Blaseball:
Game Development
as Performance

March 24th 2022

Joel Clark
Game Design Lead
The Game Band

Gabe McGill
Product Designer
The Game Band

What is Blaseball?

- A live-simulated baseball league
- Earn currency by betting
- Vote to change the league

What is Blaseball?

- An absurdist horror narrative
- A campaign for thousands of people
- A game about community choice

GDC

Blaseball is a game about choice

"...the end of each season often brings huge changes to the game that add to lore, change the nature of the mechanics, and completely **reframe what is possible** within the game **in response to players' actions.**"

Mason, Stacey. (2021). Responsiveness in Narrative Systems. UC Santa Cruz

GDC

OK, so, sure, but what is Blaseball

A game development performance that takes place on the digital stage

You can't just say stuff

- Game development
- Performance
- Digital stage

Game Development

- You all know what this is
- It's hard and it sucks and the industry has a ton of problems
- And it's hard to imagine being committed to another commercial art form

The Traditional Model

- Development > Artifact > Game is played
- Then maybe you do more development
- Fix bugs
- Refine or introduce new content
- Ship an update

But Blaseball…

- What if that all happened at the same time?
- What if fan choice could drive development?
- What if development and narrative were intertwined?

GDC

is a performance.

- A game presented live
- For the audience
- With the audience

We collaborate

- **We** make rules for the sim
- **Fans** influence details
- The **Sim** controls what actually happens

Our Role is to…

- Design systems to tell stories
- Create prompts for Fans to affect the stories
- Create compelling consequences for their actions

The Fans' role is to…

- Observe and interpret emergent behavior
- Highlight what they are most interested in
- Make choices when we give them prompts

The Sim's role is to…

- Create emergent behavior out of simple systems
- Determine the truth
- Ground the experience in something mundane
- Is malevolent

GDC

Together we Perform…

- We introduce a new idea
- We don't know what happens next
- Because we create space for the story to unfold – fan input of details matters a lot

Together we Perform…

- We control the fan input into the story in the same way that a tabletop GM would
- "Here is the situation, what do you do?"

On The Digital Stage

- Whatever the sim outputs, happens to all of us
- There is only one world state, and it changes and evolves for all of us at the same time

The Digital Stage

- A Shared World
  - We all see the same thing
- Synchronous Changes
  - That thing we all see changes, for all of us
- Creates Narrative
  - That changing thing is our shared story

Our Shared Story

- These are stories are then retold
- Part of the experience is contextualizing what has happened for someone who wasn't there

A Story we Control

- So they can participate in decisions
- To affect the game systemically and narratively

So how does that work?

- How does an entire audience control a shared story?

Everybody has to agree*

- Everybody contributes to the choice, but it is always made as a whole.
- It will have unintended consequences

GDC

How does this performance work?

Which example shall we use?

Fraud

The Book

The Snackrifice

When all of a Team's pitchers got trapped in Peanut
Shells

THE SNACKRIFICE

It's the Pre-Season.

0 Hours 9 Minutes 31 Seconds

Season 7 will begin soon.

STANDINGS   IDOLS

Go to a Player's page to choose them as your Idol.

1 Peanut Holloway		Philly Pies
2 Peanutiel Duffy		Hades Tigers
3 Peanut Bong		Miami Dale
4 TBD		Null Team
5 TBD		Null Team
6 Sexton Wheerer		Unlimited Tacos
7 Patel Beyonce		Unlimites Tacos
8 Wyatt Pothos		Unlimited Tacos
9 Francisca Sasquatch		Unlimited Tacos
10 Alejandro Leaf		Unlimited Tacos

WHAT IS THE SNACKRIFICE?

THE UNLIMITED TACOS SEEK TO GET ALL
FIVE PITCHERS ON THEIR ROSTER INTO
THE TOP 10 OF THE IDOL LEADERBOARD.

OKAY. WHY, THOUGH?

-TO FIND OUT WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A
TEAM HAS LITERALLY NO PITCHERS

-NO HALF MEASURES

-WHAT BETTER TEAM THAN THE TACOS?
WE ARE INFINITE. WE HAVE NOTHING
TO LOSE.

-THE RED LINE HAS 10 SLOTS. WE
DON'T HAVE 10 PEANUTS.

SURE.HOW DO I HELP?

-FIND A TACOS PITCHER AND IDOLIZE
THEM BEFORE THE END OF SEASON 7.
CHECK ON DAY 90.

- EAT   "MAY WE COME CLOSE ENOUGH
TO SLAY THAT WRETCHED NUT!"

The Snackrifice

We added the Idols system.

- Fans could select an Idol
- The Idols Board: a ranked list of the top 20 Idols.
- A system of competing motives

1	Nagomi Mcdaniel		Hawai'i Fridays
2	Aldon Cashmoney		Hades Tigers
3	York Silk		Canada Moist Talkers
4	Wyatt Glover		Yellowstone Magic
5	Sexton Wheerer		LA Unlimited Tacos
6	Pitching Machine		Seattle Garages
7	Valentine Games		LA Unlimited Tacos
8	Jessica Telephone		Kansas City Breath Mints
9	Baby Doyle		Breckenridge Jazz Hands
10	PolkaDot Patterson		Canada Moist Talkers

GDC

The Snackrifice

We added the Shelling mechanic

- A narrative consequence for the Idols system
- Players above a line on the Idols board would get trapped in a Peanut Shell

Season **6** Day **35**

WATCH LIVE   PLACE BETS   STANDINGS   IDOLS

Go to a Player's page to choose them as your Idol.

1	Jessica Telephone	Philly Pies
2	Nagomi Mcdaniel	Breckenridge Jazz Hands
3	Axel Trololol	Baltimore Crabs
4	PolkaDot Patterson	Canada Moist Talkers
5	Randall Marijuana	Hellmouth Sunbeams
6	York Silk	Hawaii Fridays
7	NaN	Unlimited Tacos
8	Paula Turnip	Hades Tigers

The Snackrifice

Ad-Lib Prompts

- A thing is going to happen, who will it happen to?
- Fan input without fundamental plot divergence

The Snackrifice

Fans interpreted the systems.

- The line on the Idols board (Shelling)
- Idols Board Manipulation
- Pitching Rotations

The Snackrifice

Fans made a plan.

- The Tacos offered to Shell their 5 Pitchers in order to save other Players…
- …and to find out what happens when their Pitchers are all in Peanut Shells

The Snackrifice

The Execution…

- The **Fans** made propaganda to spread the word
- The **Fans** pushed the Pitchers above
- The **Sim** trapped them all in Peanut Shells.

GDC

The Snackrifice

The Consequences.

- **We** added a rule to handle a Team with no Pitchers: a Pitching Machine is generated.
- The **Sim** filled in the blanks. Who is this Pitching Machine?

The Snackrifice

- **We** introduced a systemic prompt
- **Fans** crafted a creative reaction
- **We** designed systemic consequences
- The **Sim** executed the outcome

The Forbidden Book

That time when umpires started incinerating Players

Open the Forbidden Book - *566 Votes, 61% of all Decree Votes*

The Book Opens.

Solar Eclipse.

Umpires' eyes turn white.

Star player Jaylen Hotdogfingers is incinerated.

Hellmouth swallows the Moab Desert.

THE DISCIPLINE ERA BEGINS

The Forbidden Book

We prototyped the game.

- Built an evolving game with stacking systems
- Found narrative choices were the most interesting.

The Forbidden Book

We offered a choice.

- We had a weird system & needed to introduce it
- Branded it as a mystery box
- We assumed they'd choose it

OPEN THE FORBIDDEN BOOK

It is Forbidden.

The Forbidden Book

Fans voted for that choice.

- This was their very first choice.
- It was inevitable, but it was still their choice.

GDC

The Forbidden Book

We defined the outcome

- The Book
- Solar Eclipse
- Incinerate the best Player
- Moab > Hellmouth

Open the Forbidden Book *– 566 Votes, 61% of all Decree Votes*

The Book Opens.

Solar Eclipse.

Umpires' eyes turn white.

Star player Jaylen Hotdogfingers is incinerated.

Hellmouth swallows the Moab Desert.

THE DISCIPLINE ERA BEGINS

The Forbidden Book

The Sim incinerated Players.

- In Solar Eclipse weather
- At random, creating anticipation

The Forbidden Book

- **We** offered a choice
- **Fans** made that choice
- **We** rewarded them with consequences
- The **Sim** created systemic drama

The Process

- How do we go about facilitating this Developer + Fan + Simulation collaboration?

Clear Structure

A clear structure cuts through the chaos.

- We design new content & features weekly
- That content is introduced at clear entry points

Decrees

The Decree with the most votes from the community will go into effect.

HOT SAUCE

Feel the Heat. Makes a random player on each team Spicy.

SELECT

ENHANCED PARTY TIME

When a team is in Party Time -- Mathematically eliminated from the Postseason -- they'll have a chance of receiving random permanent stat boosts during their games.

SELECT

NEW KIDS

Incinerate the least Idolized player on every team.

SELECT

Narrative Focus

All design choices are guided by a clear weekly goal.

- Can be a theme
- Or a specific system

GDC

Stay in Tune

- We are designing alongside the live game – simulation output, fan response, bugs, feedback
- We have to **stay in tune** with those processes.

How we stay in tune

- Proactively follow the ongoing threads
- Don't tire yourself out with the noise
- Rely on teammates
- Be ready for the unexpected to surface

Designing Systems

- Incorporate ongoing threads into the systems design
- Keep all systems as simple as possible
- Use writing & branding to make them feel bigger

Branding Systems

- We don't just care about the systemic effect
- We care about the perceived reaction
- We carefully examine the words we use

The Blaseball Simulation

A flowchart of **simple systems**

A great big pile of simple systems

A writhing mass of simple systems

Ingredients for the Blaseball Sim

- K
- I
- S
- S

Ingredients for the Blaseball Sim

- Keep
- Introducing
- Simple
- Systems

Introducing Systems

- Systems are added at clear entry points to maintain structure and to control the pace of narrative.

Yeah, it can be chaotic

- Our collaborators are often unpredictable
- *"Everything that happens is part of the performance."*
- That doesn't change the process, though
- Requires flexibility and confidence

So, the Process

- Design **simple systems** that are narratively charged
- Tailor that content to the **ongoing threads**
- Within a clear weekly **structure**

How does this process work?

Which example shall we use?

The Grand Unslam

Necromancy

Necromancy

That time a Player got brought back from the dead and uh… it didn't go well

Lottery Pick - *119158 Votes Cast*

FIRE AND SMOKE

AN EGG

HATCHING

JAYLEN HOTDOGFINGERS RETURNS

MIKE TOWNSEND RETREATS TO SHADOWS

The Garages had 58% of the Votes
They were the highest bidders.

The Setup

- The **Sim** had been incinerating Players
- **We** introduced the Idols system
  - **Fans** could select an Idol
  - The Idols Board: a ranked list of the top 20 Idols.
- **We** added an Election item that would "steal the 14th most Idolized Player"

It turns out…

- Fans could Idolize incinerated Players
- Therefore, the "14th most Idolized Player" could be an incinerated Player
- What does it mean to steal a dead Player?

A change of plans

- **Fans** realized they could idolize a dead player
- **Fans** realized they could steal a dead idol
- When the Fan plan reached us mid-week, we decided to pivot to "reward" their creativity with consequences.

GDC

The simple systems

Stealing a dead Player

- The Player joins the Team but gains the Debt & Returned modifications.
- The worst Player on the Team gets pushed into the "Shadows" (the bench).

The simple systems

Debt

- The Player hits batters with pitches, making them Unstable

The simple systems

Unstable

- The Player has a high chance of being incinerated.
- When incinerated, the Instability will chain to another Player.

The simple systems

Returned

- The Player has a 33% chance of re-dying at the end of each Season.

The timeline

- Wednesday - We learn about the plot
- Thursday - We change plans
  - Scrap our current ideas
  - Finalize the new systems
- Thursday / Friday - We build the four systems
- Sunday - The systems are added in the Election

GDC

In other words

- We recognized the Fan's goal
- We designed consequences for them pulling it off
  - A consequence of simple systems
- We added them via our usual structure

GDC

The Grand Unslam

When a home run broke the universe
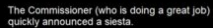
The Setup

- Blaseball was growing very quickly
- Our servers were breaking constantly
- We offered the Interviews decree

The Event

- The Tacos and Shoe Thieves were playing an intense, high scoring game
- Morrow Doyle hit a grand slam off of Lee Davenport
- Then the servers crashed…

GDC

Reality Broke

- When the site came back, the grand slam was gone.
- Not only that, but both teams had won?
- We still have no idea what happened. Thanks, sim

It's part of the performance…

- **Fans** interpreted the event as lore, not a bug.
- **Fans** labeled it "The Grand Unslam"
- In their interpretation, Morrow Doyle hit a home run so hard that it broke the universe.

A change of plans

- **We** ran with the Fan interpretation of the bug
- **We** re-worked our existing content plan to tie into their interpretation.

The narrative response

- We framed the Interviews decree as narratively linked to the event.

Interviews - *10914 Votes, 33% of all Decree Votes*

The Microphone Lifts

ERROR: The Grand Unslam Weakened the Bridge

Spacetime Tears over Los Angeles

The Infinite cit(ies) shine

Platonic Form corrupted
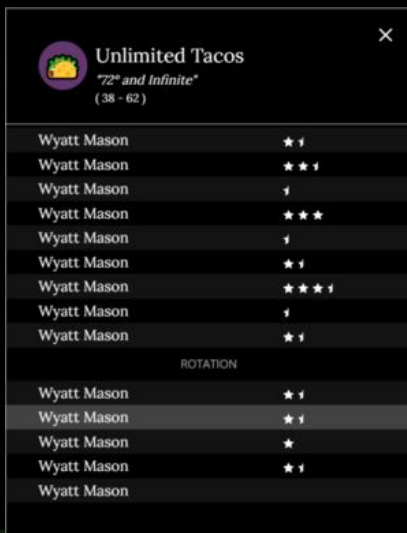
You've looked too close...

The systemic response

- We added effects to the Interviews decree, in which:
    - Lee Davenport would be cloned
    - The Tacos were re-named "Unlimited"
- …but another bug occurred…

The Wyatt Masoning

- … in which the entire Tacos roster was renamed after unremarkable Player, Wyatt Mason.

And so we fixed it?

- We used Twitter to "fix" the Players' names.

In other words

- **We** made a plan
- **Fans** interpreted a **Sim** event
- **We** incorporated that thread into our plan
- **We** introduced them via our usual structures

Bringing it all Together

- Ultimately, we need to complete the narrative arc.
- Completing the narrative arc requires full participation from all three collaborators.

Payoff

- Threads we have introduced over the course of the arc need to come to a head
- It's time to "fire off" all our "narrative ammo"

GDC

A Final Performance

- We create live set pieces that combine all of the elements into the narrative & systemic climax
- A moment for us all to watch together
- Exemplify the performance of Blaseball – live, unpredictable, messy, emergent, tense nonsense

GDC

Paying off the Discipline Era

1	Landry Violence	17940894
2	Boyfriend Monreal	17343621
3	Randall Marijuana	13795368
4	Workman Gloom	7751252
5	Kiki Familia	6302839
6	Dominic Marijuana	5584748
7	Sebastian Telephone	5449585
8	Tillman Henderson	5040622
9	Yazmin Mason	4810142
10	Caligula Lotus	4792344
11	Mclaughlin Scorpler	4698548
12	Combs Duende	4692456
13	Emmett Internet	4692120
14	Moody Cookbook	4687990
15	Tyreek Olive	4651720
16	Tiana Cash	4480504

I AM INFINTE

LIVE - 3 ▼   GAME 1 OF 1

THE SHELLED ONE'S PODS
17,238,323

The Hall Stars   **-205,000**
114,345,657   **(INCINERATION)**

BALLS   ○ ○ ○
STRIKES   ○ ○
OUTS   ● ○

PITCHING   Jaylen Hotdogfingers
BATTING   Tyreek Olive

GAME LOG

A Debt was collected. Rogue Umpire incinerated Hall Stars hitter Sebastian Telephone! Replaced by Hall of Flame player Scrap Murphy The Instability chains to the Hall Stars's Randall Marijuana!

Thank you

It is now time for questions and/or answers