“At Valve there is Gabe and then everybody else”
Cabalizing the labour process in game software development
Objectives

• Games industry
• Valve
• Cabals
• Mods
• Discussion
Games industry

• Unprecedented technological requirements
• Social significance
• New revenue models

And,

• High costs of production, relatively low costs of reproduction
• Structure
Some stats

- **Worldwide Hardware:** (as of December 31, 2006)
  
  **PS3:**
  - NA - 1,030,000
  - Japan - 810,000
  - Euro - NA
  - Total - 1,840,000

  **PS2:**
  - NA - 46,530,000
  - Japan - 24,760,000
  - Euro - 44,070,000
  - Total - 115,360,000

- **Worldwide Software:** (as of December 31, 2006)
  
  **PS3:**
  - NA - 4,200,000
  - Japan - 1,000,000
  - Euro - NA
  - Total - 5,200,000

  **PS2:**
  - NA - 552,000,000
  - Japan - 222,000,000
  - Euro - 431,000,000
  - Total - 1,205,000,000

- Sony Games Division (Revenue in millions)
  - Q1 2006 - $1,065
  - Q2 2006 - $1,443
  - Q3 2006 - $3,721
Some stats

• **Worldwide Hardware:** (as of December 31, 2006)

  **Wii**
  NA - 1,250,000  
  Japan - 1,140,000  
  Euro - 800,000  
  Total - 3,190,000

  **GameCube**
  NA - 12,740,000  
  Japan - 4,020,000  
  Euro - 4,760,000  
  Total - 21,520,000

• **Worldwide Software:** (as of December 31, 2006)

  **Wii**
  NA - 9,020,000  
  Japan - 4,330,000  
  Euro - 4,160,000  
  Total - 17,510,000

  **GameCube**
  NA - 134,850,000  
  Japan - 27,350,000  
  Euro - 42,150,000  
  Total - 198,050,000

• Nintendo (Revenue in millions)
  Q2 2006 - $1,424  
  Q3 2006 - $3,474
Some stats

• **Worldwide Hardware:** (as of December 31, 2006)
  - **Xbox:**
    - NA - 16 million
    - Japan/PAL - 2 million
    - Euro - 6 million
    - Worldwide - 24 million
  - **Xbox360:**
    - NA - 6 million
    - Japan/PAL - 1.3 million
    - Euro - 3.1 million
    - Worldwide - 10.4 million

• **Worldwide Software:** (as of June 30, 2006)
  - **Xbox:**
    - NA - 162 million
    - Japan/PAL - 9 million
    - Euro - 54 million
    - Total - 225 million
  - **Xbox360:**
    - Pending

• **MicroSoft Home and Entertainment Division Financial** (Revenue in millions)
  - Q4 2006 - $1,138
  - Q1 2007 - $1,030
  - Q2 2007 - $2,964
Game platforms

• Console games (e.g. *Final Fantasy* on PlayStation 2 and *Halo* on Xbox)
• Handheld games (on e.g. Sony’s PSP, Nintendo’s DS)
• Computer games (e.g. *Harry Potter*)
• Massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) – often referred to as virtual worlds such as *World of Warcraft* and *Second Life*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Top Game Servers By Players</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Half Life</td>
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<td>2. Half Life 2</td>
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<td>3. Battlefield 2</td>
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<td>4. Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory</td>
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<td>5. Battlefield 1942</td>
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<td>6. Unreal Tournament 2004</td>
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<td>7. Call of Duty 2</td>
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<td>8. Call of Duty</td>
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<td>9. America's Army: Special Forces</td>
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<td>10. Quake II: Arena</td>
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<td>11. Soldier of Fortune 2</td>
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<td>12. Neverwinter Nights</td>
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<td>13. Medal of Honor: Allied Assault</td>
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<td>14. Far Cry: Odebrecht</td>
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<td>15. Unreal Tournament</td>
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<td>16. Star Wars: Jedi Knight: Jedi Academy</td>
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<td>17. Medal of Honor: Allied Assault</td>
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<td>18. Medal of Honor: Allied Assault</td>
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<td>19. Halo: Combat Evolved</td>
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<tr>
<td>20. Battlefield Modern Combat</td>
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<td>21. Call of Duty Encounter Assault</td>
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<td>22. Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth 2</td>
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<td>23. The Rise of the Pillars</td>
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<td>24. The Eternals</td>
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<td>25. Quake 4</td>
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</tbody>
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Method

• 13 interviews at Valve’s Hq. in Seattle (Aug 06)
• Ethnographic study at Valve
• Online survey re: Valve’s games: response rate 47% (Feb 07)
Valve

- Debut title, Half-Life, has won over 50 Game of the Year Awards and was named "Best PC Game Ever" in the November 1999, October 2001, and April 2005 issues of PC Gamer, the world's best-selling PC games magazine.
- Valve's catalog of products accounts for over 20 million retail units sold worldwide, and over 80% of the PC online action market.
- Valve is a developer of leading-edge technologies, such as the Source™ game engine and Steam, a broadband platform for the delivery and management of digital content.
- Today, Valve is composed of over 100 of the industry's leading artists, programmers, and writers.

(source: valvesoftware.com)
Valve

- Half-Life 2: Episode 1
- Half-Life 2
- Counter-Strike
- Day of Defeat
- Team Fortress
Cabals

- Knowledge as a key source of competitive advantage
- Cabals are largely informal
- Exchange of ideas and information (‘creative knowledge resource’)
- Defined as a cross-discipline group that comes together to solve some design problems or some specific problems surrounding a specific game.
Cabals

“The task of a cabal is to design something, meaning that the overall problem they have to solve is to make a game.”

“They have the power to design and eventually to execute on it. People outside the cabal can have input into that process by providing feedback, however the cabal is expected to give others insight into the various stages throughout the project so that others can give feedback, which has to get listened to, but ultimately the cabal gets to make the call as the cabal has to do the work.”
Cabals

“So the cabal is going to say, well, we’ve designed something that needs 100 new models. Is this a good decision? I don’t know because the art team can’t tell us how long that’ll take because they say, well, Ok, we’ll do it but then doing work for 5 other projects as well and as a manager of Episode 1 or something, I don’t want the art time to convince itself that it’s going to mean I’m effectively screwing some other team’s ability to get off without knowing it.”
Play-testing

“Once you get into the state of each play test it prioritises your next week of work, so you’re not trying to work towards, you know, building something for 6 months.”
Mods

“We are also part of the larger game community. One of the unique characteristics of games as a medium is that you have to create it in cooperation with the audiences. A game engine is not just the platform for the game itself, but a platform for all the MODs that come along to extend the life and enjoyment of the experience. Be aware that everyone at Valve is acutely aware of our role in that larger community and the contributions that community makes to the success of our endeavours.” (GN, 2004)
Modifying (modding) games

• Providing gamers with toolkits
• ‘Modding’ [modifying games]
• Developer domain: Platform, engine and source code
• Gamer domain: Game code
Examples Modifiable Games

Games with official modification tools
The Sims 2
Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic
Half-Life and Half-Life 2

Games with third-party modification tools
Battlefield series
Doom, Doom II, Doom 3
Grand Theft Auto Series
Tony Hawk's Pro Skater series
World of Warcraft
Examples of mod tools

• Valve’s *Source SDK*

• Epic’s *UnrealEd 3.0*
Examples of mods
Discussion

• How is control effected? How is value obtained?
Three elements:
1) Role of cabals
2) ‘Cult of Gabe’
3) ‘Semi-externalisation of the labour process’
Learning from gamers

“There is this definite feeling in our company that there’s sort of a fear of failure that drives people a lot. And it’s like this weird mix, like feedback from the community is this two-edged sword, you know, it’s…rationally you can’t explain why you should listen to the good stuff and not the bad stuff and unfortunately thanks to the internet there’s going to be a lot of bad…you can produce the most perfect game and there’ll still be a bunch of people yelling that it sucks and that not only does it suck, you suck for working on it, so I think there’s a like a shield that people have to build up, you know, but you know I think we’re lucky enough that we work on games which are overall pretty good and so we get a lot of good feedback.”