Text Transcript of Audio/Video Recording

Hi , I'm Terry Bolt, the El Pomar endowed professor of Innovation security and the founder of the Bachelor of Innovation at UCCS. I've got an eclectic background. I've been a faculty member for a long time, and but I came to the UCCS in 2003 to change the way we drive undergraduate education, to have a whole new focus on innovation and working with companies and clients.

And today we're going to do a podcast interview with Terra Ray, who's an exemplary student who came out of the program, Terra really embodies the I'm going to get it done attitude that makes a difference, not just like tell me what to do and I'll do it, but I have ideas. I'm going to go make stuff done. So I'll let Terra introduce herself and then we can talk a little bit about her journey.

Hey, thanks for the great introduction Terry. Yeah, my name is Terra Ray, also known as Riot Yasmina. These days I am currently the delivery lead on the Seminars Rift Team for League of Legends at Wright Games. I've been in the games industry for about eight years now. If you count just strictly professionally making games, you know, early into college, as Terry said.

Yeah. And like we I first met Dr. Bolt during one of our early business classes in my team's classes, where we would basically work with members from the community, and they would give us projects that we would then go and complete in terms of group of small students. That was like my first exposure, but where it really just sort of hit home for me was definitely during that Game Jam where we just came up with a card idea.

It was me and a roommate of mine at the time named Bill Sagan. Shout outs to Will, we were just working on this card game and Terry sat down and wanted to try it and he was like, I can see a future with this thing. We're like, yeah, it's kind of cool, neat. We'll probably just put it up.

And he's like, "Why? Go for it? Do something with it? I'm like, Okay. And then, you know, year and a Kickstarter later, we had our own business. We it helped us launch our own careers. And now I'm here eight years later.

Can you tell us a little bit about you said you used your it wasn't a jump from UCCS direct to write games.It's hard to break into that that business. So can you tell us about some of the things you did in between as part of your journey to help you get to where you go? You don't jump to management right away. What were the steps in between you have to go through?

Okay, unabridged version: I had coming out of the bachelor renovation program. There were a whole bunch of portfolio quality games that I had, or at least what I felt was portfolio quality at the time. Working through things like the game production classroom was a big group of 12 that just made a single game with the goal of getting it into portfolio shape.

I managed to get my first real games industry job at Direwolf Digital, which is a local digital trading card game company in Denver, Colorado. And a lot of what landed me that job was the work that I had done during those innovation classes. And I was also able to walk into that interview and hand them a physical deck of cards for my business and a game that I created that we had went to physical printing, that we managed to kick start and get like 168% of our ask for goal and actually create this whole system.

Being able to walk in with that and then just continuing to work on portfolio pieces. While I was not in school and while I was working at it. It's a really hard thing to ask somebody who's doing a 9 to 5 just to make ends meet, to then also come home and be creative and make something amazing. But those things that I continued to do outside of my normal class commitments and outside of my normal work commitments were what really I feel like landed me my first gigs.

So I worked at Direwolf as a designer on the Pokemon trading card game online for about a year and then the first of many, as the industry so goes, layoffs happened. I needed to look for something else. And what I realized during that time was I did like design, but it wasn't where a passion was. I really enjoyed connecting with people, solving problems, getting that sort of left side creative and right side technical to work together in a big, wonderful mess that is a video game.

I started looking for production positions and stayed in production in the games industries like project managers and, you know, kind of more traditional tech or as I like to call them, cat herders occasionally. So lots of, you know, scheduling, managing that kind of stuff. I found my first one, my first official production gig with big, huge games over in Baltimore, Maryland.

So I packed up and moved all the way across the country and was the producer on the mobile game domination basically like in Clash of Clans with a history skin on it with a really prolific company behind it, been around for, you know, a very long time. This was the second run of it, but lots of industry vets that I worked alongside of for 4 years really enjoyed that gig.

Mobile games is a very interesting market to work in, very difficult, very fast paced, very challenging, but did that for four years, loved it. And then the second layoffs happened and we

got some downturns and I needed to go look other places. From there I made my way to Amazon Game Studio. This is during the pandemi c. I worked at Amazon games on the publishing side, working on the MMO, Lost Ark, a really prolific Korean MMO that then was moving over to the West.

So I did that for about two years. Unfortunately, I was not really clicking with the job super well and I just needed something else. So I started looking around and when I started looking, the first thing that came to my mind was, "huh, you know what I applied to all those years ago?"

League of Legends. I still play that. Yeah. How many years later is it? Eight. Nine. I'm still playing League of Legends. I wonder if they have a position open. So I took a look and they had the perfect position open for me. It was a producer position and like a mid to senior level working on the Champions team, which is all of their characters.

And I was like, this is exactly what I would have done. Let's try it, let's figure this out. So I sent in the application, got a call back the next day. I was like, okay, this might be happening. Did one interview. I'm like, Okay, yeah, that went fine. We'll see how it goes. I got a callback. Woo! I'm getting kind of excited, but don't get your hopes up.

Got the third callback, got really excited, held myself back, but then I got offered the job, so uprooted myself again from Dublin all the way to Los Angeles, where I now currently work. I did some internal shifts, so from the Champions Team to the Summoners Rift team. For people who are familiar with League of Legends, that's like item system, the new Baron updates all of the map changes. Those were all me and my team of really awesome people that just shipped that content two months ago and players have been really loving it since then.

So now we're moving on to the next project and I'm really happy here at Riot

So if we look back at your education right when you came in, in fact your early jobs were think you're going to be a game designer developer, right? And you transitioned.

So one of the things we like to focus on in the Bachelors of Innovation makes sure students have adaptability. They see and develop skills across things. So how did your experiences at UCCS prepare you for the career and the career path that you went down in the industry?

It's a hard question to disentangle because there is so much of it. So it's not like it's not a lack of it's a it's a surplus of and stead. A lot of it is just the amount of exposure and real-world scenarios that we ended up working under. You know, a lot of the classes were go work with a team, go understand how you work with other people, how you get a task from the initial stages all the way to completion with a group.

It's very rare that there is any job in the real world where you are that lone wolf programmer in the corner able to just do everything yourself, make decisions and go, There are millions of talented people in this world, particularly so in the games industry. So learning how to work with them through things like teams classes, like I mentioned earlier, it was just invaluable.

And then as far as adaptability goes, there were a lot of GDD, which is game design development degree. There were a lot of different electives of sorts. You had to take at least two a year, but they offered everything from like game production to UI and UX, so you got to

kind of dabble and experiment. You were still always making a game but with specific focus areas in different places.

And that really gave me a breadth of exposure throughout the course of my, you know, education. There I was a lead designer on a project, I was a lead engineer on a project

So just being able to get that exposure, being able to actually have, again, portfolio quality games coming out of college that I can just slap on a website and say, "Hey, feature employer, please go take a look at my stuff." You know that that put me head and shoulders above a lot of people and for my everyday work it's just how to work with people, you know, how to deal with difficult personalities, how to marry the hyper technical and the artistic together to create something that really surprises and delights.

So, you know, mentorship is often an important thing. So, you know, if you can say a little bit about a mentor to who've profoundly impacted your professional development.

Ooo, that's so there's almost too many to name. I'm just going to kind of rapid fire, some kind of going sequential in my career.

There is, of course, Dr. Bull, I mentioned that story where you really pushed us to go and do something incredible with what we had, just to take it to the next step, do something with it like encourage us to ask the question, "why not?" instead of "why?" — Coleen Styles, also in the Bachelor Innovation program at Colorado Springs. Just I went through some pretty big life changes over the course of those four years at school, and that goes beyond just learning how to be an adult and get ready for the workforce and learning really crazy life skills.

I changed a lot the freshman year. Me would not recognize the senior year me. And Colleen was particularly impactful on helping me handle those changes with Grace, understand my changing world, and just accept me as I was at that moment.

And I am so lucky that I, I have the grace and the opportunities to continue to do that. Not everyone has so many lucky options, so I'm very thankful there. But I would encourage you to never compromise your principles and never compromise who you are for a job.

A little follow up to that. Inclusivity is something that gets talked about a lot. Right. And it's, you know, an issue both in college, but then when you enter the workforce. So, you know, can you say a little bit about the way that the industry is becoming more inclusive and welcoming? You said it's really important to find those people, and I agree, finding the people you want to work with is just so important.

So you can say a little bit about that and what you've had to deal with as you do that as companies try to make change.

Yeah, it's a big question and something that really is on a lot of people's minds, particularly lately. Just to clear the air here, I am a bisexual woman so figuring out, you know, navigating that and you know, almost essentially coming out while I was at college was a big deal in terms of like diversity and inclusivity, I think the games industry is one of the absolute best places to be.

You hear a ton of stories about the bad and it's usually, you know, higher levels of sort of old guard, big company folks. Riot's not immune to that either. We had a huge Kotaku blowup a

couple of years ago, and so when I went into the interviews, that was the first thing that I asked.

And rather than being like, that they misrepresented that they were very much like, "Oh hey, let's talk about this. Let's talk about the changes. Let's really get into the nitty gritty." And I had plenty of women on my interview panel made me feel very comfortable when I got in there. But to get to the heart of your question, I think what people are slowly coming to realize is that creative works, particularly creative works, benefit from a surplus of perspective.

While one person in the room has this unique background, a unique upbringing, another person may have a completely different set of circumstances that completely changes the way that something is tackled and something is approached and when we are trying to reach massive audiences, when you are making something that is meant to be for a wide audience, you need to have those perspectives because your players will have those exact same perspectives as well.

We've made a huge amount of effort, particularly in the last couple of years, to increase diversity and inclusivity within our cast, not just within like our workforce, but within our cast in our game. Like we just had one of our very first, like super Latin American representation champions come out last year. We're looking into alternative body types, neurodiversity, things like that to get in, see so that way when somebody sits down behind that keyboard to play League of Legends, they can see somebody that they identify with, somebody that they can see themself in either aspirationally or specifically relating to.

And that's a huge part of it. And we would not have gotten to those places if we didn't hire neurodiverse people, if we didn't hire people from Latin American backgrounds, if we didn't hire, you know, queer individuals. All those perspectives come together in a wonderful, fantastic, beautiful melting pot of just awesomeness that then spits out one of the best games I've ever played on the other end of it. You know, so I think people are getting there.

Now, I'm very blessed to have, you know, a number of other women directly on my team, but I still am one of the only women in the actual leadership room. So it's something we're still continuing to work on.

But you can get there. Like if nothing else, we take from this that it does not matter who you are, it doesn't matter where you come from, if you have an open heart and a creative mind and you want to make games, you'll find your place.

If we think about the the expiring game designers, right, so if you had to give him one or two pieces of advice, what would you give to current students or aspiring students thinking about going into game design? Especially those from any underrepresented groups. But just for anybody, like what should they be thinking about as an aspiring game designer, developer, production person?

That's a big question. I give a lot of talks at schools about kind of these exact things, so I'll kind of go from like a more practical standpoint and then I'll go from a more experiential one. In a practical standpoint, breaking into the games industry is so incredibly difficult, especially in today's outlook. There's been mass layoffs across the industry. We've already had almost 75% of the total layoffs we've had last year and March started today.

So it's a rough time out there. First, ladies just don't give up. The games industry isn't going anywhere. It's not a race to the top. There will always be a space for you and time, it may just not be the right one for you. And that's okay. That doesn't reflect on you at all. Don't give up hope. Keep creating, create, keep trying.

And eventually you will find your place, whether you carve it yourself or you are given a wonderful opportunity. It will happen. So be tenacious. The second one would be make sure that you have something playable. Games is a great industry in so far as like your only as good as your products in some ways. And sometimes you can show a failed product and say, "Here's one the lessons that I learned," and that's just as good as a complete game up there.

But have something, a YouTube demo of a game that is so janky I couldn't actually play it. A really small vertical slice of a game that you were working on. Show your design documents. If you're looking to be a producer, use a Trello, use a publicly available Trello and give updates on the game that you're working on. Even if nobody reads it. Make it Dev blog.

Those are the kind of things that show me as a hirer in the industry that like these people are passionate, they have experience doing the exact same kind of things that we are doing and they are game creators and that's who I want on my team.

And the second one is, is that I see very often, particularly in younger designers, there is a lot of "I have to prove myself and therefore all of my ideas have to be right." Absolutely not. You are not going to be correct on every single scenario.

I've known designers who have over 40 years of experience in the industry and will listen to even me, that has only a slight amount of design experience when I say that I feel something. It is impossible for you to hold the breadth of knowledge and exposure within your brain. So hear other perspectives if you aren't going to listen to exactly what they're saying, listen to their problems.

Neil Gaiman has a great quote that says, "When people complain about something, they're almost always correct. But when they tell you how to change the thing to make it better, they're almost always incorrect." If nothing else, listen to what they are saying and the problems they are having and try and tackle in a different way. Be humble, seek other perspectives.

You're not always going to be correct and they're not always going to be correct. Try and find a middle ground.

So, looking back, a batch of innovation was, you know, part of your degree and then of the good rate. So if you were to tell student because there's lots of schools where they can go study, what would you say is the reason they should attend UCCS and the Bachelor of Innovation in Game Design, as opposed to choosing some other school? Or would you not?

I hope I would. I would recommend it. I think it's important to present like the diversity of perspectives there. I would recommend the Bachelor of Innovation Program to folks.

It is a significantly less expensive alternative to a ton of other game design degrees out there. USC may sound great on the back of the box, but that $55,000 a year semester tag was what ultimately ended up not taking me there for as far as like what the program itself offers, you don't really find a ton of other programs across the country that immediately jump you into what you are interested in, what you are passionate about.

The Bachelor Innovation kind of cuts out the cruft, cuts out the Gen Ed's and the, you know, extra stuff in immediately semester one day one you are in a class that is talking about game design, that is teaching you how to make things and is teaching you how to program. You get started right out of the gate and that's huge for some folks like me who may not be the best students but get really motivated when they're working on something they're passionate about.

So, it gets you there right out of the gate, the amount of skills that you learn. I said, you know, be a student of life, be a seeker of discovery. If you're a designer, the Bachelor of Innovation does that. You get business law classes that at first you're like, I'm not sure this is going to be super useful, but guess what?

You're going to work with legal at some point, they're going to have something that's like, Ooh, you can't actually use that name because somebody in Norway trademarked it for their game forever ago and haven't released it yet. You're not going to understand those things and have those breadth of perspective unless you've done that. And then you go into things like psychology and you're like, psychology, yeah, if I want to write like a, you know, psychological thriller, maybe that would help.

But they teach you about principles on how people's eyes work when they look at a page and you can immediately relate that to the user experience when they're playing their games. Where are my eyes going to be drawn to first? Where do I need to put critical elements? How can I design a resource system that is visible from my peripheral vision and not something I'm going to have to read a number on and then relate to something?

These are all principles that you will learn in that that don't relate to design, but that will always be a pivotal part of it and will show on your work. The Bachelor of Innovation does a great job with that. I think the only thing like like I mentioned before, I think the only thing that is a slight negative is Colorado's not the best environment for the games industry.

There are a few studios there, but there's not a lot of local places. And I think the team has gotten much better at this since I graduated. I know that there's a club on campus that brings in speakers to talk from the industry, and I know this because I spoke to them a couple of months ago. You know, it's like we're getting there.

I just remember in my college career I always wanted some big time game developer from a well-known studio to come in and just talk to me about what it was like. And unfortunately, being an early on in the program and, you know, being in Colorado, it was difficult to it was difficult to have those people come in and the programs obviously gotten a lot better at that since then.

But that would be like the one sort of like it's not going to be like USC, where as soon as you graduate with your game, it pops on the front of a blizzard hiring manager because they have the connections and everybody in California knows each other. You won't have that, but you will have that exposure and you will become a better student and a better designer and a better game creator through this program.

this is an important lesson for many students.

If you expect somebody to hand you the solution, you're not the person who's digging to get it done. So it might be you have the 9 to 5 job

So Terra, I just want to thank you so much for taking the time to to talk with us about this. Hopefully, will this will inspire some students and maybe some faculty. Right. This is a really wonderful opportunity. I want to thank you, give you an opportunity, say any closing words. Tell us where we can find you online.

Yeah, you know, thanks for having me on. It was an absolute pleasure. I'd love to give back in any way that I can. So super happy to be here and thanks for having me. If you want to keep an eye on what I'm doing at Riot, you can find me on Twitter @riotyasuna. That's our i0tyasu and a that is my handle both on Twitter and also in link of legends at me.

We'll play some games. It'll be fun. In terms of next steps. My hope is to stay here as long as possible and keep working on League of Legends.