

**Grayson Scantlebury's Top 25 Tips
to Survive Terms 5 and 6.**

Before I Begin...

As a precursor this is a list of things that I have noticed over the course of my year at VFS. For those who don't know who I am, my name is Grayson Scantlebury and I am a member of the GD08 Graduating Class. I worked on the project called Oasis. I have written this in a manner that is hopefully entertaining as well as informative. Everything written here is in my own opinion, and may or may not apply to you directly. Everyone's experience at VFS will be different. The following are in no particular order of importance and covers everything from how to keep mentors happy, to how to organize your schedule, to little things I noticed that you can use to help better your experience at VFS. What is not written here is a guide that will include everything you would ever need to know. These are tips and should be used to build upon the knowledge you've already gained at VFS and during your life. So without further rambling here goes!

-Grayson

Index

<u>Before I Begin</u>	2
<u>Group / Project Tips</u>	4
1) Dream Big but Dream Focused.....	4
2) Be Flexible During Pre-Production	5
3) Don't Stop Creating.....	5
4) Schedule, Schedule, Schedule!.....	6
5) Buffer Time	6
6) Work ahead of Schedule if you can!	7
7) Everyone Needs to be on the Same Page	7
8) Goals and Current Schedule up on the Wall.....	8
9) Understanding Strengths, Weaknesses, Priorities.....	9
10) Prototype Early	10
11) Test Early, Test Often!.....	10
12) Your Production is a Big Interview.....	11
13) Your Game is a Big Interview Too.....	12
14) Core Hours.....	12
15) Daily Scrums.....	13
16) Version Control	13
17) Back Your Stuff Up!.....	14
18) Collaborators.....	15
<u>Individual Tips</u>	16
19) Have Fun	16
20) Have "Me Time" but be willing to Make Sacrifices.....	16
21) Ask!	17
22) Ask Each Other!.....	17
23) Get to Know Your Classmates.....	17
24) Go Out with the Whole Class.....	18
25) Spell / Grammar Check.....	18
<u>Final Comments</u>	19

Group / Project Tips

1) Dream Big but Dream Focused

Remember all that stuff during preproduction and game development where we were taught about core game play, and developing all your features to support it. It's True!! I think this is probably one of the most important things to remember while planning your game. (I know you started that in term 4 or maybe even earlier) Now since most of you already have your game planned out, make sure that all those cool little extras you keep coming up with compliment the core features of your game.

Your game should consist of a one or two core, very basic elements. So for my example the core game element is moving left AND right. I know shocking. We're now going to add a secondary feature. Jumping! A new radical trend breaking feature. We have to ask ourselves, why did we add jumping? Well we added it because we thought it would be cool. Well that's ok, but we then have to ask does it build on our core element? Yes we can move left and right while we're jumping and we'll be able to reach new spots on our level. Ok cool in it goes.

New feature, collecting coins. Wow that's crazy. Ok so again, why did we add this feature? Well it helps give the player satisfaction when they get it and it leads them around the level. Ok good, does it apply to jumping? Umm yes, lets put some of the coins in the air. Ok good we now have a couple of features and they all relate to each other. I know this is a very simple example aka Mario but you can see how something so basic can relate.

Now you may be saying hey wait there's lots of games that have features that don't really add to the core game element. How many of

you have clicked on that poor critter 20 times until it explodes, yeah that's cool, but it doesn't really add much.

Because we are all students and our project does not have an unlimited time budget we can't really afford to put in all the little cool things like exploding sheep. What you need to do is focus on your core, make it fun, add a feature, make sure it adds to the core, and keep on building. Your core element is your foundation, it doesn't matter how many fancy decorations you put on the building if the foundation sucks the building is going to crumble.

2) Be Flexible During Pre-Production

How big is your team, four, five, six people? The more people in your group the less that you will get all of your ideas your way. Lets say your group has five people, that means you should get your way about 20% of the time. This is not to say don't suggest things, but you may have some brilliant idea and the other members want to take the game in an entirely different direction. It's pre-production and concepts are not in black and white, try to find what you like or dislike in every idea. If it comes down to a vote or you just don't like the foundation of a particular idea, write down the pro's and con's. Make sure that your concerns are being heard, state your argument and I assure you that your meetings will go much smoother and everyone will feel like they're getting an equal part in design.

3) Don't Stop Creating

Even if you come up with what you think will be your final game, or the end all feature. Keep coming up with new ideas. You never know when something might spark. You may come up with a new idea

that changes the way your game play flows, you may come up with an idea to improve one of your other features. Keep thinking!

4) Schedule, Schedule, Schedule!

Stop and look at how much time during terms 1-4 is spent on showing you scheduling techniques, you have an entire class devoted to creating a schedule! Use it! I know full well that schedules change and we're all students and we have no idea how long it's going to take to create feature 'x'. Ask your teachers, make educated guess, plan ahead.

Scheduling is as important to your project as a cool level, or a cool character, or a cool feature. The reason for this is because without a well thought out planned schedule chances are you'll only get to choose two of the above examples. Which one are you going to cut? Well the reason you make a schedule is so you don't have to make the heart-wrenching choices.

5) Buffer Time

While you're scheduling make sure, for your own sake, that you create LOTS of expendable time. Something will go wrong, a version will crash a model will not get completed, feature 'z' will be broken and you'll have to go back to the drawing board for a whole week and redo something! Make sure that you have as much time as humanly possible to polish and fix and test and assure that everything is working the way you want it. The last thing you want is to have your final game finished, and be saying to someone playing the game... "Oh

make sure you don't open that door cause the monster on the other side crashes the game"

Buffering time is hugely important for development cycle. Having extra time and not staring at the schedule above your head wondering if you're going to hit the next deadline helps reduce stress on the group as well. The worst thing that can happen if you give yourself too much time is you get all this free time to feature creep!

6) Work ahead of Schedule if you can!

If you have 5 things to do on your list for Monday, and it gets to 8pm and you finish all of them, don't just call it a night. Knock off one of your to-do list items for Tuesday. I can almost guarantee you that one of the items you checked off today will be broken, or something you did last week will break, or something will change and you need to create some new content. If you can get ahead of your schedule take every advantage you can. It will catch up with you eventually

7) Everyone Needs to be on the Same Page

At all times everyone in the group needs to know the following:

- **Core Element(s)**
 - Whatever that may be, short and concise
 - Aka elevator pitch
- **What stage the game is in**
 - What works?
 - What's broken?
 - What's half working?
- **What is the biggest current concern?**
 - Character 3 is not in the game

- Level doors don't open when 'x' happens
- If you press 'g' the game crashes

And everyone needs to be able to reiterate the same information. So that if mentor B asks you or your teammate beside you, you'll both give the same answer. Mentors will come in every single day and ask you this information. The ability to clearly give them all this information quickly and efficiently will allow you to move on to the next step. Which is them suggesting solutions and helping you fix stuff.

8) Goals and Current Schedule up on the Wall

On your wall should be an updated overall schedule (long term), as well as individual or your weekly schedules. In addition in nice big bold font for everyone to see should be something like this.

Week 5

- Add character '2' model
- Finish marketplace level
- ~~- Code in new jumping~~
- test monster spawning

This is both for your own benefit and will help your group know exactly what you need to have collectively done at the end of the week. And for the mentors and teachers, so they can come in look up at the wall and be like hmm ok this is the top 4 things they're working on this week, they've already done the new jumping, now I can ask them to show me the new jumping. As opposed to spending the first

10-15 minutes trying to explain each little detail that you've worked on. Big and **Bold!**

9) Understanding Strengths, Weaknesses, Priorities

As part of forming a group I feel this is very important. Everyone in the group will have skills and assets they can bring to the team, but they will also have areas that they will need help. Maybe you have someone on your team who is a phenomenal artist but can't spell, then someone else in your group who is better with their words can help them out, and vice versa. By understanding what level everyone is at you can assist each other and everyone will benefit in the end. When I say priorities I mean in the sense of life and the game. Maybe someone in your group is married or has a girlfriend that is very important to them. If they need one weeknight every week to see them and that is the most important thing to them, then the rest of the group needs to understand that. Not everyone will have the same priorities in life and it's important to realize this and try to work your schedules to fit for everyone.

As for the game maybe for someone the most important aspect is the lighting needs to be perfect, because they want to do lighting as a job, where someone who's focusing on getting a scripting job could care less. It's important that you cater your game, as well as your time to accommodate both, but be careful that one person's priorities aren't digging into someone else's. This is tricky and this is why I recommend that you all sit down, put all your wishes on the table and discuss how you will be working on your project.

10) Prototype Early

Do it! Do it as soon as possible. Whether you do it in flash, warcraft 3, or with action figures in a sandbox, do it. The sooner you're able to play even a simulation of your game and be, hey this is fun, you'll be able to make better judgment calls during your development. If you're making Mario in unreal, have your level designer create a long hallway with 20 square boxes and some minihealth pickups. This should take all of 5 minutes to put together. The minihealth packs can represent coins or fireflowers and a static mesh as a bad guy or whatever it is in your game, get something working and build on it. The quicker you have something that's testable the sooner you'll know what you want to do, or change.

(warning: don't have your artist make a beautiful backdrop or model and then put it in only to discover ohh.. that doesn't really do what we want it to, lets design something else)

What you want is a grey cube in the game to represent that gorgeous statue of a pink elephant. When the game works you can go back replace that placeholder.

11) Test Early, Test Often!

Like I said earlier get a working prototype as soon as possible. Once you get your core game elements in bring in some outside testers. What makes sense to you 'will not' make sense to someone who knows nothing about your game the first time around. Get as much feedback as you can from your testers, do they like the movement, the camera, did they know that by holding the mouse

down they charge up 'x' attack and that's why they couldn't kill whatever. Test as early as possible and keep testing. Bring in a new fresh mind at least once a week. Bring in your old testers after you've made major changes. How quickly did it take for them to get to point 'a' since last time. Do they like the changes? Do they have more suggestions.

Create a questionnaire highlighting your major concerns, Guide them through giving you feedback. "Looks cool", "I had fun" is not really helpful, what looks cool, why is it fun? Did they have fun when their character did something he wasn't supposed to maybe that's worth investigation.

12) Your Production is a Big Interview

You're not only creating a game, your creating a clever portfolio piece disguised as a game. During your development your showing that you not only have the skills to make a great product but also that you have the skills to survive a project development cycle. All the teachers and mentors you deal with during the year are looking at you as a student and as a potential co-worker. Make sure you conduct yourself the same way you would at a job. I know this is a scary concept, and don't worry about it too much. You're not under a microscope this is after all the game design industry and people come in all shapes and sizes and personalities, just keep in the back of your mind.

13) Your Game is a Big Interview Too

As I mentioned your game is a cleverly disguised interview. Make sure your creating a game that can be enjoyed by people in the interview in a relatively short amount of time. This doesn't mean make sure your game only lasts 5 minutes. For example the game I worked on Oasis, on average it takes 6-7 minutes for someone to get the beast. Most games last 10-15 minutes or even longer if it's a close match or the beast is defeated multiple times. The point is that you can display everything that went into the game in a short amount of time. So this means if you have 4 levels and it takes someone 10 minutes to finish level 1 and they say cool game and move on, they won't ever see levels 2, 3 and 4!

Also you're not making this game exclusively for hardcore gamers. Oasis is meant to be played competitively and is most enjoyed by people who are good at the game. It can also be picked up and played by someone with no gaming ability and they can wander around the world and go, hey this looks cool and understand what they are doing. (at least I hope they did!)

The point is you need to tailor your game play for that 5 minute experience that most people will give your game. I know it sucks we wanted to shoot for a 30 minute experience but its one of the few limitations you have to work with. What you do with a player during that 5 minutes is completely up to you though, go wild.

14) Core Hours

Figure out what sort of hours your team wants to work during. This does not include class time. And be there! Core hours are not for playing games and not for goofing around or taking 2 hour lunches.

Core hours are there to help structure the day and ensure that work is getting done. It also serves as a tool to make sure your whole team is there and on the same page and when you need to make on the spot decisions you don't have to wait till tomorrow." They sound dumb I know but it's yet another thing we got taught that, "what the!" really is helpful.

15) Daily Scrums

20-30 Minutes every morning, preferably at the beginning of core hours. Everyone on the team:

- This is what I got done yesterday
- This is what I plan on doing today
- I will/will not hit Fridays deadline
- I need help with _____. I'm done so I can help with _____
- My concern for the project is _____

Each person should be able to whip through their section in 5 minutes or so. If there is a big problem like, "hey guys the new code we put in last night to get the monsters to shoot makes them not move any more I need time to fix it, or I'm really worried that this feature we haven't done yet won't work. Then at the end of the scrum address those concerns. By doing this each and every morning, everyone will know where everyone else is in the project, it will help you have quicker meetings, it will help you explain to the mentors quicker where you are at, and will help you keep on schedule.

16) Version Control

We used TortiseSVN, but if you ask your teachers I'm sure there is a more recent version or a different program that does the same.

What this program does is links a particular file on everyone's computer together. So when I right click and "commit" my latest version of the map, my teammate across from me can right click "update" and get that most recent file. This allowed us to quickly transfer versions around without overlapping or losing material. The ability to have the most recent copy of your game on all computers is very important, for both mentors and yourselves.

17) Back Your Stuff Up!

EVERYTHING. Seriously, that little Photoshop image you were playing with two weeks ago, oh yeah you want it now, oops didn't save. That map version where the bridge worked, ooh wait it doesn't work now, what did we change? Oops...

Back up everything, and for anyone reading this earlier than term 4 back up everything you do ALL YEAR. If not for the project then for your own personal file, and for your portfolio. I did what I thought was a really cool model in term two, it was quite simple but I'm including it on my online portfolio because I like it. Had I not backed up every little thing I did all year there's no way I would have been able to find it.

People loose files.

Teammates (and yourself) will accidently replace assets

Teachers will loose projects handed in

Back up everything and you will never have to stress out about lost files.

18) Collaborators

Unfortunately no group in VFS history so far has had a perfect relationship with their collaborators. Hopefully you'll be the lucky first. Keep in mind if you have 4 collaborators doing character models for you, on average, 2 will be ok one will be great and one will not be good enough to put in the game. Some groups had worse experience than this some a little better. Don't rely completely on them but don't count them out. They can save you weeks of work and in general produce amazing work. Communication is key. Involve your collaborators in the project as much as possible. The more invested they are in the project the better quality product you will get out of them.

Individual Tips

19) Have Fun

Good Gravy you're going to get to make video games for a living! I can't think of anything more exciting except maybe racing spaceships around the moon. Enjoy your time at VFS, make the most out of your time that you possibly can. Get involved in the community. Get involved in the school events. Go and play some games while you're here we have an entire library full of great titles that many of you have probably never played. Take advantage of everything you can while you're here.

20) Have "Me Time" but be willing to Make Sacrifices

Me time is important but there is a time and place. At VFS by now I'm sure you have all experienced some of the storm that is VFS workload. Taking time to relax and recoup is essential to survive the year but make sure you do it right. Firstly don't take "me time" during core hours. Also don't take the weekend off without telling your team your intentions. It's your best friend's birthday and you're going to whistler say so, and say you'll catch up during the week. Last thing you want is the rest of the team working hard while you play games, or they work the weekend and you come back with a tan. Make sure everyone knows what everyone else is doing so no-one is upset that so-and-so isn't pulling their weight. Finding the right balance is important and it will be different for each individual and each group.

21) Ask!

We're all students. Ask questions! Your teachers want you to ask questions. There's never a reason to stop learning.

"He who asks is a fool for five minutes, but he who does not ask remains a fool forever"

-Chinese Proverb

22) Ask Each Other!

Ask each other questions. I know it's very gratifying to figure out something on your own. I also know it's satisfying to figure out a problem before so-and-so. And I also know that we are all prideful beings. And I also know that your class is probably just as competitive with each other as mine was. But if you ask the guy across the room, and they show you a mod that has a similar feature that you've been trying to figure out, and then two days later you show them a skybox that would be perfect for their level you both just saved one whole day of work!

The more you guys help each other out the better everyone's project will be. The more you will each learn individually. And the better your class environment will be. And trust me at the end of the year if everyone's project is great, the whole class looks better overall, rather than if just one project sticks out because the others suck. If you have the top project out of a whole class of top projects isn't that, that much more impressive?

23) Get to Know Your Classmates

Go out to lunch with everyone in your class at least once. And I don't mean that one time you went to harbor center with 15 people

and so-and-so was on the opposite side. I mean go out to lunch with everyone, talk to them. Who knows maybe you both like the same anime or band, or you both played soccer. You're all at video game school but I can assure you, if you look hard enough there is something about single person in your class other than video games that you have in common.

24) Go Out with the Whole Class

Go to karaoke, or the bar to watch the game. Even if you can't sing or you don't even know what a "Canuck" is go, mingle. By the next day you'll have stories to talk about, new songs to sing and memories. You'll all be a much happier unified group when you all go out and enjoy yourselves. And if you don't everyone will be buzzing about when so-and-so got up on stage and sang "pretty woman" and fell off the stage.

25) Spell / Grammar Check

Last but certainly not least. This may seem trivial but do it on everything possible. It's one of those things that if you do it right, no one will notice, but if you do it wrong it sticks out and whoever is reading your work is wondering what else you did wrong. This is very important to make yourself look professional. If you need have someone else proofread your work.

(on a personal note I'm awful at this and I constantly get people to edit my work, its worth it. And thanks to everyone who painstakingly helped me edit this!)

Final Comments

Lastly I would like to thank VFS, and all my teachers for their time and patience and for giving me the opportunity to get into the game design industry. What I do with myself now is of my own accord I feel I have been given all the skills necessary to get my foot and possibly a leg in the door.

Also I would like to thank each and every member of the GD08 Class, because without all of you my experiences over the year would be completely different and I probably wouldn't have even written this.

Thanks everyone!