Self Inflicted Wounds:

When We are Our Own Worst Enemy

{ How we make it harder than it has to be, even though we should know better.

- Common management and organizational failures that leaders talk themselves into accepting, which often end up negatively impacting your success

- "…mistakes that have been made so often, by so many people, that the consequences of making these mistakes should be predictable and the mistakes themselves should be avoidable."

Define 'Self Inflicted Wound'

- Most common self inflicted wounds

- For each, why we let them happen…

- …what to do should you be in the middle of it

- About the Business

- About the Team

- About the Game

Most Common Self Inflicted Wounds

- No clear customer
  - Building a game for 'everyone' means you have no idea who its for
  - 'art' can be for its own sake, but commercial products need to have customers

About the Business

- Too much or too little planning
  - Expecting very detailed documents and formal sign-offs to reduce the amount of unplanned change can stifle forward progress
  - Staying busy is not the same as being productive
  - Rushing into action without a clear plan is never good

About the Business

- Poor communication channels
  - How does one group know what the other groups do?
  - Separation of responsibility can go too far
  - Like building a neighborhood then wondering how to retrofit plumbing between the buildings

About the Team

- No clear lines of responsibility/no one in charge
  - Who can make what decision about what areas?
  - Everyone in the team should have the same answer
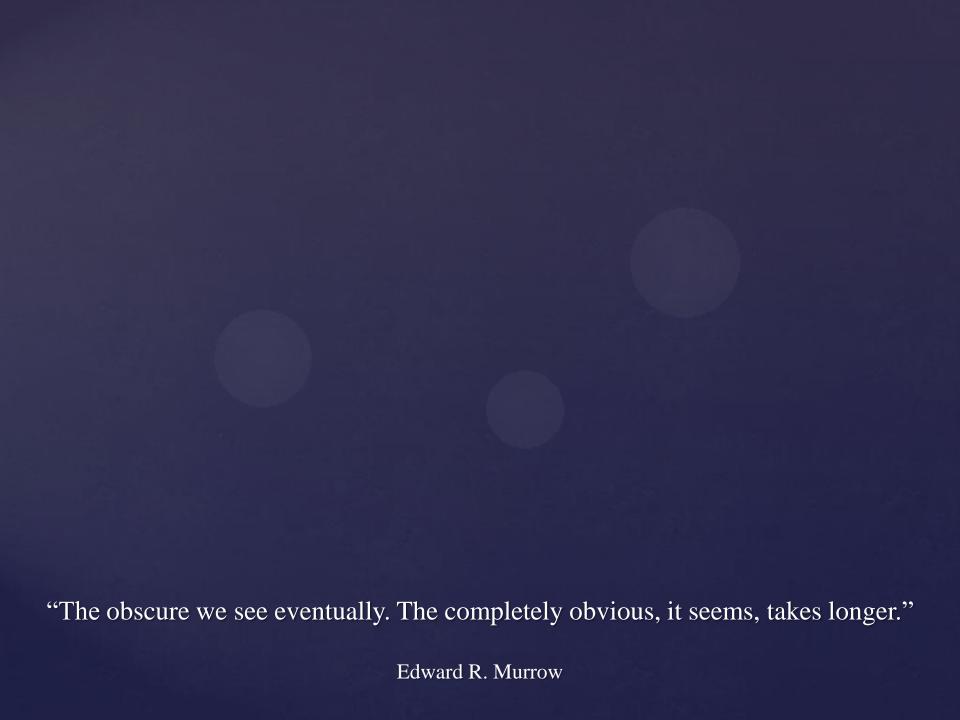 - Too many fiefdoms inevitably lead to the larger team not working towards the same thing

About the Team

- Punishing bad news
  - Communication is hard enough, but when bad news is punished it results in less communication overall

About the Team

- Hostages
  - Letting anyone, even star talent, hold the team or business hostage may work in the short run, but will bite you in the long run

About the Team

- No clear vision
  - Can everyone involved articulate the same vision?
  - No single vision likely means you are not ready to start yet because the team doesn't know what they are building

About the Game

- Fun will come later/the spark of fun is enough
  - Build fun in early and improve it, don't hope it happens when everything comes together near the end
  - Take the spark of fun and grow it intentionally

About the Game

- Customers don't get it
  - If the customers don't get it its because you didn't help them get it, or what they didn't get is not worth getting
  - Customer feedback is discarded too easily

About the Game

"The obscure we see eventually. The completely obvious, it seems, takes longer."

Edward R. Murrow

How do we talk ourselves into being okay about any of these?

{ It happens all the time.

- No clear customer
  - "blue ocean strategy"
  - "something new, so it could appeal to everyone"
- Too much or too little planning
  - "detailed docs with official signoff will make us successful"
  - "start now or we miss our date"
  - "start now because we have a team ready to go" (whether the project is ready or not)

About the Business

- Poor communication channels
  - "let the team figure it out"
  - "the producers will handle that"
- No clear lines of responsibility/no one in charge
  - "we are all in charge, it's a team effort"
  - "let's not upset any of the senior team"
  - "we are all smart people"
- Punishing bad news
  - "don't reward bad performance, make it clear when something is unacceptable"
- Hostages
  - "they are the only expert we have, we are in trouble if they walk"
  - "can be brilliant, even if no one likes working with them"

About the Team

- No clear vision
    - "we are trying something new that's hard to pin down"
    - "it's too big a project to have a single vision"
    - "we will find it along the way"
    - "we have a vision, we just can't put it into words"
- Fun will come later/the spark of fun is enough
    - "it's a complex game that only works when all the pieces are in place"
    - "the not great parts are tolerable because the good parts are so good"
- Customers don't get it
    - "we are trying something new so customers don't understand it"
    - "customers understood when game X did it, so they will understand us"
    - "that's already been fixed"
    - "that's going to change anyway"

About the Game

So What Do I Do About It?

{ Some successful strategies.

- No clear customer
  - Work bottom up to decide
- Too much or too little planning
  - To start planning is to start
  - Involve all disciplines in planning, bottom up
  - Don't confuse 'sign-off' with 'buy-in'

About the Business

- No clear lines of responsibility/no one in charge
  - Nominate from below and get group buy in
  - Take the high road; be ready to bend the knee or leave
  - Introduce RACI*
- Punishing bad news
  - Reward communication around you, whether good news or not
  - Have the courage to bring truth to power or accept complicity for failure
- Hostages
  - Peer pressure to enforce acceptable social behavior
  - Be ready to leave

About the Team

* See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Responsibility_assignment_matrix for info

- No clear vision
  - Start locally and create a shared vision
  - Expand those involved and tweak the vision to keep the larger group on the same page
  - Stop expanding when the vision stops being useful to the day to day work you do
- Fun will come later/the spark of fun is enough
  - Get clarification if Fun is the goal, and if so speak truth to power
- Customers don't get it
  - Accept you don't understand the customer and until you do this won't change
  - Listen to the feedback, don't just hear it

About the Game

- Don't wait for 'management' to fix things
  - The project will be just as dead because you waited than because they didn't act
  - Your job is to help the title ship, and sometimes that means 'drawing outside the lines'
- Decide that something not being done right elsewhere won't keep you from doing it right locally
- Get broad multi-discipline support and work bottom up
- Find what works for your team, then share it with other teams (*share*, not *force*)
- If 'they' are not receptive of your efforts
  - Learn how to disagree and commit
  - Or consider joining a new organization that values you more

Themes

- 36 Classic Mistakes of software development, as presented in *Rapid Development*, by Steve McConnell
  - "He defines 'classic mistakes' as mistakes that have been made so often, by so many people, that the consequences of making these mistakes should be predictable and the mistakes themselves should be avoidable."
- Updated and expanded to 42 in "Software Development's Classic Mistakes 2008" white paper (available at www.construx.com)

Not Just In Games

"It's frustrating that the lessons of our failure read like so many other startup failures."

"While I regret not doing more to help fix our problems, and am deeply disappointed by our failure, I don't regret taking part in the adventure."

- Luke Halliwell, RTW dev

Closing