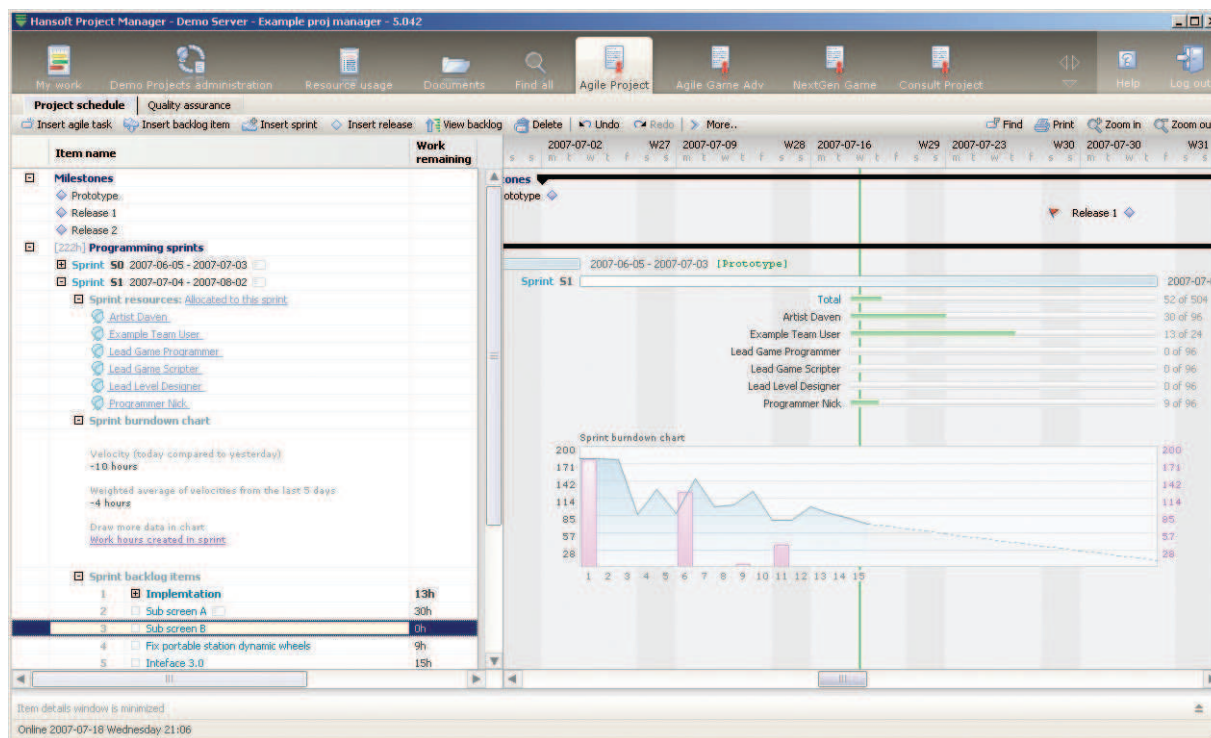


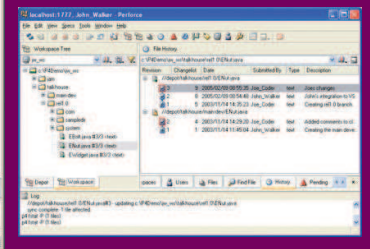
CHAMPIONSHIP Management

Managing a next-gen project can feel like trying to tame Godzilla, but there are software solutions and fashionable paradigms that claim to make your life easier, discovers Ed Fear...



Left: Hansoft 5.0 has gained significant traction within the games industry thanks to support for planning Agile cycles and integrated QA tools

Below: Perforce's platform agnostic Visual Client can run on all major operating systems, with a web client available for remote project administration



Managing the development of a game has never been an easy process: how do you schedule the disparate elements so that the game not only gets made on time, but also hits publisher milestones and trade events with enough panache to garner enthusiasm? With the increase of scale that this generation now typifies, the process of development is an even more bloated beast, one that's harder to reign. Which is where project management software comes in.

With teams larger than ever before, effectively communicating project and status becomes harder, so it's important that the management solution can help the team feel confident that they're all on the same page.

"Games are not just made by programmers," says Dave Robertson, director of European operations at Perforce. "A crucial aspect of supporting bigger teams is to be inclusive of all types of contributors to the team. This has meant the need to add user interfaces and tool integrations to our software for artists, testers, technical writers, managers and publishers."

Similarly, the high-definition era has ushered an increase in the physical



PREMIER MANAGERS: Top row left to right – Joe Maruschak, Garage Games; Kevin Hassall, Oxygen Interactive; David Veevers, Reach Business Mentoring. Bottom row – Kevin G. Clarke, Softimage; Patric Palm, Hansoft; Dave Robertson, Perforce.

domain too, with high quality texture, normal and parallax maps increasing the size of assets – and therefore the size of the entire project.

"Job number one for our engineers is to constantly improve performance and scalability," says Robertson. "Clearly, what is routine today would have been extreme a few years ago, so the server must stay just fast enough to meet users' expectations."

Staff Management

As well as managing staff on a team-level, asks David Veevers, does your studio manage them on an individual level? An expert in people development, Veevers was called in to Evolution studios during development of the *Develop* Award-winning *MotorStorm*.

"The work itself began with a one to one session with Matt Southern, senior producer at Evolution, so that the company could see how support for the team could work in practice," he explains.

"During these exercises there were a number of specific challenges that were individual to each person. These issues, if not tackled, would clearly disrupt the creative and production process and could jeopardise the game's progress."

Over 12 months, Veevers facilitated one-to-one meetings, group discussions and telephone support sessions. He isn't shy about enumerating the benefits: "At the end of the process, individuals had greater self confidence, enhanced esteem and a clearer understanding of their potential and how to achieve their targets," he enthuses. "The positive nature of the experience led to a new company culture."

Breath of fresh air

Developers certainly have their fair share of problems that require management, but what about publishers? With more than just a vested interest in the way the project turns out, how far should publishers get involved with team management?

As London-based publisher Oxygen found itself growing and managing more products simultaneously, it began to realise that it would need to formalise a process for managing developers, says publishing director Kevin Hassall.

What they did was to realise that having a producer on the publisher side as well as one at the development team simply lead to conflict. "Having a producer here and expecting the developer to have a producer on their end as well just turns into a tug of war," he explains.

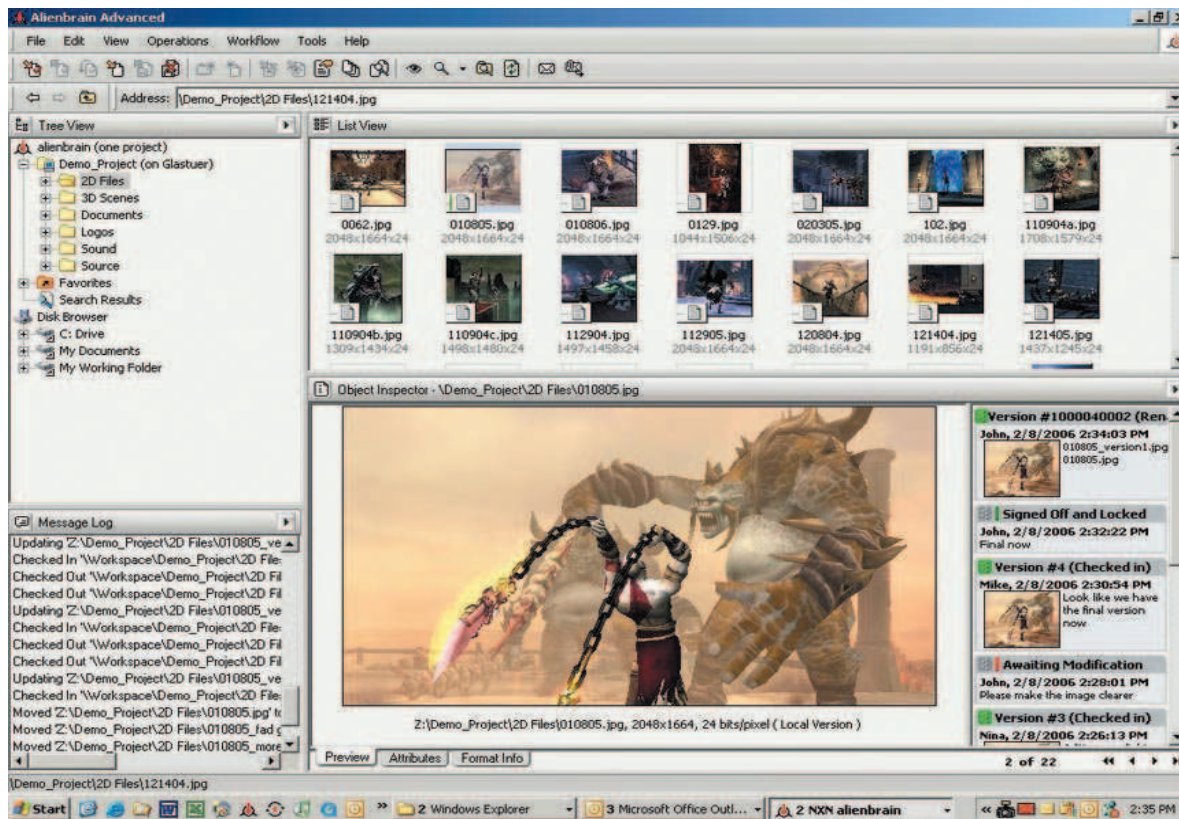
"Each has his own vested interests if the project starts going badly – both of them are thinking 'if this goes to hell I'm going to make sure the other guy gets the blame'." It can be a nasty political situation.

The solution, Oxygen thinks, is to pick someone at the development team to be the 'key', the chief contact between the two parties, says Hassall. "Rather than us sending producers to rally the developers, the key comes and visits us regularly – once a week, once a month, whatever it is – and they'll spend time here. They will spend time in the marketing meetings, and they'll spend time just working in the open-plan office picking up rumours and information as they go around."

This time spent at the publisher means the 'key' becomes aware of the publishing process and what it is the publisher wants from the developer from the beginning. They can go back to the team early on and communicate what marketing are saying rather than doing it later in the project, when it's harder to change things and the developer starts to feel more like the publisher is 'interfering'.

Of course, changing the format of the publisher-developer relationship is going to cause a few teething problems, adds Hassall. "For a lot of developers it is very, very difficult to work with this new process. They're used to someone coming in and telling them exactly what to do – if it doesn't work, they can blame them. But now we tell them what we want to achieve and that's it – and they can feel lost."

"We give responsibility to them – there is no attempt to control, there's no attempt to micromanage – we never put producers in place at developers. This, and getting marketing involved at the beginning, changes the way the project is run."



The other main trend affecting project management is the rise of outsourcing, and the challenges that brings with regards to keeping track of external development progress.

"Outsourcing requires very specific collaborative project and asset sharing resources," explains Kevin G. Clarke of Softimage, developers of the Alienbrain asset management and source control system. "Current and future versions of Alienbrain provide solutions to both this and the size issue."

"With outsourcing collaboration becomes trickier and needs more attention," adds Hansoft's Patric Palm. "We have functionality that enables outsourcers to be a live part of production but with limited visibility, making it easier to manage the outsourced part and reducing the risk of losing control."

"Fun gameplay needs to be discovered and nurtured through a methodology that rejects the fallacy that 'locking down' designs is a good thing..."

Ed Daly, Zoë Mode

AGILITY MODIFIER

As projects get bigger and teams similarly inflate, it's becoming clear to many that traditional ways of managing projects aren't quite as suitable as they may have once been.

Most troubling is the extra momentum that size gives to a project: the more people that are involved with each feature, and the more things each feature affects, the harder it gets to modify further on down the project.

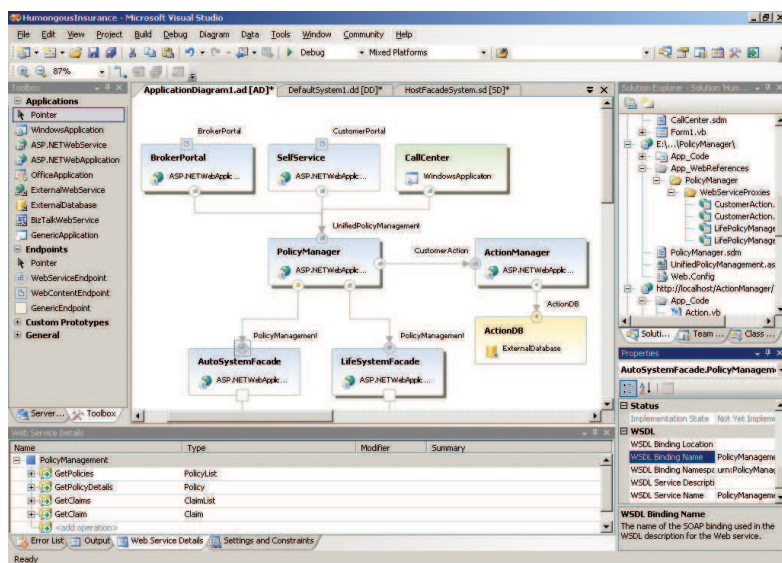
As such, the traditional 'waterfall' approach of exhaustively planning a project at the beginning and then following that plan closely is highly resistant to change – and that's a problem, says Ed Daly, studio head at Zoë Mode.

"Fun gameplay needs to be discovered and nurtured through a methodology that rejects the fallacy that 'locking down' designs is a good thing," he comments.

What Daly and many others find themselves moving towards are more Agile development paradigms, management methods that emphasise an iterative approach over a large one-time planning phase. One of the first and most popular Agile methods is Scrum, which breaks the development timeline down into a series of smaller 'sprints' that each end with a working version of the product.

"The core Agile tenant is Embrace Change," explains Daly. "At Zoë Mode we applied Scrum to our *EyeToy: Play* titles following a post-mortem of a previous project in which team communications and decision making suffered from bottlenecks at the top."

Daly isn't coy when talking about how moving to Scrum benefited Zoë



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Product round-up

Perforce PERFORCE SOFTWARE

Perforce is built on a platform-agnostic client-server architecture and features a graphical merge tool, built-in defect tracking and the Perforce Proxy for remote collaboration. Customers include Lionhead, BioWare, Irrational, Epic and Ubisoft.

Hansoft HANSOFT

Used by studios such as Electronic Arts, The Creative Assembly and Eidos, Hansoft 5.0 features integrated project management and QA tools with extra support for planning Agile development cycles.

Alienbrain SOFTIMAGE

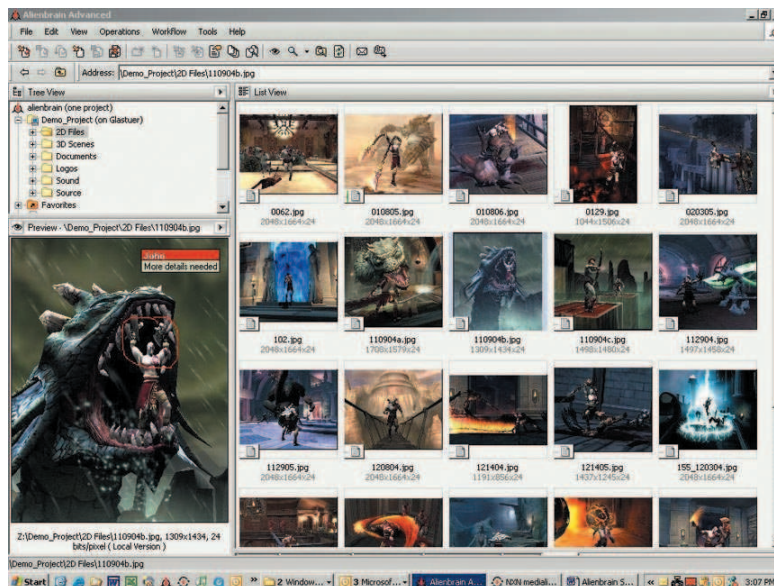
Softimage's asset-tracking and version control system is used by a large range of studios including Capcom, id, and Nintendo, and features a graphical front-end designed for use by artists and other non-technical staff.

Visual Studio 2005 Team Edition MICROSOFT

The team-focused edition of Microsoft's ubiquitous development suite includes tools to help developers work together more effectively and visually plan projects in an intuitive manner.

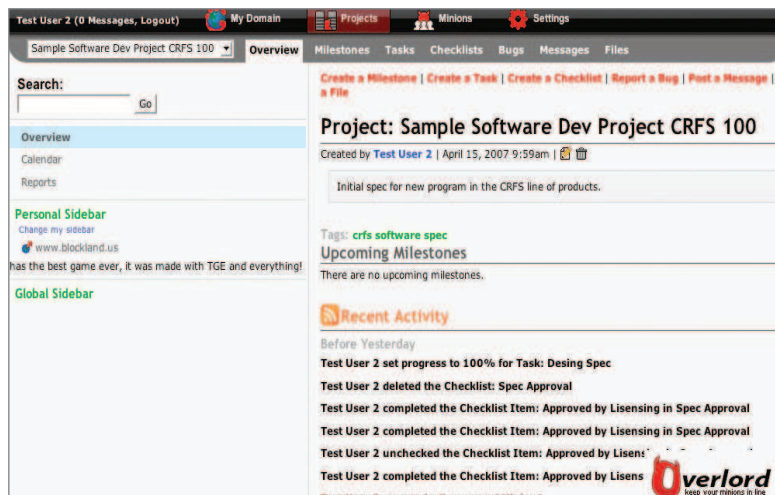
Overlord RANDOM DEVELOPMENTS

An indie-aimed project management solution with an appropriately low price, Overlord is designed to keep remotely-distributed indie or hobbyist teams up to date with milestone planning, task and bug management and integrated communication tools.



"I've met a lot of people who were really keen to use Scrum and believed in it, but weren't able to convince their bosses to adopt it – I guess giving their team more power sounds scary to some managers..."

Simon Benson, Evolution Studios



Mode: "The immediate benefit was an upsurge in team buy-in, but we also felt that Scrum gave more meaningful control for publishers, less risk to deadlines and better fit of effort and outcome." And most importantly: "More fun games."

While our contacts were all keen to espouse the benefits of Scrum, none of them claimed it was an easy ride.

"The transition was and remains a difficult process, as the full benefits of Scrum will only flow if all stakeholders and team members are on board," warns Daly.

The other difficulty that can rise from attempting to adopt Scrum is resistance from those who don't understand, explains Evolution's Simon Benson. They adopted Scrum after traditional planning methods failed

them in the run towards E3 and used it to help turn *MotorStorm* around in under two years.

"In my opinion it seems that most resistance to Scrum adoption comes from risk-averse senior management," he explains.

"I have been on many courses about Scrum and Agile methods and I've met a lot of people who were really keen to use Scrum and believed in it, but were not able to convince their bosses to adopt it – I guess giving their team more power sounds scary to some managers."

"Agile has a lot of weaknesses when it comes to the long term perspective of production," adds Palm. "We've developed solutions in Hansoft for this without losing the benefits of the core principles of Agile."

Despite the transition difficulty, Daly would still definitely recommend studios at least take a look at Scrum.

"Though it by no means guarantees success, I'd recommend Scrum to other studios - the balance of discipline and rigour with flexibility is a great fit for game development."

UP CLOSE AND PERSONNEL

A third approach to managing projects is to take a more personal stance and ensure staff are properly coached and mentored – an approach that Evolution took with *MotorStorm* by bringing in people development expert David Veevers of Reach Business Mentoring.

"Mentoring provides specialist support through the use of techniques to help people to answer the questions that have never been

Independent thought

It's not just big teams that require management software, says Jacob Fike, developer of Overlord. A web-based project management solution picked up for sale by indie-supporter GarageGames, Overlord came about through working with independent developers and mod teams. During his time with these groups he became aware that management was a sticking point – and sometimes a project's downfall.

"The teams I was working with quickly fell apart because, with only a forum to communicate with, there didn't seem to be any progress," he explains. "I started thinking about how many mods and even games get started but never finished and realised that some of those might not have failed if they had better team management tools."

The problem for indies, Fike says, is that there isn't the resources, or indeed the desire, to dedicate a team member to making sure everything is going smoothly – and even if there was, the geographically diverse nature of many indie teams add a further roadblock.

"A large studio could also afford to have one or more people dedicated to coordinating their projects and keeping track of everything, while an indie team rarely has the manpower to spare for managerial duties. As such, tools that make assigning tasks, setting goals, and keeping in touch with everyone as easy as possible are very important."

Joe Maruschak, studio director at GarageGames, thinks indies face the same problems that larger teams do – just at a different scale: "At a high level, all projects face the problem of how to manage time. Time is the most valuable resource, and humans have a tendency to squander it."

"Project management is all about making sure that the important things are done in the right order and the correct amount of time is spent on each task – and indies face the same challenge. But indie developers often don't think about what they are doing, in what order, and how this affects when they will be done."

asked," explains Veevers. "Within your organisation you need to establish champions to provide ongoing support to people working at all levels. This is a great way to create awareness of potential obstacles and is a great platform to shape the organisation going forward."

Benson concludes with a grounding thought, one that's important to keep in mind while considering new approaches to management: regardless of how you go about it, the success of a game is still almost entirely dependent on the skill of the team members. "The industry and medium is still about talent regardless of development method. If you have a sub-standard team using Scrum, you'll get a game on target and to budget – but it'll still be shit."