CAREER EDUCATION – WRITTEN Q&A: Emma Hall

1. What is your job role and organisation?

Lead Developer, Jagex

2. What do you do in this job?

In my role as Lead Developer at Jagex, I take on a few main responsibilities.

Arguably the most important of these is managing others. I have a group of 4 developers that I manage, which involves catching up with them regularly to ensure they are happy and have no issues at work that they would like help with, support them in the day to day, and guide them in their own personal and career development throughout their time at the company.

I also help to manage a development team which consists of all different disciplines (developers, QA, artists etc). So day to day this means I help to plan and manage work, work with others to manage resource and release roadmaps and ensure that the whole team remains productive and happy.

The final main responsibility that I have is to develop content for the game I work on, RuneScape! This is a straightforward process of picking something from the prioritised list of work that we have, implementing it and sending it over to QA so that they can check that it all works as expected!

3. Why did you choose this career?

I became passionate about games in my mid to late teens. I had always been excited by stories, whether in books of through media (especially films!) and had for as long as I could remember wanted to be either an actress or writer. And then when I got my first games console in my mid-teens, my passion also grew for games as a method of storytelling. It's a beautiful and effective way of getting involved in a story and becoming more invested in the outcome. I quickly realised the magic of games, how they can help and support people in the day to day and bring so much joy to people's lives! Especially when it comes to online games. The sense of community and the friendship that can come from online games is wonderful.

It was pretty much from that moment onwards that I decided that this is what I wanted to do, I wanted to get stories like this to people so that they could enjoy and have the same benefit from them that I had growing up.

4. What background education or training do you have?

I did A-Levels in Chemistry, English Literature and Psychology, and an AS in Maths. I also tried to do an A level in archaeology but… that was a LOT of work I wasn't prepared for! I mostly chose these from what I found the most exciting and interesting at the time.

At university I did a BSc in Computer Science (Games Technology), as well as a Diploma in Professional Practice gained during my placement year of the full 4 year Computer Science degree.

5. What has your career path been?

I left school in 2010 and began my university degree for 4 years. My 3ʳᵈ year was in placement, where I worked at an Accountancy firm helping with their IT needs, including building a website. This is where I earned my Professional Practice diploma.

After graduating from university, in the September of that year I started work at Jagex as a Junior Developer. Over the next nearly 7 years, I was promoted up through Developer and Senior Developer, until in April last year, 5 ½ years after starting at the company, I became a Lead Developer.

6. What does a typical day involve?

My typical day can change quite dramatically depending on what time of year it is and what point of a project development lifecycle we are in, but broadly speaking it looks a little like this :

- Catch up with my development team, discussing work for the day and issues that people need help with.

- Catch up with the developers that I manage (normally at least fortnightly), discussing what they have been working on, discussing any additional topics they wish to chat about and assessing progress towards personal development goals.

- Catching up with other Lead Developers, ensuring we tackle any issues pertinent to the wider group of developers in the team and discussing future initiatives.

- Manage the backlog of development team work, ensuring all work is up to date and accounted for.

- Pick up some development team work and implement some content for the game.

7. What is your work environment like?

I currently work from home and use a combination of VPN, Slack, emails and Zoom to stay in contact with my co-workers and team members. Before the pandemic, my work was office based.

I work in an immediate team of about 15. This consists of Developers, QA (Quality Analysts), Engine Developers, Artists, Designers and Product Management. Outside of that, there is a team of about 30 Developers, 7 of which are Lead Developers (myself included). The game team as a whole pushes about 100.

My work offers a huge amount of flexibility in terms of working schedule. At the minute, people are predominantly working from home, but there is the free option to go into the office as well. We work on a 'flexi time' basis, meaning that so long as we are working core hours of 10-4, and complete all our contractual hours, we are free to change our start and end times. We additionally have a lot of paid holidays, including an extra day each year of service up to a maximum of 30 (excluding bank holidays). Because of all of this, it is easy to get the right amount of work life balance. Although the work is so satisfying and fun that sometimes, the issue is more forcing yourself away from doing work that you love to be able to properly decompress.

8. What aspects of your job are most challenging?

Working in the games industry opens yourself up to criticism from a huge community of people that you will probably never meet and one that is incredibly passionate to boot. You'll never really have the chance to discuss your decisions with them either, so they can't always understand both sides. The internet at times can be a hard place to be in, so you need to be able the partition that part of the job away from yourself and not take everything you read to heart. There will be people that love your work. There will be people that won't. There is no way you can please everyone, and that's just not your fault.

9. Can you give an example of a project or piece of work that you have been most proud of?

The most satisfying and joyful area of my work isn't a project, nor a piece of work. It's supporting those around me to be the best that they can be and achieve their goals and dreams. Working with the people that I manage gives me a platform to be able to guide others with my own knowledge and experience. Seeing them accomplish their goals makes me feel so proud of everything that they have accomplished and excited to see what they are yet going to achieve.

10. How do you hope your career will progress?

Becoming a Lead Developer was my goal for so long and it feels like I have only just got here despite being in the role for nearly a year and a half now. I haven't yet decided on what I want my next big goal to be, but in the short term, I want to continue to grow my skills as a manager so I can be the best I can be for those that I manage. In the long term, so long as I'm helping others, I will be happy, whether this is through becoming a manager of managers, or moving into more of a production role and managing projects and initiatives for the game and those that work on it.