

Enduring Play S1 E7: Engineering for Scalable, Sustainable Games with Caerie Houchins

Transcript



Enduring Play Computer ▶ 0:00

Initializing Enduring Play Podcast Season one Engine Decompressing Audio
Synchronizing Waveforms Articulating Splines Launching Podcast Lobby.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 0:20

Welcome back to Enduring Play, the podcast where we explore what it takes to create video games that don't just survive, but thrive. I'm your host Cheryl Platz, video game designer, director and author of the Game Development Strategy Guide from Rosenfeld Media. In this first season of the Enduring Play Podcast, we focus on going deep with some of the folks who were interviewed for my book and get the full story.



Enduring Play Computer ▶ 0:48

Initializing Episode Description



Cheryl Platz ▶ 0:51

In this episode, our guest Caerie Houchins will be walking us through a tale of two worlds. From supporting the incredible intensity of a global live service game launch as a member of the launch team for the tactical shooter game Valorant to her current role as Chief Technology Officer and co founder at indie gaming studio Wicked Fox Games. Wicked Fox successfully funded their first Kickstarter in April 2025 for Rise of Elements, an online multiplayer puzzle combat game. Carrie is an incredibly talented technical leader with whom my path first crossed when we were both working at Riot Games. It should be noted that neither of us speaks officially on behalf of our former employer, nor is this episode sponsored. This is just two folks discussing a variety of past career achievements as no

matter what your discipline, there's something here for everyone. We'll cover topics like localization, the art of scaling, global launches, game development, crunch, the use of artificial intelligence in video game development, techniques for cross disciplinary collaboration, and advice for early career developers. Loading.



Enduring Play Computer ▶ 1:53

Episode Preview Artificial Intelligence in Game Engineering.



Caerie Houchins ▶ 1:58

It's fascinating because it goes all the way from code to, you know, prototyping art at a minimum. I know there are some people that are using AI art for their actual production and obviously I'm not a fan of that. Same with music voiceover work. One of the things we can rapidly prototype now using, you know, stub audio, stub art, stub music that's going to be replaced later, but it allows us to rapidly prototype in ways that we couldn't before. And also when it comes down to the code level, you know, it's like okay, well I need this very quick subroutine written that I know everybody has written before. I can just say okay, generate this, let's drop it in and very quickly do that. I don't trust any of this process for a production level yet, but for like prototype level things, it definitely will speed things up.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 2:48

Let's get into the game.



Enduring Play Computer ▶ 2:53

Loading Initial Cutscene Valorant Backstory



Cheryl Platz ▶ 2:57

To get the most out of Caerie's story, you'll want to understand a bit more about one of the games we're discussing today. Valorant Valorant is a first person tactical shooter game developed and published by Riot Games. Originally launched on PC in 2020, Valorant now celebrating its five year anniversary as a successful live service game. Since its original release, Valorant has hit several other major milestones, including a successful launch in the highly regulated China market in 2023 and a highly anticipated console launch in 2024. Tactical shooters are a subgenre of shooter games that layer on extra elements like team based play, strategic goals, and richer weapon and environment designs that encourage thoughtful engagement during combat. Some of the earliest tactical

shooter games were Airborne Ranger for Microp in 1987 and Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six in 1998. Valorant was released originally in June 2020 for PC, which means that it was released into a world still largely shuttered due to a global pandemic. This also means that the last few months prior to release were during full lockdown for the people working on the game. Anna Donlon, now head of Valorant Studios at Riot Games, has been cited in multiple interviews discussing the balance of priorities between professional quality gameplay and accessibility to players new to the genre in a In this article reflecting on Valorant's impact during its first five years, Gamerant cites the early emphasis on esports just months after the title's launch as a big part of the game's impact. With a multi tier competitive system now allowing players from recreational and college leagues all the way to international level to compete reliably and regularly. In order to succeed as an esport, a video game must generally have a strong technical backbone, as when the stakes increase for gameplay, so too do the threats to gameplay integrity. That's where Cary's primary team came in during the launch of Valorant.



Enduring Play Computer ▶ 4:51

Player 1: Cheryl Platz. Player 2 Caerie Houchins. Podcast Level Start.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 4:59

Carrie, welcome to the game. I'm so glad to have you here. Would you like to introduce yourself to our audience?



Caerie Houchins ▶ 5:06

Sure. I'm Caerie Houchins. I have been in the gaming industry for about six years now, but I've been in the tech industry for about 25. I have gone up through Riot Games. I helped launch Valorant. I was one the engineering leaders on Valorant, which really was an amazing experience in and of itself. Just the scale and the scope of all of that. Previously I'd worked in industries such as healthcare and banking and just kind of the gambit of things. I got into massive parallel computing clusters and some really wild stuff in my Career.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 5:37

I know that journey from traditional business into video games will be very interesting to many listeners. Was it always your hope to get into games or was it a pleasant surprise?



Caerie Houchins ▶ 5:46

I really, really wanted to be in gaming. My entire life I've been writing and playing games. Probably second grade on the TI94A computer. But I grew up in a really poor area of the country in Appalachia where there really wasn't any opportunity to be in gaming. I mean, remote work wasn't even a thing in anybody's mind at that point. So I spent my life trying to get to Los Angeles so I could break into the gaming industry. And it was just a long, a long road for me to get there.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 6:15

Well, you executed that master plan perfectly because launching Valorant was a huge career accomplishment. What's one thing you wish you knew when you started out in the game industry, making that transition?



Caerie Houchins ▶ 6:26

Coming in from a pure tech point of view, I was very, very focused on the engineering itself and on the technology. And you know, I wasn't giving enough credit to what video game creation is, which is a creative process. And a creative process is messy. It's not okay. How do I take an engineering problem and break it into smaller pieces and then most efficient path from A to B execute on. This creative process involves many, many types of people, different types of personalities, a lot of coordination and working together. And I don't think I truly appreciated that fact going into the gaming industry from tech.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 7:08

That's so beautifully said and it's so true. I've definitely found it hard to explain to people who haven't been in the gaming mess just how collaborative it is. Is there something you would have done differently if you had the technology or knowledge you have now? Looking back at your career?



Caerie Houchins ▶ 7:24

I think it actually ties into that quite a bit. I would have leaned a lot more heavily into the people skills side of things coming out of my shell. Believe it or not, I was very, very shy and very awkward when I first got into gaming. I had been the behind the keyboards kind of engineer that didn't really want to see the public and just typing away and doing my thing. And I very quickly realized that it's the glue people and the people that you need to talk to to get things done, especially in a large AAA studio. That's just completely not something that's taught. It's something you have to learn in the industry.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 8:03

You mentioned the concept of glue people. How do you find your glue people?



Caerie Houchins ▶ 8:12

That's. That's hard to do. There's a lot of gut instinct involved. There's a lot of. Because there are people that think there are glue people that aren't. So yeah, you, you, you've got to really develop a sense for that. And you know, and especially in engineering, there is the vast amount of engineers just want to take a technical problem and solve the technical problem. That's why they're in engineering. And honestly, nobody goes into computer engineering because they're the best people people, they do it because they want to talk with a computer. So finding glue people is not about finding. It's not about finding the most extroverted person in the room. It's about finding somebody that's passionate, I think, and can share that passion and catch that passion on fire with everybody else around them.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 8:59

Do you ever find yourself becoming a glue person for other folks on the game?



Caerie Houchins ▶ 9:05

Absolutely. More than once. Especially on. On some R & D projects. I can't mention that the at Riot that were underserved and, and were being underrepresented. I really ironically found myself turning into a bit of a cheerleader on that, which was very bizarre for me.



Enduring Play Computer ▶ 9:24

Launching podcast level 2: Problem solving for accelerating launch.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 9:32

Can you share one example of problem solving in video game development that you're really proud of, to give people an example of what it's like in the trenches?



Caerie Houchins ▶ 9:41

When we were launching Valorant, I was in charge of the team that needed to get the DDoS mitigation and packet authentication done for Valorant. Because obviously as a hyper competitive, very twitchy, tactical first person shooter, making sure that cheating was kept at a minimum, that our servers were safe and protected, that, you know, that people weren't spoofing IDs. Those were held to the very highest level of concern by. By Riot. And the date for the launch of Valorant just kept creeping up. They were, instead of pushing it out like you see

in a lot of, a lot of things that happen, they were saying, "Okay, well we want to launch this sooner. We want to launch this two or three months earlier than we had planned earlier."



Cheryl Platz ▶ 10:27

That sounds intense. So much riding on your shoulders.



Caerie Houchins ▶ 10:31

I had a team, a very small team at the time, and we had to find a way to adjust scope accordingly to try to keep some kind of semblance of work life balance and get this out of the door. Because while the development team on Valorant was getting the game ready to launch, we're out here trying to say, okay, well we've got to be able to protect the servers on the back end when this launches. They couldn't launch without us. And, you know, so that means we were down to like four people at Riot. That could prevent the launch of Valorant at the time. So we were uh- we crunched. Unfortunately, we had to crunch for about two and a half months.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 11:12

That is a long time to be going above and beyond for a launch.



Caerie Houchins ▶ 11:15

But because the schedule had been moved up, it, you know, it was interesting. There's a lot of negotiations, a lot of talking to everybody, a lot of working with different producers and engineering staff all across the entire AAA studio. And, you know, at the end of the day, we made it happen and we were able to launch this thing, you know, in the middle of a pandemic. We're all working from home and we didn't think that. We didn't even know how to do that at the time. So you threw that in with everything else and it was, it was amazing.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 11:46

Wow, I love how you casually toss that in at the end. "Oh, by the way, we were also all working remotely for the first time." It's so easy to forget the unique environment into which Valorant was released. There was a lot to unpack in that really great example for folks listening who may not be familiar with the term. DDoS stands for distributed Denial of Service Attack, which is a form of network interference that very popular games often experience where a lot of folks. Well, you probably describe it better than I do.



Caerie Houchins

▶ 12:17

It's like a mass group hug that strangles the recipient. It really is. It's when a bunch of computers all over the world on the Internet are given the command to issue traffic to a single server, like a game server that's in a malicious way, so you're trying to overflow it with traffic so that it can't respond and deny the service of whatever it's trying to offer. So there have been a lot of bad actors throughout the gaming industry's history that have tried to bring down servers. I know Anthem went through this too on day one as well.



Enduring Play Computer

▶ 12:55

Podcast level paused. Begin host commentary.



Cheryl Platz

▶ 12:59

Let's talk a little bit about that kind of disruptive behavior. In Chapter nine of the Game Development Strategy Guide, From Emergence to Prosocial Gaming, we explore the challenges inherent to shipping games that are used by many players over time. And while emergent gameplay is most often seen on large scale games like massively multiplayer online games or competitive shooters like Valorant, emergent gameplay, gameplay and disruptive behavior can be seen anytime.



Cheryl Platz

▶ 13:24

Multiple players interact in the same gaming environment. So it's important for game developers to be intentional about the behaviors they want to support, encourage and prevent in the ways that Cary Described. In episode 4 of this podcast with David Ventura, we explored the definition of emergent gameplay. Gameplay that deviates from or exceeds the parameters originally planned, predicted or implemented for a game of any form inspired by biology. The term speaks to the bottoms up nature of player driven behaviors. And some emergent gameplay is good, like players coming up with ways to welcome new players or perhaps a community organized event. Unfortunately, not all emergent gameplay is good. The Thriving in Games group, a collective of industry, companies and professionals passionate about providing data backed resources for building more positive gaming experiences, has defined two key Digital thriving is the ideal outcome of well designed online games and spaces, and disruptive behaviors are actions from players that interfere with that digital thriving. In episode two of season one of this podcast with Carlos Figueiredo, co founder of the Thriving in Games group and director of Player trust and Safety for Minecraft,

we explored some of the ways intentional design can discourage, but likely never fully prevent the kinds of disruptions that led to the behaviors that Carrie's team had to prevent with costly complex game server engineering systems.



Enduring Play Computer ▶ 14:45

Loading Podcast Level three: Exploring the motivations of player emergence gameplay.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 14:52

So that seems like something a lot of people might overlook if they're new to the games industry. That presence of the sort of antagonistic energy against a game that everybody else is enjoying. Was that something that was surprising to you, kind of getting into the industry, or did you sort of see that one coming?



Caerie Houchins ▶ 15:08

I would say that game developers are passionate and among themselves and that inspires passion in the fans and a passionate fan base can do some very interesting things to try to express that, that, that passion that they've got.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 15:24

That's a very good analogy because in a way they're creating a new set of challenges for themselves. So some people see it as a different form of gameplay. It's like a weird compliment they're giving your game, but as you say, it crushes the recipient of the hug.



Caerie Houchins ▶ 15:38

Yeah, and I mean, and some, you know, some fans almost see it as a game against the developers or against the studio. They're trying to break the game and prove that they can break the game. And that's their metagame for all of this. And it's not, you know, I can appreciate the technical challenge behind doing that, but it's also not very constructive for us trying to help the millions of players that want to play our game.



Enduring Play Computer ▶ 16:06

Loading Podcast level four: Defining and avoiding video game crunch.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 16:14

You also mentioned the concept of crunch; overwork, which is something that's not necessarily unique to video games. But comes up a lot in a video game

development construct. And how do you define crunch?



Caerie Houchins ▶ 16:29

<laughter> You know, I don't normally define crunch as like working a little bit over most. At least in engineering, we're mostly salaried employees. So we are hired to get a job done. Whether that means working a huge amount of hours or a little bit of amount of hours, we have to get that job done. Generally for me, if we're going more than 10 hours, like 50 hours plus weeks for a long period of time, especially if you're not taking weekend breaks. So to launch Valorant, my team was doing 60 to 70 hour weeks for two and a half months, seven days a week. It was brutal. People would go sleep for six hours, wake back up immediately, be back at the keyboard. We'd all jump into a video meeting room and try to knock this out. It was brutal. Is not something I recommend. And it's one of. It's a very preventable thing. You know, they like to say crunch is caused by lack of planning and I completely agree.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 17:27

I agree with you. One of the reasons I pursued lead roles in production when I was starting out as an assistant producer was because I wanted to prove that you could make games without crunch. And in episode three of the Seasons podcast with Amy Kalson, we were talking about our shared experience living through the EA Spouse era at Electronic Arts when that whole post dropped on livejournal about the overwork of the Lord of the Rings team. And then they turned out they were also referencing the working conditions on our team. And I wonder what your perspective is on this, because one thing I observed was we were just not as good at game development while crunching. You know, we were working 80 hour weeks and none of us were really nailing it. Did you observe that when you were going through the crunch periods that it kind of became counterproductive after a while?



Caerie Houchins ▶ 18:15

It definitely can. The burnout is real and there really was no way around it for us at that particular situation. There is definitely a loss of efficiency for the creative process because I honestly think that that's something that is overlooked in gaming in that even if you are a computer engineer or developer working on pure code for a technical reason, that is a creative process. And there's a saying that says that creative people thrive in a group but create in isolation. And it's true for any kind of creative process. And I think for engineers, you need to be

able to have your group setting and then go off, get into the flow state and create your, you know, your creation. Like, do Your craft in a crunch situation, there's very little time for that isolation period of getting into a flow state and really doing your best work work. So it can be very counterproductive at the same time.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 19:14

That's such a good point. And I think it's sometimes hard for people outside the engineering discipline to understand why the flow state is so important, at least for me, with much less coding experience. But some, I could certainly lose my place, forget how I was naming variables, forget to comment things or just leave something I had done halfway because it's just these huge piles of text in the end, right? Is that part of it? Or is there more to how the engineering discipline sort of leans into that focus state?



Caerie Houchins ▶ 19:45

It's kind of like when people say they do their best thinking in the shower or something like that, where you're isolated and you're purely focused on one thought process. I know for myself, like I can be if I'm deep into a coding project, I'll forget to eat, I'll forget to sleep, Like I'm just locked in, hyper focused on it, just coding. And you're kind of lost in that world. And every little interruption. I believe statistics actually say every interruption costs about half an hour of engineering development time. So if you get an instant message, you've just cost that engineer half an hour because they have to get back into their flow state.



Enduring Play Computer ▶ 20:24

Conversation level paused. Begin Host commentary



Cheryl Platz ▶ 20:28

As I asked for Caerie's advice, as an experienced engineering leader on techniques for ensuring teams have space for that critical concept of flow, I wanted to draw attention to this point in the conversation. Because while Caerie talks about engineers, I can speak from experience that her advice applies for all disciplines. The ability to estimate one's own work is just as critical to the success of design and art teams as it is the engineering teams that Caerie is describing.



Enduring Play Computer ▶ 20:58

Loading Tutorial level Best practices for Planning for all disciplines, Task estimation and scope.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 21:09

So speaking of that accepted loss of productivity as a leader because you were leading teams of engineers, what are some of the steps you try to take to prevent ending up in that crunch state? Obviously, you didn't have any control over that marketing date situation. When it is in your control, do you have any sort of advice for people who are leading teams?



Caerie Houchins ▶ 21:30

I can speak from an engineering point of view. It's vital that engineers learn how to properly estimate their tasks and break down their tasks into subtasks. And trust me, no one likes using something like JIRA to track their issues. But it's in everybody's best interest if we all learn how to properly break things down, estimate them and track them. Because if you can't tell me how long it's going to take, even a ballpark, within, you know, three days or something like that, I can't properly plan and I can't properly road map. And if you were a team in isolation, that might not be so bad. But especially in the AAA gaming space, everybody has their own part to play and their own piece of the puzzle. And your delay or inability to plan can cause another team to get behind and it just, it just cascades from there and, and then that, that, that urgency and that delay starts building and building and building and it snowballs. And at the end of the day, more than likely a team is going to have to crunch because another team couldn't plan properly.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 22:35

Speaking of impact and estimations, let's talk about scope for a second. Because one thing that has become a constant observation as a leader of video game development teams is that the passion that video game developers bring has this double edged nature to it. Because this passion leads to this thing we call scope creep, where folks just want to add this extra thing to make the game better, but often it unintentionally leads to crunch later. Have you ever experienced anything like that?



Caerie Houchins ▶ 23:09

Absolutely. Like I said, game creation is a creative process. So whether you're creating a game or you're sculpting a statue or you're painting a picture, at some

point you have to limit yourself and say, this is enough. This is what I need to get this out. What's the old saying? It's a bad saying. There's something about at some point you have to tie up the engineers and publish the product because people will continue to say, okay, well I found this bug, or I found this bug and this is, it's a never ending process. You'll never reach perfection. And so you have to scope accordingly to that.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 23:46

Yeah, it's so true about the perfection. I won't name exactly which team I was on, but early in my career I remember my eyes being opened because I thought alpha and beta were very defined development terms. Alpha being feature complete and beta being zero bugs. And then I watched a manager going through the bug database writing down bug numbers on paper. I'm like, what are you doing? She's like, well, I'm going to close all these bugs and then we're going to go beta and then I'll reopen them so we can fix them. That, you know, there's this little bit of theater sometimes, but there's no Perfection. Like, I think there's sometimes this perception with gamers that there's some perfect state of a game, but these huge, complex software projects, no software is without bugs. It's just how can we get it to the point where it's acceptable?



Enduring Play Computer ▶ 24:36

Bonus skill tree unlocked quality assurance.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 24:40

And that's why risk mitigation is such a function. Fun thing like figuring out which things you want to prevent and which things you want to spend time on. Like you were talking about the denial of service attacks. Those are a very disruptive thing to go wrong, which is why you spent so much time on them. Whereas there might have been other smaller bugs that didn't get as much investment during that last period.



Caerie Houchins ▶ 25:00

Yeah. And there's no way to properly predict what millions of people will randomly do in your game. You know, we're trying to get our game out right now, at least our live demo for Wicked Fox Games. And I have a friend who has a knack of breaking any game that we give him. And he'll do crazy things like I'm going to double click outside of the border and drag my mouse a certain way. I

don't know why he did it, but it crashed the game. And I'm like, "What? Okay, so we have to address that." It's nearly impossible to predict all of that.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 25:32

It's also a great example of how QA or quality assurance really is a discipline that requires a specific set of skills.



Caerie Houchins ▶ 25:40

Yeah. I will say I think QA is undervalued in the industry. Well, I know QA is undervalued in the industry. And one of the things that I really wanted to do when I started my own studio was respect the discipline of QA and the fact that it is a craft in and of itself. As an engineering leader, I always ask, okay, well, you need to hire on some QA people. And I said, look, I don't have the expertise to hire QA people. I needed to find a QA manager that knew and had been in the game for a long time and to interview QA people. Because honestly, especially in AAA when you're moving fast, you know, Valorant published every two weeks. We had to get a new release out every two weeks. So QA and a lot of times was treated as a commodity. It's like, "Okay, we've got this code. Please check it, tell us what you think. Okay." And I didn't have time to look at how they did automated testing or any of that.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 26:37

I'm so glad you're emphasizing the importance of qa. Totally agree.



Enduring Play Computer ▶ 26:45

Loading tutorial level: Motivators of Play and the state of the industry



Cheryl Platz ▶ 26:52

The discussion of how to value specific disciplines at a studio was a perfect opportunity for us to discuss Caerie's latest role as co founder of indie gaming studio Wicked Fox Games, and to explore how that work contrasted with her prior experience of leading engineering teams working on so called AAA or large budget games. But before we shift gears to talk about Caerie's latest career chapter, let's talk about how we got here. Caerie and I were both laid off in 2024, so let's talk about the instability of the video game industry during the post Pandemic recovery. At the peak of the pandemic in 2020, video gaming was the darling of the entertainment sector. In Chapter six of the Game Development Strategy Guide the why of Multiplayer, we briefly touch on a case study of Animal New Horizons, which released about a week into the global lockdowns on March

20, 2020 and went on to become the 14th best selling video game of all time. Full disclosure, I am currently employed by the Pokemon Company International, which is partially owned by Nintendo, but they do not sponsor this podcast and all opinions are my own. In my opinion, the success of Animal New Horizons speaks deeply to the growing drive for companionship, the modern motivator of play identified in Chapter one. But it also spoke to the times with an entire planet of people trapped with nothing to do. The reality is that few modern games offer a sense of virtual or actual companionship the way that Animal Crossing does, Pandemic or no, here's what I think happened. I think the venture capital market misinterpreted that huge signal, those players chasing their desire for the modern motivator of companionship in a market unprepared to support that unprecedented demand for it. And the interpretation of that as universal growth in the game sector and the flood of money into all games and all sectors caused an imbalance. Fast forward to today and the gaming industry finds itself in shambles. An article in Game Developer this summer, after my book had gone to print, cites a crowdsourced tracker from Farhan Noor and tallies sobering numbers. 8,500 layoffs in 2022, 10,500 in 2023, 14,600 in 2024, including both myself and this week's guest Caerie. This summer's tally was then at 4,000 in July, not including recent announcements from major studios like Crystal Dynamics, Dreamhaven and 2K Games. That's at least 37,600 layoffs, not including those too small to be reported as layoffs, performance terminations that don't hit the wires and games that just don't get funded because of conditions. But I'm going to go out on a limb here. Let's look at the pile of games that have struggled and what motivators of play they serve: Suicide Squad, Conquered and Multiversus were high profile live-service game failures that tried to enter an already crowded competitive game genre.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 29:43

As we can learn from Fandom's Inside Gaming 2024 study of 5000 gamers, competition is actually one of the least compelling self reported motivators of play. Fandom reported only 18% of gamers are seeking competitive gaming experiences right now. Games with huge followings like Star Wars Outlaws and Civilization 7 struggled with technical performance complaints. And if players are coming to you for the motivators of immersion, comfort and meditation, as that study reported, the frustration of a poor user experience is going to be enough to drive them away. I know I had that experience with the Save experience in the new Civilization series, one of my favorite games. Video games aren't dying. The industry is vulnerable, but players are still out there and they're asking us to meet

them where they are instead of shipping the same old games we've been shipping for decades. The experiences like Stardew Valley, Unpacking, Balatro and Sky: Children of the Light that do so in innovative ways are thriving well beyond people's expectations. And there's plenty of room. And yes, you can provide companionship through competition, so don't lose heart. Remember our conversation with Celia Houghton, former UX Director of Fortnite, about the cognitive psychology behind Squads in Episode one? But the problem with requiring either competition or companionship is it requires critical mass of players. And games like Concord were walking in the footsteps of games like Overwatch, which had established player bases who were already going to somewhere else. So they needed to satisfy some other motivator of play to pull players out of that environment or do something better. They didn't quite hit that mark. What's interesting about Rise of Elements, the first game from Caerie's indie Wicked Fox Games, is that it hits many motivators of play. Competition is optional because there's a single player mode that allows fun and mastery without worrying about others. Match 3 game mechanics are a common source of meditation and comfort for many, but there's also an element of narrative added in an attempt to immerse players along the way. It's not that every game needs to hit every motivator, but hitting more than one broadens your audience and differentiates your game from others in your category. Let's hear more from Carrie about her indie development journey.



Enduring Play Computer ▶ 31:52

Launching new podcast mode: Indie game studio entrepreneurship.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 31:59

You mentioned that you co founded your own indie game studio. So let's switch gears. How would you describe your role at Wicked Fox Games?



Caerie Houchins ▶ 32:08

I'm CTO and co founder of Wicked Fox Games. As a very small startup, I'm actually in charge of marketing, socials, communications and all of engineering. So it's, it's a, it's an interesting place to be. But we found out that, well really generally in any startup you just find a gap. You fill the gap. You, you have to throw your head into the ring, into the ring with any talents you can bring to the table. I just happen to be better at social media and speaking to people.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 32:36

And how does that compare to your day to day when you're working on a very large game like Valorant?



Caerie Houchins ▶ 32:44

<laughter> Whether it's in tech or whether it's in gaming, large companies don't really know what to do with a multi talented individual. They generally try to put you into a box and they very heavily discourage you getting outside of that box. I know my time at Riot there was some forward momentum and getting me in front of a camera and talking to people and being more of a face to some of the games there. But it just never came to fruition because they really only valued my engineering ability and my leadership ability and none of the rest of my creative revenue that I could bring to the table.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 33:19

Thank you for your candor about that struggle because I've definitely felt it too where I have this other skill or I'm flexible. But at big companies, that's one of the big drawbacks. Everybody's got their place and you're evaluated on getting that one role in that one part of the machine done. And that's what draws a lot of people to indie game development eventually is being able to work on those multiple skills. And another thing I've really struggled with as my career has grown is, you know, when I'm trying to interview for new roles, is trying to fit myself into those boxes when I have such broad experience. So thank you for sharing that. It definitely resonates if you could give some advice to someone who's headed into video game entrepreneurship for the first time, is there anything you would want to warn people about or just things you wish you had known going into it?



Caerie Houchins ▶ 34:09

Oh, I will say trying to found a game studio has been the hardest thing I've ever done in my life. Probably up until this point professionally I think the hardest thing I had done was to help launch Valorant China. That was a massive, massive project that we had to really, really work across multiple, you know, multiple countries and time zones and languages. It was massive. Founding a studio is even harder. You're trying to create something from nothing and I don't know that there is a good roadmap on like the right way or the wrong way to do that, especially if you're coming into it and you're not particularly wealthy yourself. And you actually have to find funding for your studio. If you're a co founder, whether you're in engineering like me or anything else, you really need to learn

the business side of things. You need to learn venture capital system, how that works. Really, really make sure you're not ignoring that and dive into it. Because it's complex and not every player out there is. Most of them are not looking out for your best interest. They're looking to get a thousand fold return on profit or return on investment.



Enduring Play Computer ▶ 35:28

Loading Podcast Level 5: Localization and Globalization for game development at scale.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 35:37

Thank you for that transparency. You know, you mentioned another point I'd like to double click on is you mentioned Valorant China and I think that's one thing folks don't necessarily give enough time or space to is how international the games market is and how complex the international portion is. Was there anything you took away from working on big international titles like that that will help you work on your next big project?



Caerie Houchins ▶ 36:00

I was incredibly impressed with the studios and engineers that we worked with in China. They were really, really sharp as attack and really driven and really focused. Loved that there are cultural differences that are things that I just had to learn as, you know, as a leader in that space. And some of that can be, can be really interesting to try to navigate. I don't want to get into specifics here, but it was, I guess, learn the cultures, learn the idiosyncrasies, learn the gotchas. There are certain cultures where like disagreeing with your leader in a meeting room is, is not something they will do. But if you can get somebody later on, one on one, they'll give you their real opinion and that's incredibly valuable. You don't want to develop anything in an echo chamber. Yeah, just learn that culture. Learn how to fit in and complement each other rather than clash.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 36:56

Some really great advice. Listeners might want to take a look at Erin Meyer's book the Culture Map, which is a helpful framework that explores different cultures and how they show up and how their values differ. I've encountered it in some corporate training before and I liked it. So that can be something useful if somebody's going into a new environment, needing to work across cultures. And then there's also just the humility.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 37:18

You talked about different cultures with those different perspectives. A game that works in one culture may need to be shifted in some way to work in another culture. I know in the Sims we made adjustments to the way characters showed up, or even just the confirm and reject buttons in some cases. Because different symbols meant different things in different cultures or different aesthetics were preferred.



Caerie Houchins ▶ 37:39

Yeah, absolutely. Symbols have different meanings. Even things as innocuous as, you know, showing a country on a world map in a first person shooter is not something we thought about when we put it into something like Valorant. But in some areas of the world, especially if you took a political map and put it in there, there are disputed areas in the world that people get very, very upset about if you've put a map that they don't agree with in there. So you really just have to really think about this stuff. Especially anything that's going to be released internationally is going to take a lot of research by a lot of people.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 38:16

That map example is such an evocative, important example. Especially there's so many games where the global nature of it is so core to it that if you aren't really seeing that stuff up front about like, okay, well, we're just going to use a global map. We're just going to show all these countries. That's going to be really hard to walk back later if you need to change the way you present that when you do your next global release. Yeah, fantastic point. And the stakes on getting that kind of thing wrong can often mean the difference between being allowed to release in a country or not.



Enduring Play Computer ▶ 38:46

Loading Podcast Level 6: Artificial Intelligence for video game development.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 38:56

What's changed most significantly in your video game development work since you started?



Caerie Houchins ▶ 39:02

Well, I mean, I don't think we can leave this conversation without talking about the impact of AI and what it's had on the industry. It's fascinating because it goes

all the way from code to prototyping art at a minimum. I know there are some people that are using AI art for their actual production, and obviously I am not a fan of that. Same with music voiceover work. One of the things we can rapidly prototype now using stub audio, stub art, stub music that's going to be replaced later, but it allows us to rapidly prototype in ways that we couldn't before. And also when it comes down to the Code level. It's like, okay, well, I need this very quick subroutine written that I know everybody has written before. I can just say, okay, generate this, let's drop it in, and very quickly do that. I don't trust any of this process for a production level yet, but for prototype level things, it definitely will speed things up.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 40:04

Thank you for sharing your perspective on that. And for listeners who may be earlier in their career, when we say production level, we mean content that's intended for the commercial market versus prototype, which is something that's really intended for internal use only. There's some different modes of development. There's generally sort of an R & D research and development phase where you're going through a lot of new ideas very quickly. Those are never intended to see players. Those ideas rarely hit scale. Those are the prototypes we're talking about. And then there's the production process where we've identified a game that we want to make and we're going to make that game. And anything we make during that period, we generally intend for players to see. And so if I'm interpreting what you're saying correctly, you're way more comfortable with the use of the AI during that throwaway research and development process.



Caerie Houchins ▶ 40:54

Yeah, and honestly, we have artists working with the studio, so the artists are generally the ones making these AI images using their own prompts, comps. We asked them to make something, but we're like, it doesn't really matter, we're going to throw this away. So we're not taking the jobs away from anybody here. And that's super important to me. I really don't want a lot of these new techniques to have a negative impact on the creatives that actually are the geniuses behind these games in the gaming industry. And it may hurt us in the long run that I'm taking a moral stance on this, but I think it's the right thing to do.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 41:30

I love that you have such a strong perspective on it. And I mean, who knows how it's going to go, but certainly there's a lot of fans who care about the people who make the video games and feel the same way. And so when you talk about artists using those AI tools, it's essentially not taking their art job away. But you're saying that it reduces the amount of time they spend on throwaway work. Is that what ends up happening?



Caerie Houchins ▶ 41:55

Yeah. And I don't see a lot of difference between, like, even at Riot, we would have what we would call stub voices for voiceover work on R and D. So before you paid the big money for the voice actors to come in, you'd have just developers, game devs, and they're doing their best to make the voices. We still do that. Like at Wicked Fox, we have some of our voices are in our games. But it's also just as fast for us to just use a generated voice and say, okay, well this is. We needed a robot to speak in this. And it's. We could either use one of our voices and put effects over it, or we could just generate it and throw it in. None of this is supposed to be seen or heard by anybody other than a handful of people.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 42:34

Yeah, that makes sense. I know I did stub voices when I was working back at Amaze Entertainment for the Shrek game. I was Princess Fiona. But then you literally couldn't use the throwaway stuff because I wasn't union. Hey, it's even better to just use AI to generate some quick temp tracks that are clearly placeholder instead of wasting a human's time who could go be doing game development. So you can definitely see there are potential places where it makes sense. But I agree with you, there's absolutely. We need to make sure we're making as much space as possible for the actual creation, the humans behind it and that spark.



Caerie Houchins ▶ 43:09

And I think the studios have overreacted to this kind of disruptor in the industry right now. And that's part of the reason we're seeing so many layoffs. But it's something I believe they're going to regret later. You can't create something as complex as a game and something that has a voice or is speaking to a certain need or passion without having passionate individuals involved. I just don't think it's going to happen now.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 43:39

As a co founder, one of the other things that not everybody deals with is the intellectual property ramifications of artificial intelligence or AI. Is that something that y' all have had to wrestle with or think about about.



Caerie Houchins ▶ 43:53

Not yet, but it's. And like I said, I really just don't think that. Well, I've put my foot down. It's like we're not going to have any AI generated content in any game that's going to be released to a market or to the public for revenue generation. And that's generally something where you get more into the property rights when you're trying to market or earn money off of something.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 44:13

Something that keeps me up at Night is the current position on work with AI art and it being virtually uncopyrightable. One thing I've observed is it's awfully tough when you're, say, generating AI images as placeholders, but sometimes you can't tell the difference between real images and AI images. Is that stuff creeping into your game without you knowing?



Caerie Houchins ▶ 44:34

I sure hope not. That's spooky.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 44:37

It's spooky. I mean, sure, sometimes you can tell there's six fingers on a human hand and sometimes it's just mountains. Are they AI mountains? And I mean, look, the tools seem cool, but I've always been one for risk mitigation because I spent time in production. And how do you keep that stuff from slipping through?



Caerie Houchins ▶ 44:56

Can't even imagine if, if an unscrupulous actor, like designed a main character in a video game using an AI tool that could not be copyrighted. You know, it's like, that would be crazy.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 45:10

It would be crazy. And anything that's possible eventually probably happens. So we're probably just a matter of time until somebody goes through it. We would just rather not go through it ourselves. But that's something to keep in mind for listeners, is that the implications of copyright law really do play into how and when you choose to deploy AI and whatever you do, keep track of those assets.



Caerie Houchins



45:34

Very good people you can trust and that you can, you can believe in because it could, it could. Wow, that literally could poison the water for the entire, the entire project if you did that wrong. It's just like I'm a huge fan of open source software, I'm a big backer of Linux and Debian, all of that really. But you have to be very, very careful on the engineering side. If you're putting in code that can't be copyrighted because then you end up having to release chunks of your game code to the public to meet licensing agreements. So there is somewhat of a precedent on the engineering side of things, of that, but probably not quite to that scale. As you said, it's much, much harder to determine if something has been generated like an image or a voice or music, than doing straight code searches.



Enduring Play Computer



46:29

Bonus level unlocked: extracurricular activities.



Cheryl Platz



46:35

We're getting towards the end of our time. I know you have some very unique extracurriculars. I'd love to hear your perspective on your unique set of extracurriculars and how they complement your work in the video game industry. Do you want to share a little bit more?



Caerie Houchins



46:51

I am a professional magician. I perform at the Magic Castle in Hollywood, California and other places here in Southern California. I love the idea of combining video game creation and the magic performance aspect of my life. When I was Growing up, there was a company called Origin Software and Origin Software made these amazing RPG kind of open world things that were just blowing my mind as a kid. But on the box it said "Origin Software: We create worlds" underneath it. And that was their slogan. And I think that my entire life that has driven me in everything I do. I want to create worlds. I want to create a new reality and bring other people inside of it and open their minds to new things, new ideas, new ways of doing things. And whether it's a video game where we're literally creating a new virtual reality for people to step into and experience that story, or it's a performance on stage where I'm performing something with magic and I'm inviting people into my world, into my character and then changing their reality through different illusions or effects. It kind of all crafts back into the same thing for me and all goes back to me as a child looking

at the slick black back of these boxes where it just said we create worlds. And I was completely inspired by that.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 48:18

Your passion is so evident and gosh, what an awesome, clear sort of origin story with Origin Software. I love it so, so much and I hope our listeners will get a chance to see you perform your magic just as much as they get to play your games.



Enduring Play Computer ▶ 48:43

Loading. Final boss challenge: Video game engines and career advice for all disciplines. Engineering career advice.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 48:57

For our final question, building on your origin story, what recommendations for skills or technology that would you make to people who are starting their own video game origin story, who are early career or looking to switch from another industry? How would you recommend they start their journeys? Understanding that in current conditions it's probably going to be a pretty steep climb.



Caerie Houchins ▶ 49:27

That is a really large question. I would say if you're going to be going for an online game, make sure you understand cloud concepts, whether it be Microsoft, Google or Amazon. The basic concepts are the same. If you don't understand that, you're not going to understand things like auto scaling and managed fleets and things that we all do in modern gaming right now to make sure that we can meet demand. Especially on day one. I would say learn about data, how to read and ingest data. I think that's an underused skill. We may get trapped into the "hey, I've got problem A and I need to solve problem A." But a lot of people don't take the time to step back and say "why are we solving problem A? And is problem A worth solving?" And it's only- data driven decisions can help with that. I would say take a look around the industry, see what other people are doing. Try not to reinvent the wheel. Try to stay as much on, off the shelf tools as you can. The more you reinvent the wheel, the harder it is for somebody to come on board your team and become productive. The more you modify a game engine or anything like that, the harder it is to upgrade, the harder it is to stay current. And players are going to expect you to stay current. Especially today, things like Unreal Engine, between Unreal Engine 4 and Unreal Engine 5, there's a huge,

huge technical leap and players are, they're aware, they're hyper aware of the capabilities and they're going to come back to you and say, hey, why does your game look old? What's going on? So there is a danger in hyper customizing and going off on these bespoke solutions. So I'd say stay away from that.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 51:14

I'm so glad you brought up the point that the value is not always in inventing new things, especially new game engines. The value can be in creating the new world. As you mentioned, I've just seen working in Unity the last few years hit mobile games where they're having to hand roll custom Dynamic island tech that Unity's already released fixes for because those games were still running on custom engines years prior. And it's so frustrating as a game developer, knowing you, you're solving problems that have already been solved and if they had stayed with sort of the mainstream, they would have gotten so much for free. So much, so much more bang for the buck. It sometimes feels like a good idea, but it almost never is. Customizing engines, what a great point.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 51:58

Is there anything else I should have asked or any last words of advice or tidbits you'd like to share? As we wrap up today,



Caerie Houchins ▶ 52:05

I just want to say a word to our women identifying developers that are coming into this. Like I, it's, it's not easy. It is not easy. This is still, even in 2024, this, this is still a very much a boys club. But we need you. Like we need you so badly. I, I would spend entire weekends of my own time at Riot messaging, just cold messaging women engineers on LinkedIn saying, hey, I'd really, really love to bring you into the gaming industry. And it's not an easy path, but it's a rewarding path and it's something that we need you. We need you to come in and help change the world. And it might be scary, but there are those of us in the industry, like Cheryl and like myself, that are there to help you and reach out a helping hand to help lift you up. So please, please don't be scared to come and join us in the industry.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 52:58

Thank you Caerie for lifting other women up and and doing that work. And for those who are sitting on the sidelines thinking about coming in, yeah, it's not always easy and we have seen a lot of things before. But that means that there

are a lot of us here who can help talk you through the weird stuff and just honor your feelings and look for other people to help you through those difficult moments. It can be so rewarding if you find the right support systems. It's a tough journey, but there is still progress. And Caerie, I'm so glad that you were here with me today to share your perspective and experience because it's so important and I feel so lucky to have gotten to know you through our trials and tribulations. We both worked at Riot during the same era and we both left Riot during the same era and we are off on our next adventures. But I can't wait to see what is next from you. From your magic from Wicked Fox Games.



Enduring Play Computer ▶ 53:59

Loading Final Podcast level: Links and Follow.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 54:03

Up Is there anything else you want to share with people about how they can find you, how they can follow you on social media, anything like that?



Caerie Houchins ▶ 54:11

Yeah, I'm active on on Blue Sky, I'm active on X. I'm active on LinkedIn. You can find me there. You can find Wicked Fox Games there. There. We're posting constantly. If you want to see, you know, how a studio goes from nothing to something, I would, I would highly encourage you to come come follow us. Reach out. I I generally am checking my messages so I may not respond that same day, but I will definitely try to respond to you. If you have any specific questions.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 54:39

You can always find the show notes@ enduringplay.com and as, as always, some pro networking tips for people who are taking up my wonderful interviewees. Make sure you provide context when reaching out. Make sure you mention that you heard this podcast and appreciated it. Make sure you mention something you liked about what Caerie said that makes those connections stronger. Caerie, this has been a delightful conversation for me and I am just so grateful for your continued allyship and friendship and all of your work.



Caerie Houchins ▶ 55:13

Thank you so much Cheryl. It's been a pleasure being here and it's always lovely spending time with you.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 55:19

If you enjoyed Caerie's perspective here in the podcast, make sure you also check out how her work is featured in the Game Development Strategy Guide, my new book from Rosenfeld Media which is intended for game developers of all experience levels, giving you a holistic look at modern video game development, helping you understand how to create video games that don't just survive, but thrive. The Game Development strategy guide Crafting Modern Video Games that Thrive available worldwide from your favorite online bookseller or from my publisher, RosenfeldMedia.com



Cheryl Platz ▶ 55:52

Enduring play listeners can get 15% off at Rosenfeld Media.com through November 30th using the code EnduringPlayS1. Join me next time for another conversation with one of the experts featured in my book as we explore what it takes to create video games that don't just survive, but thrive.



Enduring Play Computer ▶ 56:14

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