

Game Companies as Tribes: an Anthropological Perspective

A recent debate among the industry illuminati drove me to ponder the roots of game companies as compared to a traditional cultural society. The debate was fueled by an ardent discussion of the “one, true way” to which game companies ascribe regarding creativity and marketing. Is the game borne of the creative whim of the genius game designer and then peddled to the masses with the hopes of market acceptance? Or is the game an extension of a planned strategy, the result of a marketing program, a demographic analysis, and the timing of release based on the prediction of what consumers will like?

This conflict between the “creative” and “marketing” dragged my mind into this article as I read the classic “At The Edge of History” by William Irwin Thompson published in 1972. William Irwin Thompson is known among academic circles for his comprehensive study of anthropology, comparing the development of primitive cultures to modern society and tracking the ways in which history repeats itself. Thompson also is, in his own heart, a gamer as he puts forth some interesting comments such as: “Toronto... is almost Tolkien’s Rivendell, safe from the ragings of the archaic darkness of Sauron and the Ring Wraiths. Whether one can live permanently in Rivendell is a question I ask myself daily, but at the moment Toronto seems the perfect retreat in which to look from one end of history to the other.”

Of particular note in his treatise is the model he presents of the Tribal Community, which I will adapt in comparing to the start-up game company.

We begin our journey with the black and white film, “The Hunters” by John Marshall which portrays a tribe of bushmen in South Africa who send their four primary members off on a hunt. Each of the four quadrants of the Tribal Community is represented in this sortie: The Hunter, The Clown, The Headman, and the Shaman.

Thompson proposes that in a small tribe, every member is focused on survival by necessity, therefore engendering mutual respect among the four, disparate types as they go out to the hunt. However, their particular specialties are complementary... not to the exclusion of each other, but to their mutual benefit...

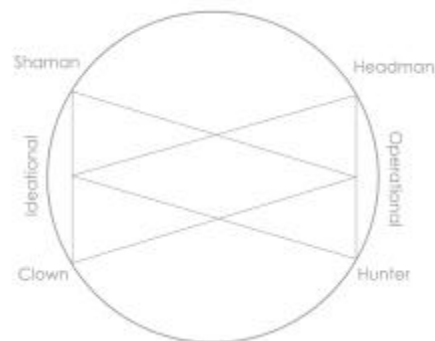
In the film, the four Bushmen set out armed only with small arrows tipped with a slow acting poison. They finally manage to wound a giraffe with an arrow and then the hunt begins as they track the crippled beast together. Earlier in the hunt, they were at odds with each other, insisting that their particular methods are the only correct way to hunt, but as they work together, they realize that their combined skills are more effective than they are separately.

The Headman provides the leadership while the Hunter provides the physical prowess in the hunt. Meanwhile the Shaman uses his magicks to aid their pursuit with the Clown entertains (and annoys) with his critique, jests and satire.

So too, in a small gaming startup, we find these same four specializations. Your Headman (Manager) finds the funding and sets the course, while the Hunter (Sales Rep) finds the distributors and negotiates the deals as the Shaman (Editor) helps to guide the development as the Clown (Artist and Author) issues his creativity in the formation of the entertaining products.

Now, of course no creative person wishes to be called “The Clown” but if you ignore the degrading connotation in favor of an anthropological perspective, it will make sense as we digress further.

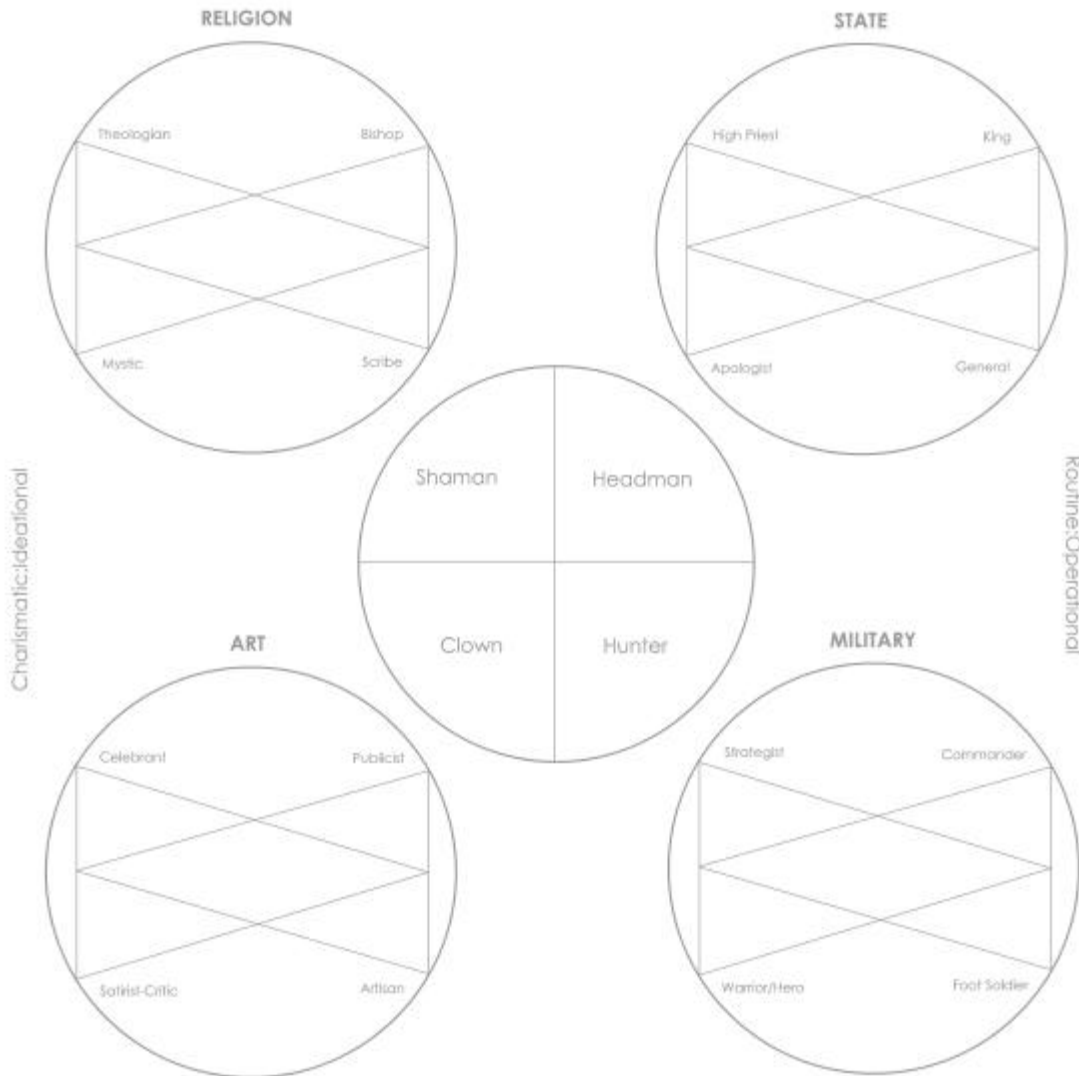
Naturally with any small design house, there is always the issue where all members must join in the hunt. The Artist cannot simply stay at the drawing board churning out pieces of artistic wizardry.... He too must go to the conventions, dazzle the fans, and inspire the distributors with one-on-one contact as well as the editors, owners, and sales people. In truth, some game studios don’t even have these four basic elements so they pull double duty.



Feudal Community

Once the “tribe” becomes more established however and the revenue begins to roll in, a transition occurs as each group begins to specialize. As with any Tribal Community, the individual specialist begins to form his own sub-society within the growing sales department. Now, instead of the lone Hunter working his daily sales duties, you now have a Sales Department that spawns its own microcosm of culture within its own insular group... in anthropological terms, this becomes the Military with its own Hunter, Shaman, Clown and Headman.

So too do the other specialties expand as seen in the following diagram:



We could draw correlations to this sub-modern social structure to a mid-sized gaming company where the Military is Sales, the State is Management, Religion is the Editors/Game Mechanics group and Art is the Creative team.

As the diagram indicates, each workgroup or department now has its own internal, symbiotic struggle against its own members, with members of the same group struggling against the others in opinions or methods, but the core results of the project derive from the struggle itself. Each individual member of a team will inevitably seek to expand his own scope of power and authority until he dominates the entire circle, as will each of the other members. A sound team reaches a state of equilibrium without forcing out

one of the parts.... You cannot have the Headman without the Cynic, nor the Shaman without the Hunter, and as such, Marketing must be balanced by Creative and Management by the Design Team.

I find some amusing parallels in Thompson's overview of the Religion subculture in the Tribal Community: "The Bishop thinks the Mystic is a foaming maniac; the Mystic thinks the Bishop is a callous money-grubber; the Scribe thinks the Theologian is a parasite upon his important work; and the Theologian thinks the Scribe is a mindless tool."

How true this can become when you thrust an Artist, Editor, Manager, and Marketer into the mix together! Especially when you toss in a dash of financial struggle, ego-centricism, the creative quest and family pressures.

As we further explore this "ascension" of the Tribal Community, there are other aspects brought out by Thompson: "Because men are now full-time specialists, they no longer have to share in one another's lives. Social distance becomes extreme as a new elite begins to lessen the authority of the other members of society. Now social roles become markedly differentiated and oppositions become more energetic as society tries to counteract the expanding forces of the new economy. Art is the opposite of the State; Religion is the opposite of the Military... society becomes a many-body situation in which values can only be achieved in conflict with opposites."

Imagine if you will the culture that develops in a rapidly successful company such as Wizards of the Coast. The core Shaman, Hunter, Clown and Headman who started together in a unified fashion, printing Magic cards in their garage, now find themselves victims of the last great expansion of their peaking culture within the Hasbro monolith. Revenue abounds and success follows them in the newspaper, yet with that success, the values with which they founded their institution can only be obliterated, leaving the founders unable to find within the massive culture they had developed, the motivating values that they started with... lost in a sea of bureaucracy.

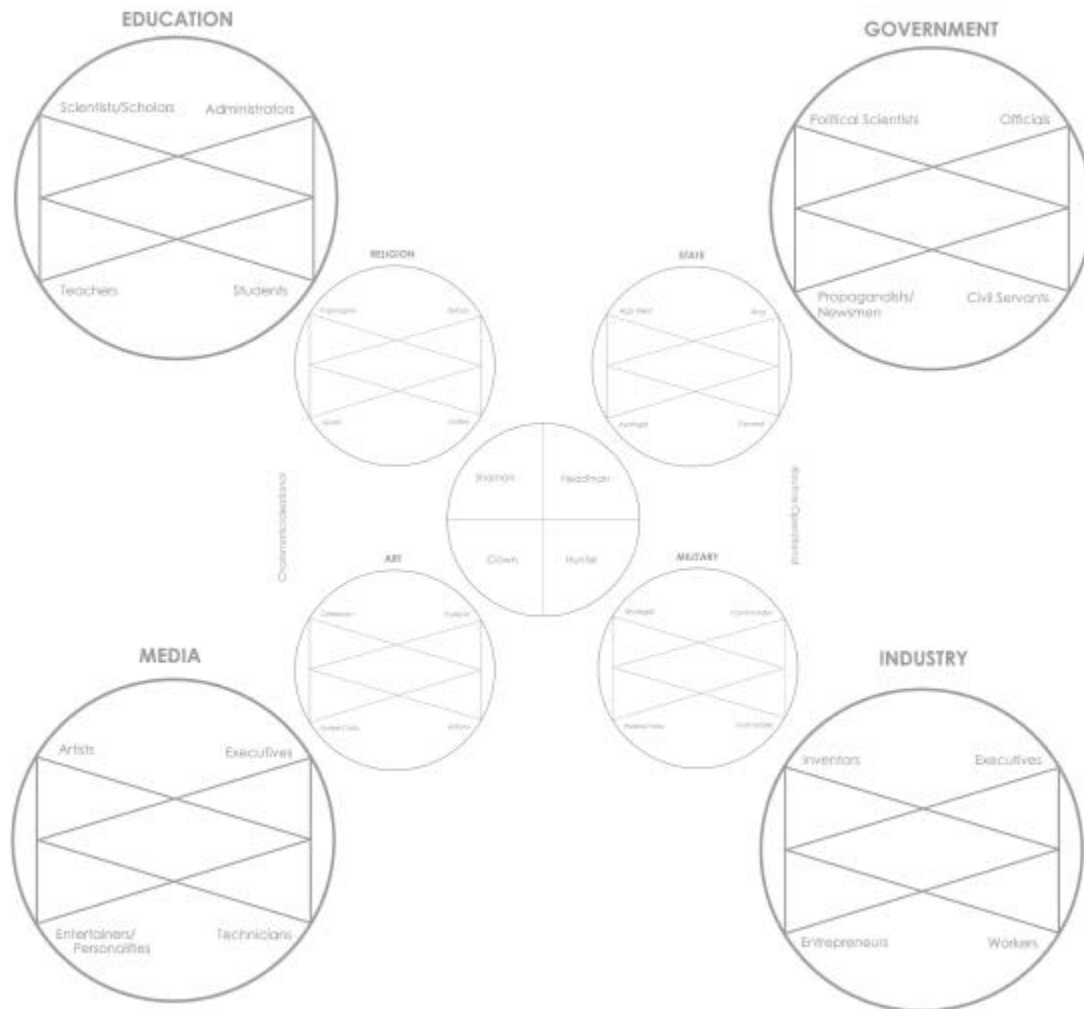
I quote Thompson again, "This fall from unanimity to multiplicity is another expression of the philosophy implicit in the myth of original sin, for just as the conflict of opposites is inevitable, so it is inevitable that every institution must subvert the values for which it was founded. Every vision must be routinized to survive the death of the visionary, but every routinization of vision is only a bureaucratically disguised form of death, and so death is unavoidable."

This "routinization" could also quite aptly be turned to form a basis for examining a fad culture as well.

Look at the impact that conflict has on the new game designer.. "The young individual forces himself to believe that only his action is right, that all others are wrong. But when he begins to see the possibility that his enemy completes him more profoundly than his 'groupies,' he is forced into the recognition that he must cherish his enemy." Examine this platitude from the perspective of a competitive market economy in the harsh climate of the entertainment industry and the wisdom is clear.

Corporate Community

The influence of technology and the capacity to store information drove the Feudal Community to the much more specialized state of a Corporate Community. This demonstrates a third evolution of the Tribal Community that also introduces its own layer of new conflict. This also borders on the point where my analogy to a game company begins to wear thin, however it is interesting to review the following chart to see the final (or next) destination of the evolution of corporate societies as stated by Thompson.



As I think about this type of evolution, it makes me wonder which roles I have assumed as the years have gone by? Where do you think you fit in? Of the industry elites, where do they fit in? I think that the answers to these questions may surprise you. Feel free to send me any insights you might have, especially regarding how you would categorize certain people in our industry.

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