GAME STUDIO ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

Abreu Noriega, José Luis *

Abstract. Tanooky is an independent videogame development studio founded in Monterrey, Mexico. Its current goal is to generate revenue through various venues such as doing outsourced work, training educational institutions in technological tools, and develop creative and educational applications to a wide audience. The primary goal of this analysis is to find any latent issues or advantages against the current trends of the industry in the workplace, as a means to find the cause and effect of the strategies employed within the workforce, and see if these strategies are effective on a day-to-day basis. This ethnographic study goes over important components such as its organizational culture, hierarchical structure, and communication methodology in order to find out more about its operative functions.

Keywords: Ethnographic study, organizational culture, communication, development Studio, hierarchical structure.

Introduction

Tanooky is a small videogame development studio founded in Monterrey, Mexico. Its current goal is to generate revenue through various venues such as doing outsourced work, training educational institutions in technological tools, and develop creative and educational applications to a wide audience. The studio itself has a staff of six people, each with their own particular specialty. The staff is comprised of a dedicated programmer, two dedicated artists, one animator, one designer, and the CEO of the company which also acts as the producer of any given project at the time. During this project, my relationship with Tanooky was holding the main position of game designer, while attending to any other matters that require my assistance such as training, documentation, among other tasks.

My main goal with this analysis is to find any latent issues or advantages against the current trends of the industry in the workplace, as a means to find the cause and effect of the strategies employed within the workforce, and see if these strategies are effective on a day-to-day basis. The main components of this will be the communication structure of Tanooky, along with its hierarchical structure and organizational culture. All of these elements will give a clearer picture on Tanooky as a whole from both a social, cultural and productive standpoint, using defined norms and standards to do a proper ethnographic study. In order to achieve this,

on-site observational research has been performed, by looking at the relationship between upper management, and everyone in operation within Tanooky. This ethnographic study will help identify any common strengths and weaknesses found in management, which can be reproduced in other environments to bring more efficient results. Another goal is to find if there are any differences in working on a Mexican development studio on a social and cultural level, against working for organizations in other countries.

Communication Structures

Because Tanooky is primarily comprised of six individuals, communication is often direct, with no discernible grapevine to be seen. As mentioned by Mishra (1990) "The grapevine is the informal and unsanctioned information network within every organization." In this case, because the communication between every member of Tanooky is not distanced by departments, but rather a close space, it means that communication itself tends to travel faster and without the need for anyone to gossip about the status of the organization. During my time at Tanooky, I was able to observe that on a daily basis, situations were communicated clearly and swiftly. If something was going to happen to the organization, the CEO would go ahead and tell everyone about the current status. This included grapevine-heavy topics like money, negotiations with other institutions, and the feedback status of a particular member of Tanooky.

The following is an excerpt of an interview I had with the CEO regarding the matter of transparent communication:

Jose Luis: State your name and position at Tanooky, please.

CEO: My name is German Vazquez, I am the founder and CEO of the company. I make sure that everyone knows what needs to be done.

Jose Luis: What is your main goal for communication here at Tanooky?

German: My goal is that everyone is able to say whatever they want, whenever they want to. Preferably when it is necessary.

Jose Luis: Do you have any particular reservations about what should be communicated?

German: Not at all. I strive for everyone to have a clear idea of where we are headed, where we currently are and what needs to be done.

Jose Luis: What do you do to avoid rumors spreading around the company?

German: I try to be as clear as possible when it comes to telling everyone about their current standing, and specially the current standing of Tanooky.

As it can be observed, it is a strong priority for everyone to have a clear communication, whether it be by any medium possible. This includes sending everyone e-mails of current standings, meetings, or voiced messages. Because the CEO of the company tries his best to showcase a sense of transparency within the organization, this means that the overall value of clear communication is transmitted across everyone in the workplace.

Hierarchical Structure

Tanooky itself is a very small organization, with a focus on core-related tasks where everybody's role is particularly important for the development of ventures and projects. As mentioned by Yamada (2007) "A fundamental characteristic of a healthy work culture is that everyone, regardless of rank, exhibits a questioning attitude. The freedom to challenge any action, any condition, and any assertion cannot he maintained in an environment laced with rankism. Only by continually demonstrating respect for all opinions and those who hold them will an environment he maintained in which a spirit of respect can thrive." (p.309) In my observational research, it was paramount to see this particular point as means to discern whether or not fear was present when it came to giving opinions on delicate subject matters. Initially, it seemed as if everyone wouldn't want to be the

person to give a bad impression by stating their opinions, often waiting for a particular individual to start the conversation on topics where points of view might differ. However, as time went on I noticed that it was not necessarily the case, because as time went by everyone became far quicker to react on particular instances. An example of this would be when we were close to a deadline where all of the elements might not come into place. The artists struggled to turn in a particular element and were afraid to talk directly to the CEO about it. However, they eventually gave in and talked to him in order to find a way to mitigate the risk of turning said work in time. The CEO listened intently and was able to discuss a solution with them to accommodate for their needs.

Because they were able to overcome the fear of punishment by higher positions, they were able to clearly communicate what they needed, and make accommodations according to their perspectives. This shows that due the smaller size of the company, there was a more quick and direct response to their issues as opposed to having to wait for different departments within management to respond to their questions. This makes for a closer relationship between the workforce and management, allowing for more efficient results.

Organizational Culture

When it comes to organizational culture. It's important to understand that because Tanooky is primarily a software and videogame development-oriented company, it has some fundamental differences when compared to the average workplace. As mentioned by Taipale-Lehto and Vepsäläinen (2016) "The games industry is a growing new sector that does not have a traditional structure or a traditional infrastructure, either hard or soft. The practices and structures in the sector are only now being created. The workforce in the sector is made up of young people and the attrition due to retirement that is typical of other sectors does not exist." This coincides with the rather relaxed nature of the workplace at Tanooky. This includes the way in which tasks are often communicated, and the way meetings are held throughout a project's development. These are often

informal in nature, where a particular task is announced and it is expected of the animator to start working on it and organize these tasks in their own way. It allows for everyone in the company to handle their own organization.
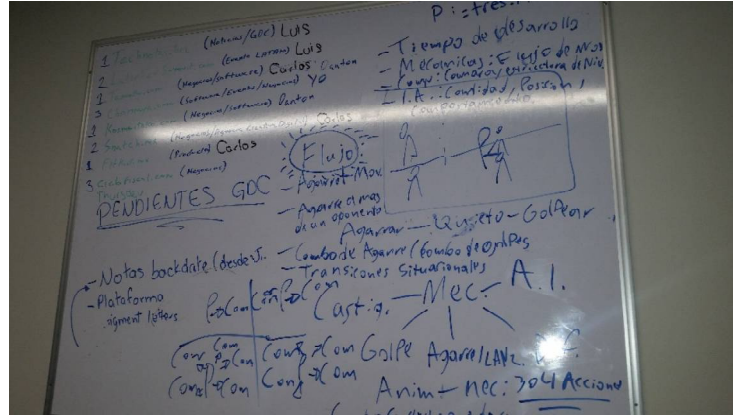

Figure 1. Tanooky's Planning Board. This photo showcases the drawing and planning board for Tanooky being used on a daily basis in order to organize and plan for the tasks at hand.

As it can be observed in the figure above, Tanooky's planning board is often free flowing in nature, allowing any member of the organization to write down their relevant inputs to tasks at hand. This is a clear extension on Tanooky's overall vision of creative freedom through its organizational culture, as it means that everyone is able to help with the organizations and tasks at hand. The closest it gets to a concrete structure would be through its use of Agile in order to delegate the tasks to everybody involved. As defined by Albero Pomar, Calvo-Manzano, Caballero and Arcilla-Cobian (2014) by Scrum is "the creation and delivery of software in small increments with little upfront planning. Hence, it allows companies to deliver value to their clients earlier and to adapt to changes faster." What this means for Tanooky is that, coupled with its flexible organizational culture also comes the responsibility to divide tasks in a way where everyone is able to do the work quickly and efficiently, in order to adapt to any situation where a change in development is necessary.

Conclusion

From the various sources used in my research, including observational experience. I could discern that Tanooky was a very enclosed and small organization, giving a very close and personal treatment to all of its employees, allowing them to have the freedom to organize themselves in whichever way was most convenient for them in order to achieve the best results possible in productive situations. In order to reach this, I had to observe daily conversations as well as the way in which organization was constantly presented, whether it was through their planning documentation or constantly changing drawing boards, it gave me a clear view on the way relationships worked in this particular kind of workplace.

As mentioned by Marchand and Hennig-Thurau (2013) "The industry is characterized by not just growth but also a high degree of innovation and dynamics. In addition to consoles, video gaming takes place within interactive networks and on various mobile devices, including smartphones and tablets" this goes in-tune with my observational data, as I could observe on a daily basis the strive to constantly find ways in which to be more efficient, while still retaining a sense of creativity and innovation. The overall culture of the workplace was very relaxed, which agrees with the external sources which often describe a similar ambience in workplaces with the same occupational backgrounds. This is regardless of the national backgrounds found in studios from around the world, which seem to follow a very familiar path to the one I was able to observe at Tanooky.

Because of this, the organizational nature of Tanooky aligns with that of studios from around the world, meaning that entertainment media producers seem to follow this relaxed train of thought for hierarchical stances, communication structures and organizational cultures. In the end, Tanooky is a very efficient organization even if it does not follow conventional practices of organizational culture from other industries, while aligning with those companies with similar backgrounds, which are known to be successful while their workplace cultures are

informal.

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*About the Author

Jose Luis Abreu Noriega is a professional game designer. He has an Associate Degree in Visual Communication with a Video Game Design Major from Austin Community College. He also holds a Bachelor of Science in Technical Management from Devry University at Chicago, which concluded with a Summa Cum Laude Honors achievement. Currently working as a Consultant for the Spenta Game Institute in Monterrey, Mexico and developing mobile applications and games.