into us. What I'm talking about is evolution. An evolution that actually gives you instincts which we can leverage as we build our stories. The instinct borne from nature, something as simple as saving your life. I think we've probably all been in situations where we get that feeling at the back of our neck, the hair goes up on the back of your neck and you're like 'I need to get the hell out of here.' That's instinct talking.

Also, it fuels your sense of competition. It can kind of almost put you into predator mode. It's been governing our behaviour before we even realise what we were. What I'm talking about here is it gives us purpose. The idea of falling in love, the idea of coveting, the idea of wanting to be with somebody, gives us a sense of community. We huddle together in the dark, we long for companionship. And it gives us a sense of competition.

Now some people would look at this and go yeah, but we've come pretty far. I would argue we haven't. I would argue that we still focus on purpose, that even though we've changed, our community has moved online, it's still very much rooted in that need, and we are abso-fucking-lutely competitive. There's no question. It shapes the perception of our world. If you think about those early lessons – the first time we saw blood and we understand its value as both life and death; the first time we saw fire and understood that it could be defence, but it also hurt us. The first time that we saw the forbidden fruit and the colour of that and we coveted it, but we knew that it was dangerous. What's interesting about these colours, these swatches, is that they paint our world today and we don't even realise it.

So, it begs a question: if humanity is leveraging nature, why wouldn't we leverage human nature? In the games that we make, in the stories that we tell, in the things that we put on television, in the movies we make. I'll give you an example. You're an audio designer, and you say 'I want to make this evocative sound, I want people to feel it.' OK, well you could build this brand new sound, or you could just leverage what we already get two points on our blood pressure from.

Every time I'm driving and I hear the sound of a cop car, my heart starts to beat. I'm not doing anything wrong (well, I'm probably speeding,

that's not true), but I instantly feel like 'oh shit,' I feel that oh shit feeling. So why wouldn't we leverage that? Why wouldn't we use what we already have?

Number two, maybe somebody wants to build a stressful situation. The sun is about to burn out and we have to restart it. The moon is about to crash into the Earth. OK, that's certainly a way you could start your story. Or you could just pick something that's relatable. I flew here, I'm terrified of flying. I had to go through customs, I think everybody here's probably gone through customs. And I actually went - I really feel a little bit weird whenever I put my bag in front of somebody and this institution starts going through it. I'm not a drug dealer, I don't have drugs in my bag, but I swear to God I checked my bag four times for drugs. I don't understand why, but I just felt the pressure that I needed to.

And finally, I want the player to risk. There's this huge mountain up there and I want the player to climb it. I want them to risk, I want them to feel it in their bones. That's OK, you can do that. You can do expensive things, or you can do something that we all feel, that we could feel tonight, that we could feel tomorrow. You could just make an alleyway, and make it dark, and make the sound of a pop bottle moving in the distance and you get all that stuff for free – all the stuff we're already afraid of, all the stuff that we already know.

Perception and intuition is something that you leverage in the blink of an eye. I'm saying it's this fast. You take a look at a picture and it tells you who you trust or distrust in one millisecond. It can tell you if someone's celebrating or if they're in pain, and it can tell you that you need to intervene now, don't wait. We want to leverage that, but what's interesting about this hardware is it also comes with software updates. And what I'm talking about is your family. Right. Your family is an amazing thing because it can be both positive and negative.

It's where you first learn about love. It's where you first learn about yourself. It's where you first understand the value of family and community. And everybody needs that one person in your life that thinks you're special and where you're safe, and that's where you get that from, your family. But there's also the negative side of that. We have brothers and sisters who don't like each other, there's competition. There's a simple question: What if you know you're not the favourite kid of one of your parents? That is tough

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information to carry with you through life. We leverage that as we build characters. When I'm working on *Far Cry*, I like to think of – yes, of course we're going to be building villains, we do a pretty good job of that. But I want them to be human, we want them to be human. So we looked at that as we build these characters. We look to family, we look to reasonable experience and we look to the idea of what comes in their past.

I like to do a little exercise. I like to actually think of our villains and our characters sitting around a holiday dinner. Because when you're sitting around a holiday dinner, pass the salt never means pass the salt. It's 'Why don't you love me?' 'Why do you like Jeremy more?' 'How come you won't buy me a car?' 'Don't you understand me?' 'I hate you.' So we put that into our characters and we try to make them feel real.

Then we have things like culture, and what's amazing about this is we all have these rich cultures, and we all have these opportunities, but sometimes people are actually shy about it. I say why be? It's a fantastic opportunity to share this and give it something that's exotic, something different and make that part of your theme.

Our education – we all go after different things, we all covet different things, we chase different parts of knowledge. Use your education as part of your theme. The media bombards us with information and we react to it and we take it in and we choose what we like and what we don't like.

Politics – sometimes a difficult subject. People believe certain things, they trust certain things and they believe it in their bones.

Religion, or even just spirituality, a great opportunity for a theme in what you're making and what you're doing.

And finally, your basic concept of human rights. Not everybody agrees on all this stuff, and it's a fantastic opportunity for you to leverage what you already know and what makes you unique.

We want to leverage what you believe, what you know, what you fear, what you love, what you aspire, what you keep secret, what you don't tell people. All of these things are fantastic things for you to build your creative with. These are your themes. And your themes inform your ideas.

So what I like to do whenever I'm thinking about a theme or I'm kind of data mining my brain for this stuff, is I like to build a collage. Now, you can build a collage in your mind or in your house – just be careful who you invite over because you look like a serial killer when you do it. And what it is, it's this. And it creates a swatch, and this stuff is gold. This allows you to see everything you're thinking and it allows you to cut the fat off it and be able to pull it down so it's that bare bones elixir.

OK, so I have an idea, but how do I grow it into a vision? What I would say at that point is invest in data mining the real world. Look at what's out there, take a look around. When we're on *Far Cry* one of the things we say is reality is far stranger than fiction, and I would argue that the last two years have proven that.

I think you have this idea or you even have a construct of an idea, and you look to 'How do I furnish it? How do I grow it?'. And the answer is study, do the work, put the hours in. Do everything you can to study it: Meet people and talk about it. One of the things creatives make a mistake on is that they don't share. They've got an idea and it's golden and if I tell anybody they're going to take that idea. Talk to people that you trust. I'm not saying post it on the Internet, don't do that. What I'm saying is talk to people you trust and get feedback. Talk to experts. If you have an opportunity to travel, go there, live it. There's no substitute of drinking the water, wearing the clothes, doing all the stuff that's from that place, getting dirty. When we were building the creative for *Far Cry 5*, we actually went to Montana. It's a very cool place, I fell in love with it. We drove around and we were there for about fourteen days, and I kept saying 'I want to get dirty, I want to get dirty guys. I'm not getting dirty enough, I'm not living this.'. So they took me to a farm and it was the day that they were seeing if the cows were pregnant.

[Laughter]

And I don't want to talk about it. If you can't travel I totally understand, I get it – it can be expensive and it can be difficult. But what I would say is that there are people who live in your town, the place where you live, the city, there's people there who can help inform you about these ideas. Talk to them. Invest in taking a look around your world, even if you can't get on a plane or a boat to go do it. Eat the food. Live it. Wear the clothes. And if you don't know what your idea is, take a look at television. There are some amazing things going on with documentaries about these

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places that show you what these places are – if it's a place or it's a thing or it's a culture you want to look into. Go on social media. A lot of these places, a lot of these people have pages and you can learn about it.

But probably the most important thing I would say is look around. Be present and be aware. I'm going to tell you a story of something that happened to me which is super innocuous, but it really helps me inform characters: I'm driving one day and I'm on my way to work and I'm late. It's about 09.05, I've got about thirty minutes before I get to work. I'm supposed to be in a meeting because there's really important people coming in on a plane, and I'm like 'holy shit'. I pull up onto the freeway and it's just a wall of traffic. It's like somebody invented traffic and put it in front of me. It's punishing. And I'm like 'shit, what am I going to do?' and I'm sitting there and I'm waiting and I'm dying inside, and then the lane opens up so I head out. And then this guy shows up. God damn white car. OK, now I have an irrational dislike of people who have white cars.

[Laughter]

Does anybody here have a white car? OK, you're suspect. OK, so he pulls out in this white car. And like people who drive white cars do he's driving about thirty kilometres less and he's sitting there. So I instantly dislike this guy. So I pull up behind him and I'm laying on the horn, I'm right behind him and I'm just being an absolute dick. And he does something really interesting. I'm laying on the horn, I'm making a tonne of—[makes horn noise]—'get out of the way – move!'. And he's super chill and this is what he does – I'm going to turn around because this is what I saw – he reaches up and he opens up the sun roof all the way back and he just does this: [raises middle finger]

[Laughter]

So I burst out laughing at seeing this, and he sees me and he bursts out laughing and we have a moment.

[Laughter]

And what I realised is that I had built up this idea of this guy who drives this white car and who is driving super slow and I made a cliché idea of him in my mind and he was actually a complex individual and we had a moment of love and hate inside of like five seconds.

And now, no joking aside, every time I make a character, I ask 'what's their...' I always ask 'what makes them special, what makes them unique, what little bit of spice do they put on top of what they do?' I still remember that guy.

So, carrying on with the theme, watch movies, watch television, and specifically when I think about my favourite show *The Sopranos*, one of the things that made that show really interesting for me was there's a really good chance I'm never going to be a gangster. I don't think I want to be a gangster... maybe a little. But what was really interesting about that show was that they presented a character and they presented things in that show that I could relate to. This was a guy who had problems: he had problems at work, he had problems in his marriage, he had problems with his family. It was a guy I could relate to, it was very approachable, who also happened to be a gangster. And that meant that somebody who doesn't like gangster films or shows like that has an in to be able to at least be able to understand the complexity of this character, and I thought that was brilliant.

Watch the news, read the news, take in the news. I know it's tough right now. I know it's hard, I know sometimes it's scary, but drink it in.

Do something that terrifies you or makes you scared. Believe it or not I don't always enjoy doing public speaking, it makes me pretty nervous. But it's something I do because I want to be able to test myself, I want to be able to try new things. Do something that makes your heart rate jacked every week. Don't do this it's stupid.

I talk about theatre a little bit because there's something magical that happens in theatre and I think in the digital age we've lost a little bit of it. Something about being in an audience watching actors freeform on stage, there's something just magical that I remember from being a kid going to the theatre. Go to the theatre, invest in that space. There's really cool stuff happening quickly.

Talk to the person at work that nobody likes. There's a wall between people and a lot of times what we do is we choose to not like somebody and then we don't really further the agenda of understanding why.

Talk to the person who seems to have everything figured out.

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If you don't play a musical instrument, at least enjoy someone who does. Be around it, it can furnish your brain with new ideas.

Have a legitimately different emotion as often as you can. You're not going to be able to write and or build or plumb the depths of an emotion if you haven't experienced it and if you don't risk. A lot of the times we walk around wearing masks and we want to be cool and we don't want to show who we really are. Let those masks drop every once in a while, and be free to experience those emotions and show that to other people.

Play games. There's amazing games out there.

Listen to podcasts. For those people out there, those kids out there, anybody who's going to school and they're struggling and they maybe don't learn the way that other folks learn... I sucked at school, it was super hard, and what I really wish is that some of the podcasts that are out there right now on history and about science and all the things that are really interesting, were there when I was there. Listen to those podcasts, they're super smart.

Have a beer, chill out. Creative get locked in their own heads a lot of times and they forget to take a step back. And what you've got to do is within the confines of making sure you don't hurt anybody, do the things necessary to unlock your mind a little.

Be embarrassed, say sorry. What's day is today? Tuesday? How many people thus far this week have said 'I'm sorry?' Fifty per cent of you. OK the rest of you, you guys are perfect? Just make sure that you remember we're not all perfect, make sure you say sorry even if you don't think you did anything wrong. Look into it and make sure you're comfortable saying that because there's an amazing exchange that happens between people when you do it.

Write your ideas down and then argue the opposite. Learn what it's like to argue the opposite and then believe in it.

Stay in school, which seems like an obvious one. But when you do, make sure that you keep the camera lens wide. Make sure you look at the things that are going on in the hallway, take a look at your teachers. Look at everything that can inform you about the reality of life while you're there.

Get the shit kicked out of you by love. Get your heart broken. It's going to be very difficult to believe that you can make something that's going to talk about these things without having experienced it.

Listen to music, and I'm not saying music that you like, I'm saying music that you actually loathe. Listen to new forms of music, challenge yourself to do it. There's a chance that you'll find something new and it can send you in a completely different direction.

Talk to somebody over the age of seventy five. Seriously. These people have lived life and they've been around long enough to see it come full circle. They are oracles. Mine those oracles.

And if you can, go camping. One of the things that happens in the digital age is that we have a tendency to step away from each other. We have a tendency to step away from nature. And if you're able to turn everything off and you're able to go camping then you can step back into that and it can send you in a brand new direction.

What I'm basically saying is: Say yes to life. Be a voracious consumer of life. All of it. That is the cheesiest PowerPoint, my God, sorry about that.

OK, a question I get asked is 'do you use this on *Far Cry*?' Absolutely, for sure I do. When we were first thinking about the idea for *Far Cry*, specifically *Far Cry 5*, I wanted to leverage what I already knew and what I felt.

I was born in 1972. This is kind of what I remember in a nutshell of what was happening in the '70s, and it's kind of colour-coded from the standpoint of this I don't remember very much and then it kind of gets more into specific relief here. Of course I remember *Star Wars*, everybody remembers *Star Wars*. But the two things I really remember that stick with me, that haunt me, were I remember this idea of a gasoline shortage. And it scared the shit out of me as a kid because I remember for the first time realising we could run out of stuff and it was important stuff. And the second one is I remember the story of Jonestown. I don't know if you guys know that story, but the story of this magnetic leader who basically turned what was supposed to be a good idea into a horrible idea, and basically convinced a bunch of people to kill themselves. I remember hearing about that story and being stricken by it, even as a little kid.

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But, so I was born in 1972, but let's be honest I was a child of the 80s. This is what I remember. I remember all this stuff. And what I really remember about the '80s what that it was the decade of excess. Everybody was buying stuff and they were almost acting like there was no tomorrow, and I suspect I know why.

Because during the '80s this is what was going on underneath. What I remember as a kid in the '80s is looking up at the Cold War between the former Soviet Union and America and being terrified at what I saw. What I remember is this Cold War being aggressive and me feeling impotent looking up at it and going, 'I feel so small, somebody's got their finger on the button and everything could just go south at a moment's notice.'

And it was informing all the stuff I was watching. *The Terminator*, about the end of times and somebody coming back and trying to fix it. This movie here, *War Games*, all about somebody who was trying to stop a war with a home computer. I had a home computer, I was worried about war; it spoke to me. This movie here – did anybody see this movie? *The Day After*? – Terrifying. I remember this when I was a kid, I couldn't sleep for like a week – all about this concept of an apocalypse.

And I really felt at that age that it was possible that the end of times was coming. This is what I was afraid of, this is what I was worried about. And if I try and bring that down in one image, one thing I remember, it's this. That's what I felt.

And then something miraculous happened: it feels like we took a step back from the cliff. And it feels like people sort of, cooler heads started to prevail. The Berlin Wall fell and I think globally everybody just took a big sigh of relief. OK we're safe, it's not going to be annihilation. And I remember just kind of letting it go, not thinking about it for ten to fifteen years. I even forgot the feeling of that precipice and that danger. And then this happened: 9/11. I think everybody remembers where they were on that day, it was a terrible day. And I remember I didn't recognise that the feeling was back but I did recognise that something had come back. Something, I wasn't sure what it was.

And then in 2007, 2008, I remember I was living in Chicago at the time and I was, I remember very clearly the sub-prime mortgage collapse and hearing people for the first time, at least in my memory since that earlier time, start to talk about

'Where's the government?' 'Who's at the helm of this?' 'Why are they not protecting us?' 'This is our legacy, this is our lives. Who is in charge here?'. Abject frustration. And then I started to notice that the language of the global village started to change. And the language moved away from 'we' and 'us' and it moved into 'them'. And I started to feel that feeling coming back. This feeling of separation. I didn't know what it meant. Then I also started to hear rumours of groups who were disenfranchised, possibly military.

I was walking in downtown Toronto about three, three and a half years ago, and this guy walks around the corner and he's kind of dishevelled and he's wearing a sandwich board, and on the sandwich board is something like this: the end is near. And I had two thoughts. Number one is 'holy shit that guy might be right,' and number two is 'I've never had that thought before'. I realised this was back.

So I took all of that, the themes and ideas that I'd experienced in the '70s that kind of haunted me. Some of the '80s that had haunted me, and the things I was feeling three years ago, and I built a collage. It was way more complex than this, it was huge, but it looked something like this. And then what I did was I took all of that and I put it into one person, the main villain in *Far Cry 5*, I put it into his brain and we created a character who believes that the end of times is coming and that we have to prepare because it's inevitable: humanity doesn't have the maturity to be able to step back from the edge. And that is the theme that informed *Far Cry 5*.

So, OK I'm a big guy, I've got a deep voice, when I say that everybody starts to, babies start to cry and stuff. Everybody chill out, OK? What we're actually here to talk about is not *Far Cry 5*. We're here to talk about the whole concept of how you can use this and how you can use this in your own creative: We're talking about process.

So how do we process this? Well, you're going to need a team and to be honest team comes much earlier. And you're going to need a lot of smart people to be able to leverage this and be able to contribute to this as well. There's big teams out there, and what we're talking about is big teams, incredible talent, lots of egos, big stakes, and it's tough to manage. Maybe they live all over the world, maybe they have different cultures, maybe they speak different languages, maybe they're not even in the same time zone.

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And in truth, what we're talking about here is there's different cultures in terms of the place you might work. A place might be very, very good at technology. Another place might be really good at creative. Another place might be good at business or be fixated on process. And the point I would make is: How do you manage that many creative people, that many unique, creative people?

Well, there's two lessons that I've learned. Number one, this seat is sacred. Who equals what. You've got to surround yourself with passionate people who want to make a different, who are artistic, are creative, who want to basically row in the direction of a great creative vision and contribute to it and are positive. That's imperative, that seat is sacred. Who equals what.

Number two: One size does not fit all when it comes to management style. Not at all. And when I think you're talking to managers about how you leverage these creative talent, what I'm talking about is folks who look at it and say 'How do we make it so these folks all work?' When I think about where I was before Ubi, or coming to a situation where I'm looking at the culture of an existing studio or the culture of an existing team, the first thing you've got to do is take a step back and see what people naturally do and do well. So I tried to figure out how I could explain this, the idea of getting a fresh perspective and leveraging the people you have, and I came up with this toy. You remember those from when you were kids? It's an amazing toy because what it did is it kind of gave you a fresh perspective. It had these discs and you would pop it in and pull the handle and you'd get a brand new image and a brand new perspective on things.

So I tried to look at it from my perspective which is games. And I tried to figure out is there a way that I can explain how you might better leverage creative talent in an industry that I know nothing about. So I picked music.

Here's my analogy: Imagine your team is a band and imagine that you've got a lead singer, you've got some one who plays the guitar, you've got percussionist, you've got somebody on the bass, you've got somebody who plays the piano and you've got somebody who does horns. Now that's interesting. These are each creative people, they're unique creative people and you want to be able to leverage all that talent and make great music.

But the challenge is they all have different personalities. They may even be governed by different things. You may have an activist, somebody who loves to travel, somebody who's got a problem, somebody who secretly believes they should be the lead singer. You've got people who maybe just got the shit kicked out of them by love, and you've got somebody who's super chill. Compound interest on that is they might not like each other, and there's a very good chance they all want to make their own solo album.

This is challenging but that's OK. What it takes is not one size fits all. And what I would ask you is would you apply one recipe to managing all these creative people? I don't think you would. I think you'd take a step back and look at them and go, 'how can I furnish their agenda?' 'how can I help them be the best they can be?'. That requires leadership, but it also requires diplomacy and the idea that you can manage all those talents and all those feelings and emotions and rally them around a single vision with one band with everybody making one album.

If you want to inspire, if you want to surprise, if you want to evoke and amaze and innovate, you have to be prepared to hire unique people who think differently, who challenge you, who provoke you, who are relentless and who make you better. This is the band that I get to work with.

Now, iteration. Once you have a vision, how much does it change over time? I get asked that all the time. And the reality is it changes quite a bit—it can change quite a bit. People have a tendency to write it down and once they write it down it becomes canon and they believe that it's gold and you can't change it. I would argue that that page can be folded into a cube and you can kind of look through it. And I would even say that it's not paper, it's probably glass and what you should do is hold it up and look at it and get a sense how those ideas look as you look through them.

Again I come back to this, an important exercise. Go ahead, load in a new perspective, pull the handle and change a location, change a theme, change the time, change the player action—the verbs of what they player's doing, the situation or even a character itself. Test it.

Now here's the problem: iteration is expensive and not everybody likes it. I had a review a few years back and somebody said to me, 'I would very much appreciate it if you would not iterate

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and I would very much appreciate if you would get it right the first time.', and I remember thinking 'I would very much appreciate it if you would fuck off forever.'

[Laughter]

You have to iterate, OK? Whether you call it tuning or tightening or editing or adjusting or trimming or scoping—make it tactical. And those folks that come by and tell you don't iterate, make sure you don't offend them, tell them 'I totally understand,' and while you're walking away think 'fuck off'.

Let me talk about feedback, and feedback is super important when it comes to your creative. It can be very difficult to get feedback, it's not something that we're naturally built to always take. I'm talking about peer review. So there's this thing we do at Ubi where you walk into this room and you've got your ideas and you present—show and tell.

And the first time that it happened I got super mad, super red. When I get mad I get super red, like I'm talking that red. And so I go into this room and I feel this way and I'm like 'why?' and the answer is because it feels like this. OK? It feels like there's all the risk, there's no stakes, and that's how I feel. The point of the matter is that I shouldn't. This is an opportunity to get peer feedback. This is an opportunity for all of those people to provide their own viewmasters, to be able to inform your ideas and give you feedback and maybe make your ideas better.

But there's an important step that was missing that I'd never experienced before I'd come to Ubi. And that was that the room changed. Once I had finished talking about the vision I sat down and the person who was giving feedback stood up and they gave theirs for what they were working on. And that went all the way around the room. And it completely changed by perspective of it. Because the idea of no stakes was gone, and it turned into a new opportunity to get ideas and iterate, and I fell in love with that meeting. So I would strongly encourage that.

Then we get to the pitch, and this is the tricky part. This is the part nobody tells you about. This is where people get stuck, and there's a reason people get stuck, sometimes they make their stuff too complicated. They don't lock it down, it's just too heady and people can't wrap their ideas around it, they just don't get it. It should be simple, it should be short, it should be easy. It

should be something you can do in an elevator. Keep it simple.

This was the pitch for *Far Cry 5*. 'Dan, what's the middle of the game about?' 'The main character, the main villain, the protagonist—how do they feel?' 'The part after the second part and that sub-part...'. That's the game we're making. Take your swatch, boil it down to its essence, keep the pitch simple.

Then there's something people don't talk about that much, and that's the room. Everybody knows the idea of home court advantage. When you're making that pitch you definitely don't always have that home court. It's tough. The room can be austere, that room can feel really tough. And to make it worse, some of the people in that room may not appreciate exactly what you do. They may not have the same language, they may be from PR, they may be from marketing, they may be from business. They may not have the feelings you have or the parlance and how you communicate. And you end up feeling like this again.

My point is, that there's a very simple thing you can do that kind of awakens everybody: leverage your audience. How many of you guys have been camping? OK. Some of the best stories I ever heard in the entirety of my life were around a campfire. Ghost stories. Everybody knows that moment, the smell of the campfire, somebody breaks out a really good ghost story and you are riveted. It's fantastic.

Build a campfire. When we think about a campfire, we have been sitting around these things for millennia. Before we had texting, before we had TV, before we even wrote down our ideas we communicated them over this. We shared it. Build a campfire, and keep it simple, but be wary of the sound.

So you've done all this work, you've data mined yourself, you've drunk everything from the real world. You've changed your ideas into a vision, you've built a team, you've iterated, there's feedback, you have your pitch and then you get the sound. I'm going to give you an example of the sound: 'Mum and dad, I want to quit school and I want to make games for a living'.

[inhales]

That's the sound. Now the thing about the sound is it is truly creative kryptonite. And you're going



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to run into it. It's sometimes also coupled with the face, which is...

[Laughter]

People aren't just going to get it. 'I just don't get it.' Those are tough words. What I would tell you is there's going to be times where you're going to fail and that's OK. What I would say at that moment is have thick skin then have a beverage and think of it as peer review and an opportunity to iterate. Because eventually you are going to get a green light and it's going to be amazing and when you do, lock that shit down. Lock it down. There's moments to iterate, it's super important that you do, but at the point where you have that green light, lock it down. You can continue to tweak and edit and adjust, but don't offer wholesale change to that vision. Create your swatch, put it on the wall, and every time somebody asks you a question about it, point at it.

Probably most importantly, and I put it mid- to the end, is don't forget about the player. Our industry is changing very, very quickly. And each of these are an opportunity to talk to the player. The danger some creatives have is that they get locked in their own head and their ideas are gold and they can't possibly share them because somebody will steal them. That's not true.

What's amazing about the time we live in is that unlike any other time you have the ability to go on Twitch, you have the ability to go online and take a look at somebody playing your game in real time. The feedback is instantaneous. You see the emotion, you see the enjoyment, you see the hate and you can use all that, you can leverage all that.

Same with sharing your idea. Make sure you talk to people about it. Don't keep it to yourself. Again, don't post it on the Internet, but talk to your friends, talk to somebody that you trust. Talk to another player of games. Talk to your team, they all play games, they want to give you feedback, they want to weigh in on the process. All the way through iteration and feedback and pitch and even the sound, understand this: the band. In years past what we've thought of is that we as developers are in the band and players are the audience. It's not true anymore. Players are in the band. Make sure they're part of the music, it's super important that you do that.

Now we get to the money. And this is the part that I don't think is exactly what you think it's

going to be. This is a business. Understand that. It's probably not your money fuelling the game, it's probably not your company, it may not be your employees. Don't focus so much on the money, and just try to be inspirational. Focus on that. And this is something that's super hard to do. This is something I struggle with all the time. When you're working on something creative it's your baby. It's very difficult to be positive all the time, or to be a cheerleader or get people going. So surround yourself with people who remind you that is part of your job, and be inspirational.

The summary of that is this: Use your brain and use what you know. Leverage what you already know. Consume what you can from the world, build your swatch, distill it down into the barest essence of a vision, get feedback and iterate when you do, and when you get that green light lock that shit down, and be inspirational. And don't forget about the money or they'll fucking fire you.

[Laughter]

So we'll get to part three. And this is where I'll put my money where my mouth is hopefully. Here's what happens. I want to actually pitch an experience to you guys live. And I've been kind of warned that this could be amazing, it could also be a fiasco. I say fuck it, let's give it a try. You guys in? OK.

**Audience:** Yeah.

**DH:** Alright, so, here's the deal. Step one: Leverage what I already know. And what I told you, I was born in 1972, this is what I was living, this is what I saw, but what I didn't tell you was that there was something that was incredibly important to me at that time, and it was the most important thing in my life, and I still remember it today and it still has a place in my heart. And it's this. You guys did not see that coming, right?

[Laughter]

But the teddy bear that I had didn't look like that, it looked like this. It was blue and white

Audience: Aww

**DH:** Really?

[Laughter]

Wow. And here's the thing about that teddy bear is that it was really there as I was learning

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who I was. It's an amazing thing when you have a toddler with a teddy bear. The first thing that you try and do is eat it. The second thing is that they have a conversation with it, and it's a legitimate conversation, it's super cool to see them talk to this thing and learn and discover and communicate. That's what I did. Of course you learn about love and all that stuff from your family. But this is the first time you learn it from this thing. True friendship. This bear was my buddy, my best friend. And if anybody tried to touch that fucking bear there was trouble.

What it was was imagination fuel. It's fantastic. Looking at that bear and basically formulating my perceptions about the world just based off of my friendship with that bear. But like all things you kind of grow up, the bear gets put up on the shelf and over time you forget. You go to school, and trust me you can't take that bear to school or you're going to get your ass kicked. You see the real world, you drink in the real world and you get new ideas. Imagination fuel 2.0. And I remember later on in life, I remember hearing a really cool story and it stuck with me. Just like the bear was important, this story left an indelible mark on me. And that was the story of Prometheus.

For those of you that don't know the story, there's a lot of different versions of the story but the story that I remember was the idea that there was a war between the Titans and the Gods. Prometheus was a Titan and Zeus was a God. And the gods won and at the end of that war Prometheus kind of switched sides, and Zeus said 'I want you to build mankind,' so what he did was he got some clay and he kind of built mankind. And as he put mankind down into the mud, he said to Zeus, 'give them something, give them fire, let them grow. Give them something,' and Zeus said no. So Prometheus went and he stole fire from Zeus and he gave it to mankind and it became the birth of culture and metalwork and it became this whole idea of the birth of thought. And Prometheus was punished of this. I believe he was basically chained to a rock and he had an eagle eat his liver every day and his liver would regrow and he'd have to eat it every day which sounds horrible.

But the story was really interesting to me, And I just thought that idea of that gift of thought... it stuck with me. But then like the bear it kind of went off into the ether. I went to a new school, I started to think more about a larger world and even some of the stuff about exploration and leaving the world and I got a whole bunch of new ideas. And that exploration and moment of

leaving the world got me into space and an interest in space travel and just imagination of it. And I remember thinking about it and going out amongst the stars and even going to another planet. But after a while life gets in the way and you put that on the shelf.

And then I got a call from BAFTA, and it was like, what if I could leverage those in an idea. So I went back to the shelf, I dusted them off, and here's my pitch: I want to retell the story of Prometheus giving that key moment of thought, but I want to replace fire with a teddy bear, and I want to put it in space because it's fucking awesome. That's my pitch.

[Laughter]

Now underneath the laughter, here's what I heard: [inhales]. Because it's not really a pitch, it's just a whole bunch of ideas put together and I just don't really get it.

So here's what I did. Luckily I work at Ubisoft and it's a super cool place, there's a lot of smart people there. So I went, and I started to think about whether I could build a team around this. Some people thought I was nuts, other people were embracing it. This is Serge Marino. For those of you who don't know him he was the art director on *Child of Light*, a very cool game. So I went to Serge and I said 'here's what I want to do.' And I told him and he didn't make the sound. Because I made sure what I did is I told it to him in story form and I made sure that I made a campfire. So serge and I met for seventeen minutes and since then we've only met twice more for a total of three hours and this is what we came up with. I told him the story and he basically illustrated it and we iterated on it. I pitched an experience, and here's the pitch:

It starts with a bear and a little girl who loves her bear in space, because it's cool. She lives out in space, she has normal parents, a normal life. She loves this bear: She has tea parties with the bear, she has birthdays with the bear, she has little parties with the bear. She goes to bed every night knowing that this bear is there to protect her; it's her buddy. Until one night she's not protected, one night danger strikes. A klaxon goes off, her parents come running into the room going 'oh my God, we've got to take you,' they pick her up and they rush outside and the bear is left in the bed and she turns and she screams 'No! Get my bear!' and she runs back and grabs the bear and they head for the spaceship. But at the last possible minute she stumbles and she

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drops the bear. The doors close and she sits there pressed up against it, screaming 'no' as the bear gets left behind. And the rocket takes off and heads into space and gets smaller and smaller and smaller.

The bear sits alone on the edge of a great precipice until a gust of wind pushes it down. And down into the hole it goes, further and further, past caves, and monsters and all manner of creatures and all kinds of things, until it finds its way all the way down to the centre of the planet, and it rests in inky darkness, alone. Until it sees a little light suspended from a little string. That light gets bigger until it presents itself as a little creature staring at this teddy bear. This creature has a name. it's called a razagaboo.

The razagaboos are very inquisitive creatures, they're sitting there looking at it but they've never left the cave, they never had any information about the world outside. They don't know what this thing is. This razagaboo looks at it and offers a soft little purr to the other razagaboos that are up in their webs and they all come down, and they move forward gingerly, carefully, looking at this bear, no clue what it is. Forward, forward, until they touch it.

Here's what's really interesting: That's when they have their Prometheus moment—in this case it's a razagamoment. This is where up until that moment they've only ever thought of building their webs in 2D. But they saw that this thing was built out of yarn and they understood that they could build in 3D. They could re-engineer what they built. And they had that lightning strike of we can build in three dimensions. This changed everything about the razagaboos. Their understanding of their education, the idea of their culture and the idea of their engineering. So this is our call to action. This is what we want players to play. We want them to play as a razagaboo. We want them to journey out of the darkness into the light. We want them to go off where no razagaboo has gone before, but it's not going to be easy. There's going to be unknown dangers and creatures, there's going to be challenges and puzzles, they'll have to engineer their way around, maybe they can bridge, maybe they can push. There will be collages, cave-ins, there will be obstacles, there will be monsters. But eventually, they will reach the surface and return that teddy bear to a very happy little girl in space. That's my pitch.

[Applause]

And we call this Yarn.

[Applause]

So I'm glad you guys liked it, but what's really important about this I want feedback, I want to be able to iterate, I want to test the process. I want to make this better. It doesn't do any good just to have the idea, we've got to be able to take it out there and see if we can make it better. So I come back to you and I believe I've got a few minutes left, then we'll do Q&A.

So, I want to involve you guys in this process. I want to come back to that viewmaster and I want to drop in something and change it. So we could change the Prometheus idea, we could change the teddy bear, we could change the girl, we could change the razagaboo—do you guys like that name?

**Audience:** Yeah.

**DH:** OK, I'm not going to change that. OK, we could change space, we could change the construct. But for the purposes of this, I just want to focus on the bear. And I want to ask the question of 'what if?' How many of you guys had stuffed animals when you were a kid? There you go, OK. What did you guys have? What did you have?

**Audience member:** A bear

**DH:** You had a bear. Somebody yell out something that wasn't a bear.

[Various responses]

OK, sorry let me do that again. You, what did you have?

**Audience member:** A carpet dog.

**DH:** Really? That's kind of cool. What did you have?

**Audience member:** I had a sheep.

**DH:** You had a sheep?

**Audience member:** A baby sheep.

**DH:** That's cool. Did anybody have a panda bear? Wow, really? OK, let's just do something simple. Alright let's just take the idea of a panda bear, and let's imagine it wasn't this kind of bear that fell down the hole, let's imagine it was a

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panda bear, and let's effect the story and change the ripples. Let's chase those ripples and see what happens.

So the panda bear goes down and it's black and white, and the chief razagaboo comes out and looks at it and says 'What is this? It's monochromatic, it's black and white,' and what he says is, 'I hereby outlaw colour'. The game completely changes. And all these razagaboos who have the ability to emanate all these colours now live in this totalitarian regime where they can't express themselves. How would that inform the gameplay? What's the first thing you would do if somebody says you can't express yourself—anybody?

[Various responses]

Exactly. So the game becomes about going out in the world and painting and tagging the entire razagaboo landscape with colour. And it changes from something that is puzzle based to something that is expressive.

That's pretty much all I've got. My point is that you guys have the ability to contribute to these ideas and you have the ability to use that swatch. You have the ability to go back and look at each one of these things and iterate, and to the folks that tell you that you shouldn't—don't listen to them. So, my five minutes is up, you guys have contributed. I'm glad you like razagaboo. I'm interested in what you guys have to say, I'll be fielding questions.

The point I would make in summary is this: use what you already know and keep it simple. Consume the world as much as you can. Distil your vision. Make sure you get feedback and you iterate, you don't forget about the player. Lock it down, be inspirational, don't forget about the cash. And if you forget all of that and none of that matters, just ask yourself: What's your teddy bear? Thank you.

[Applause]

**KM:** Dan, thank you so much that was amazing. Excellent insight into some of how creativity happens, especially at a big studio. Before we field out questions I have a question for you: Why do you hate white cars so much?

**DH:** You know what I've just had some bad experiences and I don't want to talk about it.

[Laughter]

But it's interesting. I'll be interested to see if anybody asks me any questions about what colour is the bad guy's car in *Far Cry 5*?

[Laughter]

Revenge!

**KM:** So you worked in film and TV before you worked in games. What was your path to creative directorship?

**DH:** Oh man, I wouldn't call it a path. I think I tried a lot of jobs, I tried a lot of different things. I think as a creative, as somebody who wants to be creative, I think I wasn't always courageous in pursuing it. I think that sometimes what would happen was I would do the job other than I think other people expected me to do. And so I kind of backed into the job and it took me a long time to get there. So I think the path for me was I was an animator, I was a lighter, I worked in television and film, I was an art director, I was a cinema director, and then I switched over to production. And then after that I became an executive producer and after that I sort of went back to being a creative director and now I'm both.

**KM:** Great, Yeah, that's quite a zig-zaggy path. I'm going to open it up to questions from the floor now. If you have a question raise your hand and the roving mic will find you. One over there.

**Q:** Hello, my name is Neil. I'm a performance capture artist and a voice artist. I've been working a lot in games, I come from a film, television and stage background, but I'm interested in the collaboration that happens now that didn't used to happen in motion capture but is happening more in performance capture about how sometimes through organic happy accidents, moments that happen in the volume even with the script which is usually locked down at that stage, how sometimes, collaboration between different types of creatives can actually affect a game. I've been working about eight years now so I've felt the effects of suddenly having an idea from a different creative point of view. But I was wondering how much of your methodology, whether that's something you actively try and seek from performers? Or is it one of those things that because of the mechanics of the game etc. etc. it sometimes is impossible to do that?

**DH:** It's not impossible at all and you should totally do that. Earlier on in my career I was... You write

an earnest story and you think every word on the page is gold and anybody that doesn't understand that is stupid, and it's not true at all. What's amazing is when you look at *Far Cry 3* and you look at Vaas, Michael Mando did a lot of that stuff and you have to be able to let him run, you have to be able to let great artists do what they do. And so I think we had this idea of what that character was, and he was a huge part of making that character great and better. And the real question you ask yourself when you're looking at an actor and you're looking at a performance is 'do I believe it?'. And I believed that performance. The same thing with Troy Baker who was Pagan Min, I mean he just blew us away.

And I mean when we were really looking at *Far Cry 5* and we were looking at trying to create a character as magnetic as the father. It was tough. It was really really tough. And you have to have the right performance, you have to have the right actors. And we wrote some stuff and we thought it was pretty cool and then we went wide on *Far Cry 5*, we've got a whole bunch of characters I would love to tell you about but I'm not allowed to. But it was really cool because somebody was working on this and they called me over and they were like 'Dan you've got to see this.' And I go over and here's Greg Bryk's performance of our father and it was incredible, I basically had chills down my back. And the key thing for me was he didn't say exactly what we wanted them to say. He was believable, he made it his own. And for the first time I'd met somebody—I think the problem with the concept of cults sometimes is that we're all smart and I think it's very difficult for us to believe that somebody can get inside our head and that we're going to follow them and do what they say—and within five minutes of seeing that performance I really did believe that Greg could start his own cult and I might want to be a part of it, and I was like 'what the fuck is wrong with me?!' It's chilling, and it's super cool to see him work. You try and play a little bit of one-up-manship and go 'OK, this is really cool,' and then every time you do these actors just make it better. And if you don't lean into it, it's foolish. Let them run. Let them make mistakes. You're going to make mistakes. Let them find those little kernels of genius.

So I totally agree with you, it's not a science. Alright, it's alchemy. And you go into that volume and you kind of intend to bring pieces in with you, but they don't get assembled in the way you expect, and it's magic.

**KM:** One down here at the front.

**Q:** Hi. So I think it's been obvious over the last year that AAA, single player games have been struggling to pay the bills in the end. I think we've seen a lot of games that have been great but have actually struggled when they've gone out into the market. And I think as a result of that there's been a lot more emphasis on monetisation approaches that have actually started to change the nature of the game itself. So my question is how do you remain inspirational and retain your creative vision when the pressure to make money is actually pressuring your own vision in the first place.

**DH:** That's a great question. It's not easy, right? I mean it's a business and I think that there's always going to be pressures to find new ways to incentivise and do those different types of things. But the truth is I really do try to focus on, and I think we all try to focus on, bringing a product people can play, and that when they play it the way they invest in it is based off of how they want to. I don't want to give you a bullshit producer answer too much, but it's a tough question right now and I think people are struggling with it. With our game, we're still thinking about how to manage certain things, but what I know is that our emphasis right now is on building an open world and building a system that you can go and play it the way you want to play it. And that really informs everything we do.

It would have been super simple for us to make a linear game, really simple. We didn't do it. We made a game where the player can go out and invest and play and meet and bring people along with them in the order that they want to play it. And that's difficult but it's something that we think is important.

**KM:** Is it different at different studios, the extent to which creatives are exposed to the imperative to monetise?

**DH:** I think so. I think it's always out there.

**KM:** Right, it must be a part of everybody's life.

**DH:** Yeah, you're always going to... it is a business and you're always going to have conversations about it, but I think what we like about Ubi is the conversations we end up having is about what the player wants, right, and then we ask. I think that it's a different mind-set.

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Whenever you want to know what somebody does, don't ask them to tell you what they do, ask them how they spend their day, because it's very difficult to spin that. And a lot of my day is talking about the creative, a lot of my day is dealing with people that are super smart and ideas and narrative and game systems. That's what we spend our time doing.

**KM:** One down the front here.

**Q:** So in the beginning you spoke a lot about leveraging human knowledge and human experience, things like that. But in this day and age where game developers are so prolific, where do you think the line is drawn when that human knowledge is kind of assumed game language? Because we don't just want to restrict the market to people that play games already, we want to open it up and be inspirational. How would you combat that between the assumed knowledge of gamers?

**DH:** It's funny because I wasn't really talking about the assumed knowledge of gamers and systems. What I was talking about was just the DNA of everybody, and I think that the spectrum is much broader. When we're thinking about leveraging what you already know, what I'm trying to say to folks is as creative sometimes we over-complicate things and we assume what players want or what people who read our stories want, and it might be better to just ask and to hear their thoughts.

When I asked the question about 'what kind of teddy bear did you have?' Or 'did anybody have a teddy bear?' I was shocked at how many hands went up. And I think that that's an important thing when you're creating that you want to be able to touch folks where it leverages what they already know. And that's sort of what the presentation was about.

**KM:** Did anyone not have a teddy bear, I'm curious?

**DH:** Really?

**KM:** No one in this room did not have a teddy bear?

**DH:** Are you OK? Stick around dude, we can get you one in like two hours.

[Laughter]

**KM:** How does the size of a studio impact the focus you're able to have in the vision? When you have team of two-three hundred people, does that make it more difficult to stick to a vision than if you had a team of ten?

**DH:** Oh I think so. I can lie to you and tell you 'no, no, no, it's super easy and everybody rolls in the same direction and it's like a Swiss watch and it's great.' It doesn't work like that. I think that the bigger the studio gets, the more that you get fractals of ideas going off and you're building stuff and maybe going in different directions. It's very much like a large tanker. If you try and turn it you can't turn it quick. It's not nimble, but what's amazing about that is it's got great inertia, and when you deliver something you deliver it and it's generous and amazing for people to play.

**KM:** A question at the front here.

**Q:** Hi. Do you have any advice for when you should kill an idea?

**DH:** That's a good question. Do I have any advice for when you should kill an idea? I think you'll know, right? A lot of times we don't listen to ourselves. I think you'll know. I think we do all kind of know. What's that phrase, if there's a doubt, there's no doubt.

I think that the other side of that is, I think a lot of people struggle with the confidence to put their ideas forward, so I think there's some very confident people that drive to an idea and they can't let it go. And I don't think I'm too worried about that. I think the world has a way of letting people know their ideas are not good. I don't think that's the problem we have. I think the problem we have is that there are a lot of good ideas that don't get made, and a lot of good ideas don't get heard, and there are a lot of things we could leverage that we're not.

But in terms of how you know when to kill something, I think it's just that sound. I really, I hate that fucking sound. I hate it, like with the heat of a nova, but you get it. And you hear somebody... You give that idea and what you want to hear is 'that's super cool' and [inhales]. So yeah, the sound, that's my answer.

**KM:** A question up here.

**Q:** Hi. So, you were talking quite a lot about—sorry I have a cold, I'm not normally this deep—about the way you can take inspiration from quite broad themes, really, and you can kind of narrow

that down into a vision that maybe guides more of the project. I was wondering how, when you discuss vision, how much of that is thematic, how much is a specific narrative that you've kind of really honed in on, how much is mechanical? I guess more in the sense of a new IP as opposed to like *Far Cry* where those might be already kind of set. But how do you balance those in that initial kind of stage when you're trying to sell the idea of a project?

**DH:** That's a really good question about the idea of how do you leverage what you already have? If you're working on an existing IP what you don't want to do is just throw out everything you already have and start from scratch. You want to be able to leverage, be mature and leverage what you have. But at the same time you want to be able to make sure that the idea can grow.

It's a constant question between revolution and evolution. Knowing what the right balance is. I think you've got to trust your people. You've got really smart people who will remind you, 'hey, you know, listen you're throwing out those great systems and these are really cool and this is how it can grow.' So I think it's about listening to your team and trusting them to help you furnish the vision. It won't be exactly—if you're a creative director you're going to put out a vision and it's not going to be exactly what you thought. And I think sometimes if you're not mature enough to look at that and think that's ok, it's a lot like having a situation with an actor and if you're not thinking about it and saying 'let's see where this goes,' then you can get crushed.

I think the harder thing is sometimes when you're finishing a game it's devastating to leave something you really want in the game on the cutting room floor. That's super, super hard. It's happened on *Far Cry 3*, it's happened on *Far Cry 4*, I know it'll happen on *Far Cry 5*, but I'm still not emotionally prepared for that. It's just really, really tough to cut something you think has value and think can grow over the brand over time. But I think it's an interesting question about what you leverage, I think the answer is trust your team, they'll let you know.

**KM:** Another question down here

**Q:** Hey, so I'm a games journalist and I get pitched games quite a lot, and often how developers try to pitch it is they'll say 'it's kind of like *Candy Crush* but you crush cars, *Car Crusher*.' And it's strange because I think part of it comes from people drawing inspiration from

within the games industry and not reaching beyond it, and part of it comes from a fear of people not understanding what they're pitching, so they try and root it in what they know. And basically my question is how do you pitch an idea that's so off the wall, that reconstructs what we know about games, what we expect from games, in a way that people will understand without pulling back in on what we know?

**DH:** That's a big question. Um, that's a good question. How do you pitch? I don't know if there's one formula for it. When I was first pitching what was the construct for a lot of the themes in *Far Cry 5* not everybody got it, the world was different place. The world was a very different place three and a half years ago. So you throw out the idea of the end of time, you throw out the idea of a cult and you throw out the idea of this magnetic leader and everybody's like 'oh that doesn't seem believable,' and then time goes on and all of a sudden things start happening and people start to lean towards, well maybe that's a little bit more believable.

But it's difficult. You've got to have thick skin. If you believe in it. And it's a little bit to the question of how do you know when to kill it? It's hard. It's really hard to... And that's why I put Kermit the frog up there, because it definitely sometimes feels like that. It feels a little bit lonely for you to stand up in front of a pitch and have everybody look at it. You have to be tough, you have to have a thick skin. And I think if you believe in it and you leverage the team, and you leverage the systems you've got. I think that the pitch can survive and kind of be forged in the fire. But there's no question it's extremely tough and not everybody can survive it. It's really tough, if I haven't sold you this, it's super tough.

[Laughter]

**KM:** Something that question hinted at I think is a lot of people who play games for a long time think quite often, is that gaming's frame of reference can be very narrow and sometimes you find that games reference other games a lot and they reference things like *Star Wars*—big common points of pop culture. Do you feel that gaming's frame of reference can be too narrow, and what can be done to widen it?

**DH:** Sure I think that it's... You're in pitches and like you say, 'it's like this,' and you're like 'OK I get it but what's new, what's different?' And it's really hard to do. I think that... It's funny, the conversation is about is the view of the gamer

narrow and I don't think it is, I think there are times where it can seem that way. But I think what's really interesting right now is that when I think about things like *Stranger Things* or I think about things that are not games. Think about the fact that... Look at the nostalgia for the '80s that's there right now. Look at these ideas that are coming out. Look at this brand that's being built. And that's all stuff that we lived. We all drank the same water at the same time, we all had the same experiences, the same memories, and this thing comes on television and we all go 'this is amazing this is my childhood,' and we all love it, or at least I love it.

But I think that sometimes in the conversation with gamers, yes, it can get a little bit about a system or that we don't widen it as much as it could be. And I think that as we widen and as we mature that conversation just gets bigger.

**KM:** One of the things you mentioned was listen to music, read books, watch TV. Things that aren't video games.

**DH:** Yeah and you'll hear it, I play a lot of games, but I also do a lot of other stuff, we all do. I think that you've got to be prepared to look and take and drink in and experience as much as you can in as many different directions. I swear to god I still use this [hand gesture] all the time. It's a little thing, it's super cool, you're building a character and I'm like, 'oh I don't believe this character, it's not surprising to me. What's the little thing, what's the little bit of spice?' And you can find it anywhere: You can find it in the real world, you can find it in stories, in a great book, you can go to a play. You can find these moments of genius, these kernels of genius where you'd least expect it.

**KM:** Question in the middle there.

**Q:** Hello. So I really like the process you put up and I really like how you reached the end and all of the steps. I wanted to ask, because *Far Cry* number five is sort of obvious you're going to build some kind of *Far Cry* iteration, when you had all of these '70s, '80s things put together, did you—were you looking for a far cry villain shaped hole to fill? Or did you have these and say well this fits into this big, big game that I'm building anyways?

**DH:** Wow. I'm not sure I entirely get it. Are you thinking when I was pitching *Yarn*?

**Q:** No, no, so you said 70s 80s, end of the world prophecy, this guy who has a cult—so when you had that were you looking your something that fills a *Far Cry* game villain? Or did you have this idea, and then you said, well it could be a *Far Cry* game villain.

**DH:** Oh that's interesting. No, I think that as a matter of process—it's the chicken or the egg, which one came first?—I think it's a matter of process. I don't honestly remember. I think what it was is that, I think what it was is I know with *Far Cry* we've done a pretty good job at building these villains and I kept thinking 'how do we make this villain have purpose?' So it probably starts there, we've got to make this villain have a purpose. And then I had this feeling like something was wrong with the world, something was off, and I said how do I bring those things together. Right, it's chocolate and peanut butter and smash them together and see what happens. And it was really interesting to see that this villain had purpose and this villain had a belief. And as soon as I started to be able to take the personality matrix of a Vaas or a Pagin Min and apply the belief that the end of the world was coming—that character got very, very interesting. And then to make them magnetic and then have a family that's with them, and have all these different characters, and that he's a manipulator but he does it for a reason that he thinks is valid—he truly believes he's saving you. He truly believes that at the end of this when the apocalypse is over, people will turn to him two weeks later and say 'thank you,' and that's chilling.

**KM:** A question at the back here

**Q:** Hey there, thanks for the talk. I really like *Far Cry*, but I actually think *Yarn* was really cool. And looking at things like classic books you buy for your kid like the Caterpillar book and stuff like that, *Far Cry*'s got that mass appeal and probably will sell far more units than something like *Yarn* will, but I kind of feel like the games industry has a place for *Yarn* to try to become these mass sellers. And I wondered what your thoughts are on how *Yarn* could get that mass appeal and potentially sell more than something like *Far Cry*.

**DH:** I have no idea. Honestly, this thing, we're talking about two weeks worth of work. We just kind of were riffing off of an idea. I'm glad you like it. This is literally the first time I've told anybody. Like we kind of just were doing this off to the side. So I think that I'm going to go back



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and think about that. I think if people like what they're hearing I'll have a new problem. Right? Like I'm going to walk back into the office and people are going to be like 'what the hell is *Yarn* and why didn't you tell us?'. I think that's going to be a serious problem. So yeah, I think, oh god I've just made a new problem. I'm glad you like it. It's obviously something I'm now going to be forced to think about.

But I think if I give you the human answer, which is, is the next game I'm going to work on *Yarn* it doesn't have to be me. What I was trying to prove was that good ideas and collaborations and opportunities can come and that somebody can take that idea and make it better. And I think it's ego that stands in the way. If *Yarn*'s a cool thing and if somebody really wants to make it at Ubi and they can take it out for a spin, that'd be great. It'd be great for that to live. I love *Far Cry*, I live and breathe *Far Cry*. I've obviously got something else inside, and I thought it was a really cool exercise and I think it's kind of ignited something different.

If you're asking me specifically how do we make it as big? I don't know but I'd love to find out. I would love to find out. I think that just working at a place where this is OK, to walk in and be talking about *Far Cry* and in the next breath be talking about *Yarn*, that's a super cool place, it's like an idea factory.

**KM:** Ubisoft as a company, unlike some of the other larger publishers, does make things that aren't necessarily going to sell millions. Do you think there's a danger at the moment that unless something is potentially a massive, massive seller that it doesn't get made? How do we balance the need for multimillion dollar franchises in order to keep a company afloat with smaller games that might have a smaller appeal but are nonetheless worth making.

**DH:** I think yes, there's a danger, I think that's true. But I think what's really cool is that you're looking at the tools what it takes people to make this stuff be really, really accessible for the first time. You've got people who are able to make remarkable stuff on the iPhone, you've got people who are able to make remarkable stuff using in-game editors and those types of things. It's really, really cool what the players are making. So I think it's good to work at a company who has the spirit to make a little indie project and it can see what happens, and I think a thing like *Yarn* could be pitched... I don't think that if I worked at... Ubi is the type of place where I think it's OK

to have these thoughts and then show up and not really tell anybody back there and then pitch it and that's cool.

But yeah I think sometimes the industry can be restrictive. It's super hard to stand up here and pitch a game that might not make a lot of money. And I meant that honestly when I say inspirational it's something I struggle with for sure. It's super hard to be inspirational all the time. You're in a business, you're working a tonne of hours, you've got a tonne of responsibility and it weighs on your chest all the time. But I think it's super cool that we can explore these new things and that there's a better than average chance that it's going to get made. So hopefully it does get made.

**KM:** I want to ask in your role as a producer you've obviously worked with all sorts of creatives. From your presentation it seems to me like you're quite a visual, creative thinker

**DH:** For sure

**KM:** What kind of other creative thinker do you encounter when you're on a big project and how do you try and accommodate everybody? How do you find a way of letting everybody express themselves in their own way.

**DH:** It's interesting because—do you guys watch *Westworld*?

**KM:** Yes

**DH:** Remember the creative director on *Westworld*? Super cliché, interesting guy, super cool. But I look at that and it hurts a little. Because I think creative directors come in all shapes and sizes and have different—there are some folks who are super quiet and introspective and they just want to be able to come in and put their music on and be able to write. And they want to be able to lay out, 'here are my thoughts, have a read of this and tell me what you think.' And there are others that are super emotive and bombastic and it's just, it's just this show and you kind of drink it in and go 'well I don't know what the hell that means, but it sounds amazing' and it's a carnival. I think that you've got to be prepared to kind of counterpunch about that. It's kind of like dealing with water – it's going to find a way to flow and you've got to figure out a way to channel it and it's super hard. It's super tough. But if you try to apply one aspect of managing it, and I talk about that, you're going to break it. Creativity, as much as I gave the light bulb and

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the colour and the crayons a hard time, it's true. People they communicate in different ways, and it takes a very special kind of producer to be able to leverage that talent and kind of manage it and kind of allow it to grow and even plug the team into it. There's a sun there and you want to try to use that energy in a productive way without breaking it. It's not easy.

**KM:** A question at the front. We've got a mic coming for you so everyone can hear.

**Q:** So, as a storyteller and a producer, do you feel more satisfaction at the end of a project that you see a response in the audience that they've completely understood your vision and exactly where you were going and you can see that in the reactions of 'let's play' videos and stuff like that, or do you feel more satisfaction if they completely go off-piste and make their entire own kind of way of understanding the game that surprises you?

**DH:** Can I lie?

**Q:** Sorry!

**DH:** Um, no, so, luckily I've been engaged with that type of lesson for a while on *Far Cry*, and I learned that lesson on *Far Cry 3*. On *Far Cry 3* I absolutely had this proscription for how I imagined people were going to play the game, and holy shit was I wrong. And what it does, for a minute it breaks you, and for a minute you're like 'I don't understand, you're not playing the game the way you're supposed to,' and then you hear yourself say that out loud and you say 'well don't do that again.'

The game is, and *Far Cry* in general is this amazing anecdote factory, and the whole idea is to allow the systems to collide and the whole idea is to have stuff that happens that you didn't plan for. And so if you create this proscription for it, you're doing it wrong. Give the players the tools to be able to express themselves. Give them the opportunity to be able to author the script and the narrative the way they want. Meeting characters, bringing people in and doing all that stuff, hiring the guns for hire they want fangs for hire they want. Give them all that stuff and allow them to play they way want then just sit back and enjoy it. I would answer that question very differently five years ago.

**KM:** How so?

**DH:** I would just say no they've got to play it a certain way.

[Laughter]

And that's not true at all. Honestly what's really, really cool now is looking at the tools we're giving players and seeing the wellspring of new ideas that come from it. And I think we have to do a better job now providing tools for people to make their own vision and experience that as well.

**KM:** You mentioned the idea in your presentation about the player being in the band now. Is that kind of part of that philosophy for you, the idea of the player being able to play something in the way that expresses them?

**DH:** Yeah

**KM:** That takes part?

**DH:** The industry is changing, and I really mean that, that the player is in the band. You have to remember every day. Truly, as a creative it can be a little bit lonely sometimes, you get locked in your head and you write stuff or you come up with ideas and you communicate them and aspects of the ideas get through. It's tough to keep going and putting that stuff front and centre.

I think that by leveraging the player and allowing the player to be able to play the way they want, that only makes the system better, it only makes it better for the game and what you're doing for your creative. So it's all about bringing the player in and making them part of the band. I know it sounds a little cheesy, when I say it out loud it sounds really cheesy, but players are making amazing stuff, and if you're a creative who doesn't look at it you're missing everything.

**KM:** think we've got time for two more questions if we have two more from the floor. There's one.

**Q:** How do you strike a compromise between your narrative and the game? Because at the end of the day you're making a game and a story that's not integrated well isn't going to interest or whatever. And sometimes, something not even spoken about on the floor will say more than just a tacked-on cut scene or something.

**DH:** True, yeah. I think as somebody who really cares about narrative and thinks that way first, it's really hard to know you're making a game where

you may not see some of that. You may choose not to imbibe in it, you may choose not to do that. But I think we have to be able to allow the player to author the experience in the way they want. So it's heart breaking, there's some really cool missions in *Far Cry*, there's one in particular in *Far Cry 5* that's my favourite, but there's a very good chance you're not going to play it. And it's not because we're not going to ship it, it's going to be great, but you just... It's not an imperative moment in the narrative. It's not... It's something you can discover. And I'm sitting here thinking how do I shovel that in and make sure everyone sees it and the answer is that's not the game we're making. The game we're making is the opportunity to go out and meet people. It has a through point, a spine, of this character, this dark character and this cult, but we also want you to be able to snack. There are action bubbles in the world and you can go and snack on them, and if you don't care for what you're getting there you go snack on something else.

They way I was thinking of it earlier and the way that I kept thinking about it was that it's like speed dating. You go and you have a date and you speed date and you move on to the next thing. And I think that snacking, that idea of going around and meeting different characters and deciding whether or not you like them and taking in those little stories and then moving on to the next one... What's really going to be interesting is looking at people playing the game and playing in a—I've got to be careful I'm going to give stuff away here, somebody's going to tackle me from off the side—I think it's going to be really interesting for people to pick up the game with a notion of what they think it is and then play in a region where it's completely different and then communicate about the game and somebody else who's played it a different way is going to be like 'what are you talking about?' and then going to discover it that way.

It's a tricky thing to build an open world where you can do what you want and put it in any order and have the narrative be organic enough to be able to respond to it, but I think it's worth it.

**KM:** Narrative and play are often put in opposition, but I think one of the true challenges of great game design is making them work together.

**DH:** Yes it is. It's super hard because it's the type of thing that works only at the end. There's a long time where you're like 'is this going to work?' 'is this going to work?' 'is this going to work?' and

then when it works you're like 'thank God it's working.' So yeah.

**KM:** We have time for one more question

**Q:** A fantastic talk. So speaking to your previous point about narrative and how you've worked that into the game alongside gameplay, I've realised that you guys are looking at a co-operative component to *Far Cry 5*, how have you found trying to weave that into your narrative and how difficult is that to then...

**DH:** It's not easy, right? And I would use co-op as another moment in the anecdote factory. It's another system for opportunity. The thing that we did to really make sure it felt like it was cohesive was we built the guns for hire system and we built the fangs for hire system and we built the friend for hire system, we made it all part of one thing so that, you know, it feels like your friend is coming in and playing your game and is part of your experience, but when you add narrative to that there's no question that some players are just going to come in and for me I would love that everybody watches every single scene. Twice. And it's not going to happen. The truth is we put in a skip button, we put in the opportunity for you to just go 'no, I just want to play the game, I want go out and I want to have the anecdote factory.' But we also put in a little bit of subtlety and nuance.

What I always like is when you're thinking about the social contract you have with somebody when you have a conversation. You walk up and you have eye contact with them. And then if you walk away, you expect them to get a little pissed off. And then if you come back you see them stumble over their words, and it feels real when you do that. So even though it's a realisation and even though it may not further the agenda of the characters themselves or even the game itself, there's a thing you want from your characters to be able to make it feel like it's real. So you look them in the eye and they give you a meaningful piece of information and if you walk away they're like 'where the fuck are you going?' and if you come back they're like 'OK, well seriously, alright, here...'. And you're not going to nail it, it's not going to be 100 per cent, but investing in that and investing in feeling like those characters are real, there's something golden there.

**KM:** I think that's all we have time for on the questions front. I just want to say thank you very much to all of you for coming, and thank you to everyone who watched on the stream. Also

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important thank you to BAFTA's partners for the games events, which are Tencent, EA, SEGA, GAME and Ubisoft. BAFTA does lots of events like this through the year; if you want to find out more about them you can go to [bafta.org](http://bafta.org) and see the calendar. But most of all thank you so much to Dan Hay, that was honestly fantastic.

**DH:** Thanks very much guys.

[Applause]