00:00:00	Music	Transition	Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.
00:00:01	Promo	Promo	**Speaker**: *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

[Music fades out.] |
| 00:00:12 | Music | Transition | "Huddle Formation" from the album *Thunder, Lightning, Strike* by The Go! Team. A fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out. |
| 00:00:19 | Jesse Thorn | Host | It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. This next interview is about video games. And even if that's not the kind of thing you're into—maybe you don't know what *Fortnite* is or the last console you owned was a Sega Genesis, but still, hear me out. You're gonna wanna keep listening. For the better part of a decade, the video game industry has made more in revenue than Hollywood. Year after year. It's not even close anymore. The two industries have a fair amount in common. Both movies and video games take enormous amounts of work to produce—work that spans dozens of disciplines, sometimes employing thousands of people on a single project. There are big studios, small studios, indie projects, multibillion dollar franchises. But the video game industry—at least compared to film and TV—is relatively new. It's changing constantly. Sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. And the folks who make these games, most of them don't have the same protections movie crews find in, say, a union or guild.

Jason Schreier has made a career reporting on exactly that. He's uncovered labor abuses in the video game industry, the creative and legal disputes behind the scenes, and he's done it all in a disarming, relatable tone. Jason's got a new book out—*Press Reset: Ruin and Recovery in the Video Game Industry*. It tells the origin stories of some of the most renowned video game studios in the world and how those same studios eventually collapsed. Jason's also the host of the Maximum Fun video game podcast, *Triple Click*.

[Music fades in.]

We're very excited to get to talk to him. Let's get into it. |
00:01:59	Music	Transition	Thumpy, relaxed music.
00:02:05	Jesse	Host	Jason, welcome to *Bullseye*. I'm so happy to have you on the show.
00:02:09	Jason Schreier	Guest	Thank you so much for having me, Jesse. It is an honor to be here.
00:02:12	Jesse	Host	So, you have written a lot about where video games come from and I think that, had I not read your work, I wouldn't know—even as a guy who's been, you know, playing video games since *Tecmo* football. So, Jason, can you tell me a little bit about the business structure, first, of the video game industry? And then we'll get into the creative process of a video game.
00:02:41	Jason	Guest	Yeah! Well, so, when a game designer and a game artist love each other very much—

[Jesse laughs.]

—they go to their bed—no. And that's where video games come from! Yeah, it's a weird, wild industry because it makes more |

money than Hollywood—which not a lot of people realize. I think there's still a little bit of a stigma to video games that like people assume like, "Oh, yeah! Those things for kids." Even though it's gotten bigger than anything in the world. But it's also an industry that is very fraught and it's very difficult to kind of crack into and be successful at, even once you've been doing it for a few years. It's almost like media in that like there's not a lot of stability. There's not a lot of safety. There's not a lot of like guaranteed career paths. And that's something I've been writing about for a while and just kind of trying to shed some light on how things really work. To kind of answer your—to answer your question from a general perspective, the way that the business works is that there are game developers and game publishers, and the game publishers handle the finance end, and the game developers handle the creative end. And developers can't do their work without getting funding and publishers can't make their money without making the games.

So, it's—there's that kind of symbiotic relationship between those two entities. It's kind of the classic like business versus creative tension that causes a lot of problems in the games industry. And yeah, and then there are like the bigger—the bigger companies. The EAs and Activision, Sony, Microsoft, Nintendo. And then there are a bunch of indie developers and everything in between. I believe that the latest revenue number I've seen is $180 billion a year. So, lots of—lots of people in this thing. Lots of money in this thing.

00:04:20	Jesse	Host	Video games are made at all different scales—just as any other form of entertainment media is. The top of that pile, the biggest games, are generally called AAA games. I don't know what the triple "A" stands for.
00:04:36	Jason	Guest	I don't think it stands for anything. I think it just means—it's like industry lingo for big budget. For like, "This cost a lot of money."
00:04:42	Jesse	Host	Yeah. So, how much money is spent on a single one of those games?
00:04:49	Jason	Guest	Um, it could be hundreds of millions. I mean, in some cases it's literally hundreds of millions of dollars. Because you're paying—the biggest expense in these games is the people and some of these games, especially nowadays, you look at the credits and it's literally thousands of people, because it's not just the companies that we know. I mean, some gamers out there might have heard of the biggest companies, like Blizzard, like EA, whatever. But it's not just those—people at those companies, which might be hundreds of thousands—it's also outsourcing companies that they're all working with these days. So, you look in the credits of a game and it might be dozens of companies, thousands of people all across the world. You might have—if you're playing the new *Assassin's Creed*, you might be playing one level that was developed in Singapore and then another level that was developed in Montreal. So, we're talking thousands and thousands of people and you give them all salaries, you give them all benefits, you give them all office space and suddenly we're talking about many, many millions of dollars, here. And just like the expenses have just grown exponentially as the technology has gotten more elaborate, as the graphics have gotten a lot more beautiful and high fidelity and you can—you can recreate a lot more—like, you can create these

			realistic looking graphics, but that just means more expenses and more people and a whole lot more money that you have to throw at these things.
00:06:07	Jesse	Host	One of the kinds of story that you tell in *Press Reset* is the story of what it's like to go from that world to the world of indie video games, smaller video games. So, for many years—and still to some extent—the video game ecosystem was dominated by consoles. You know? The Nintendo Entertainment System or the Xbox or whatever. And for a long time, getting a game onto one of those consoles meant, you know, if you wanted to make an NES game, you had to make a bunch of Nintendo cartridges, which cost a bunch of money. And then it costs a bunch of money to get them into stores. *[Jason agrees several times as Jesse continues.]* And it costs a bunch of money to put boxes around them and print manuals and all this stuff. And it meant that the scale of a video game had to be pretty big to get out there—at least on—at least on consoles, and to some extent especially before the internet, on computers as well. What changed that made building indie games so much more viable, as a way to make a business?
00:07:18	Jason	Guest	Yeah, well, digital distribution was the biggest factor. And the fact that suddenly, starting in—around the mid-2000s, late 2000s—so, there were always indie games. We actually just did an episode of *Triple Click*, our sister podcast, about like the rise of indie games and how the modern indie game industry got started. But yeah, there's—there were—have always been—
00:07:40	Jesse	Host	I mean, Jason, I don't wanna—I'm not trying to get involved in shareware erasure, here. I played my fair share of video games on my home computer that someone had to copy onto a disk and hand to you. *[Jason affirms.]* And then if you liked it, you had to mail a check for $10 to a guy in Spokane, Washington, or whatever.
00:07:56	Jason	Guest	Oh man. Yeah, good stuff—that whole—man, I've met some and talked to some of the people who were like the earlier industry pioneers and they've talked about like going around with plastic bags of discs, selling them to people. It's wild stuff. *[They laugh.]* But, um—
00:08:08	Jesse	Host	Like Too Short selling mixtapes out of the—out of the trunk of his car.
00:08:12	Jason	Guest	Exactly. Exactly. But yeah, the—looking at the modern indie game industry and how indie gaming became more lucrative, it really started around the mid-2000s, when digital distribution became more ubiquitous—both on consoles, on Xbox, with like the Xbox Live and the Xbox digital store—and also on PC with Steam, GOG, and Itch, and like other stores where you could just—but where anyone could really just get a game up on there. And it got to the point where like around—I think it was—there were games called *Braid* and *Castle Crashers* that were like some of the first indie

games to sell a million copies. And that really just like inspired a lot of people and led to a lot of people just looking over and being like, "Woah! This is like a really big deal."

And around 2009 or 2010 a little game called *Minecraft* came out and that started blowing people away, became a cultural phenomenon. And then, yeah. Throughout the 2010s, we've seen this rise of like people being able to go off and just download a program like GameMaker or Unity or Unreal and use one of those programs to make a game and to just kind of create their own thing. And obviously, it's easier said than done, but the barriers for entry have just been completely removed. Like, anyone can go off and make a game if they so choose. In my first book, *Blood, Sweat, and Pixels*, I wrote a story—one of the chapters in the book is about a game called *Stardew Valley*. And *Stardew Valley* is this fantastic farm game that's very peaceful and serene and fun to play, addictive. And it's made by one guy! Eric Barone.

[Jesse chuckles.]

And Eric made it by like literally sitting in his attic.

00:09:45	Jesse	Host	Jason, it's peaceful and serene until you *[chuckling]*—until you start shaking whenever you're not playing it.
00:09:50	Jason	Guest	Right. Yes. It's peaceful to play it, less peaceful when you're not playing it. Exactly. *[Laughs.]* So, Eric Barone made this game by himself in his attic, did everything himself—the programming, the art, the music. Literally everything he did by himself. So, the fact that that can happen now is wild! And is very much a stark comparison to what things were like a couple of decades ago. The downside of all that is that we've entered what people call the Indiepocalypse, which is like this giant, giant oversaturation—this glut of indie games on the market where it's very, very difficult to stand out. But yeah, but in *Press Reset* I talk about some of the— some of the successes, some of the failures, some of the kind of like ups and downs people face. A lot of people use like a studio shut down or a mass layoff as a way to go and pursue their indie dreams and like use it as an excuse and say, "You know what, I'm getting a couple months of severance. I'm gonna go off and I'm gonna—I'm gonna make a game. I'm gonna use this to fund my indie dreams."

Which I think is really cool. It's always cool and creatively inspiring to see people doing that sort of thing.

00:10:56	Jesse	Host	So, if you're making a game like *The Witcher III* and you're spending hundreds of millions of dollars on the process of making a vast, immersive world of Polish fantasy novel gameplay—man, I really hated playing that video game.
00:11:16	Jason	Guest	Oh no! *[Laughs.]*
00:11:17	Jesse	Host	I know. Sorry, all people whose emotional lives revolve around that game and think it's the greatest thing ever. I've heard from you in the past.

[They laugh.]

I've never had a more inscrutable entertainment experience. But you know, you're spending hundreds of millions of dollars. Right?

			And obviously no group of eight buddies who all just got laid off together and head off to make their own video game, much less one guy in an attic, can get together the hundreds of millions of dollars required to make a game like that. So, how can you make a game that sells 1,000,000 copies if you are competing against games that are spending $100,000,000? Like, what are the leverage points? What can a team of eight people do?
00:12:10	Jason	Guest	Yeah, well, I mean first of all, you have to get really lucky. And *Stardew Valley* has sold like 12,000,000 copies. So, that's a game—that's an example—that's an anomaly. That's like on the smash sensation like cultural phenomenon scale of things. Most games are not that lucky. Most games are not like—because it's not only that you have to be really good. There are all of really good games that come out every week that are just abandoned. Like, you have to be in the right place at the right time. You have to have a good marketing strategy. You have to get your game out there. You have to have the right hook. So, it's a whole lot of factors, like anything else. It's sort of like if you're an indie filmmaker, you could put your film on YouTube, but like doesn't mean anyone's gonna see it. You need to find the way to get it in front of people. And it's the same with making an indie game.

I think that like if you're a team of eight people and you're making a game, first of all you can release it for much cheaper. Usually new games, new AAA games like *The Witcher III* come out at $60. You can be like, "You know what, I'm gonna release my game at $20 or $15." And try to appeal to people that way. But really, like these days—because the landscape is so like—well, because, first of all, the AAA landscape has gotten a little bit stale and rote and like a lot of those AAA games are just doing a lot of the same sorts of things, because they're so high budget that they can't take risks and they really have to just like go follow the same checklist to try to appeal to millions of people. There's a lot of like fresh, unique stuff in the indie world and I think gamers and fans have like really grown to appreciate that and can make games that are like really unique and smart and fun to play a success.

So, like I don't know, I played a bunch of like—like some of my favorite games of the past couple of years are games that were made by very, very small teams. There was a game called *Return of the Obra Dinn* that is like this phenomenal murder mystery game where you have to go—you're playing as this claims adjuster in the 18th century and you go on this ship and you have to figure out how everybody died on the ship, because they are like 60 people who died on the ship and you do that by like going—by using this device you have to kind of see the last moments before their death and then you have to like figure out and write notes down and solve this giant puzzle of like who died where and how did they die. And it's a really phenomenal, fascinating game. But there's so much stuff like that out there in the indie space that's just like creative and smart and unique and like unlike anything you've played before. And sometimes that stuff catches on and is really appealing to people, which is cool.

You're never gonna sell 10,000,000 copies of, you know, *Return of the Obra Dinn* or like any of the other indie hits unless you're lucky

enough to be *Stardew Valley*. Which, again, is very rare. There are only so many like *Minecraft*s out there. But if you're *Return of the Obra Dinn* and you're eight people, you don't need to sell 1,000,000 copies, right? Like if you're a small group and you all want to—let's say you all wanna make $100,000 a year. You want like a good salary that you can support a family on. Then you don't need like—$100,000 and eight people is $800,000 a year. So, you don't need to sell a million copies. You just need to sell whatever can get you to that number. And sometimes it can be sustainable. Like, you can create a sustainable career as an indie studio without ever really making that one smash hit that like is on CNN every night or whatever.

00:15:24	Jesse	Host	You mentioned briefly in *Press Reset* a game that I just thought was absolutely breathtaking—a game called *Firewatch*. And I—it led me to think about the business of that game. It's a very narratively driven game. The first time I have ever been moved by the narrative of a video game. I've played a lot of video games that I've enjoyed a lot; I wanna be clear. But any time anyone is talking to each other on the screen, my eyes tend to cross. So, it is a very narratively driven game about a *[chuckles]*—basically just about a lonely guy in a fire watching tower in a national park or a state park, maybe it is. Don't @ me. And I thought like what are the things that allow a game like this to be made by a group of 10 or 20 people when a game that I like, like *Skyrim*, is made by 1000 people? *[Chuckles.]*
			So, what are the exact things about—if we take that example of *Firewatch*—what are the things that are different about that game? The like making of the game that allow you to create a satisfying experience but not spend that much money?
00:16:52	Jason	Guest	Yeah. Well, so, first of all, actually you'd be surprised at how few people worked on *Skyrim*. *Skyrim* is actually a surprisingly small team for what it was. But yes. Much bigger than *Firewatch*'s team. *Firewatch* is—
00:17:03	Jesse	Host	I mean, they probably had like three or four different dragon people whose job was dragons.
00:17:07	Jason	Guest	*[Laughs.]* They had a lot of dragon people.

[Jesse agrees.]

Yeah, so *Firewatch* is interesting. I mean, if—first of all, if you look at the map, I mean you can see the maps in both games. If you compare them, just in terms of like the amount of space in the map, like *Firewatch* is *[chuckles]* like a small-town village compared to *Skyrim*'s like entire US. Like, *Skyrim*, you can explore these—you can explore for hundred of hours this world, whereas *Firewatch* is very small scale. So, that alone—like the amount of time and the resources that it takes to create a game like *Firewatch* is much different. *Firewatch* is also very clever in how it uses its map. It actually like—it has you exploring the same paths but in different ways and some are kind of linear and then not so linear and like closed off and then open up to you and it's very smart. It's a very well-designed game.

One important thing worth noting is that the makers of *Firewatch* had all worked on big games before. The studio behind it, Campo Santo, was founded by a couple of people who were at Telltale for a

long time. Telltale was a company that worked on like *The Walking Dead* games and a bunch of other stuff. Also mentioned in *Press Reset* because Telltale unfortunately shut down a few years ago. But *Firewatch* is very—it's very smart in how it uses its limited resources to tell this evocative story and like—without having to throw too much stuff at you. There are no big budget cutscenes with things exploding—until the end, kind of, where things are on fire. But like, there's no—there's not a lot of—there's not a lot of stuff in there that would have taken people—like would have taken a cinematics team many, many months to create and millions of dollars to put in or anything like that.

The graphics are very—they're beautiful, but they're very stylized. They're not like the highest fidelity possible. So, they don't have to be ultra-realistic or anything like that. You would never confuse *Firewatch* for like *The Last of Us* or something like that. And yeah, it's just a bunch of super smart, clever people coming up with ways to make this game and like an affordable, like reasonable way. And it should be noted—I mean, kind of the sad coda on all this is that the studio behind *Firewatch*, which was purchased by Valve—like I mentioned before, consolidation here—and great for them. I'm glad they got paid and all, but like now they're part of a bigger machine and like working on way more expensive games as opposed to just like a team of ten people or whatever it was working on small, creative stuff. So, yeah. Sadly, the—it's very difficult for indie studios to survive, even when they make games as highly regarded as *Firewatch*.

00:19:37	Jesse	Host	We'll finish up with Jason Schreier in just a minute. After the break, what is the future of the video game industry and what changes might be in store for the thousands of people who make the games? Stay with us. It's *Bullseye*, from MaximumFun.org and NPR.
00:19:54	Music	Transition	Cheerful, chiming music.
00:19:55	Jesse	Promo	This message comes from NPR sponsor Odoo.

Is your old software making it impossible to keep up with demand? Then it's time to switch to Odoo. Odoo is a suite of business applications designed to streamline, automate, and simplify any company. Odoo has apps for everything: CRM, inventory, manufacturing, sales, accounting. You name it, Odoo's got you covered. So, stop wasting time and start getting stuff done with Odoo. For a free trial, go to Odoo.com/bullseye.

[Music fades out.]

00:20:33	Promo	Clip	**Yowei Shaw**: I'm Yowei Shaw.

Kia Miakka Natisse: I'm Kia Miakka Natisse.

Yowei: We're the hosts of the NPR podcast *Invisibilia*.

Kia: You can think of Invisibilia kind of like a sonic blacklight.

[Thoughtful music fades in.]

Yowei: When you switch us on, you will hear surprising and intimate stories.

Kia: Stories that help you notice things in your world that maybe you didn't see before.

Yowei: Listen to the *Invisibilia* podcast, from NPR.

00:20:55	Jesse	Host	Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest, Jason Schreier, covers the video game industry for *Bloomberg News*. Before that, he covered the same beat for nearly a decade at *Kotaku*. He has a new book that just came out. *Press Reset: Ruin and Recovery in the Video Game Industry*. It talks about how some of gaming's biggest studios are adapting or failing to adapt to a constantly changing industry.
			I wanna talk about one of the games that you write extensively about in *Press Reset*. I'm gonna be frank: I've chosen this one because it was one of the only games you wrote about that I have played. It's a game called *BioShock Infinite*. First of all, for people who haven't played this game, could you kind of give me a general idea of what kind of game it is and what happens in it?
00:21:43	Jason	Guest	Yeah! Sure. So, to go back in time a little bit, in 2007 a game called *BioShock* came out and this was a game that was immediately just like had an impact on everybody. It was one of those games that just comes around once—only once in a generation that was just like, "Holy crap. Like this game is mind-blowing." It's got this combination of like artistic sensibility and narrative smarts and does all these cool things and it really blew people away. It was critically acclaimed. It was considered one of the greatest games ever and it sold really well. And so, the studio behind it didn't make *BioShock 2*. *BioShock 2* is a whole 'nother story that's also in *Press Reset*. But the studio behind it—Irrational—went on to make *BioShock Infinite*, which was their own version of a sequel. The third *BioShock* game, essentially.

And *BioShock Infinite* was a game that—I guess the best way to describe this whole series is like they're first-person shooters. So, your camera is the eyes of the character and you are carrying a gun and you are shooting things. But they're also sci-fi. They have a sci-fi element to them. And they're also—they're trying to say something. They're games that have a point. So, it's not just like a roller coaster ride where it's like, "Oh! Look at these ships! Look at these tanks! Blow up these people!" It's a game that wants to say something philosophical about the nature of humanity and the nature of art and wants to have some sort of like aesthetic sense and is full of references to stuff. *BioShock Infinite* is—like one of the books that the director of the game, Ken Levine, asked everyone at the studio to read was *The Devil in the White City* by Erik Larson—about the—about the Chicago World's Fair and the murders there. And so, it was—it was the type of game that like had literary sensibilities—literary ambitions.

And yeah, it's arguable whether the game actually delivered *[chuckles]* on its promises. I think it was one of those games—it was—it was really fascinating, because it got a lot of critical acclaim at first and then afterwards, like within the next two weeks, you could see this massive backlash campaign where people were like, "Oh my god, wait. What—this game is saying what?!" And people

			were like, "Wait, what?! This game is like trying to say that the populist revolutionaries are just as bad as the fascists they're trying to—they're trying to overturn?!" But that's a whole 'nother story, but yeah. That's *BioShock Infinite* in a nutshell.
00:24:02	Jesse	Host	As a player of *BioShock Infinite*—which I bought because my friend Kumail told me to buy it, and he was wrong.

[Jason chuckles.]

As a player of that game, I felt like it illustrated one of the big challenges of these AAA game properties in the—you know—late first quarter of the 21st century. Which is there is a need to demonstrate—you know, you gotta show the money on the screen. You know? You have to build an enormous world. You have to have extraordinary graphics. You have to have something that will be punchy when they show a trailer in E3 or whatever. Right? So, the scale is extraordinarily vast, almost without exception, because if it isn't, gamers who spent 60 bucks will be like, "Hey, I spent 60 bucks and I only played this for eight hours?"

[Jason affirms.]

So, the scale is extraordinary—extraordinarily huge. And that often means that it's—that, you know, that it is a—that these games are open world or at least open world adjacent. Right? Like rather than the platformers that you and I played as kids—you know, *Super Mario* type games that—where you just run from left to right and there's obstacles in your way—you can wander around. And it can be very difficult to balance that wander around ability with the demands of narrative. Right? Like, at some point, you have to *[chuckling]*—you have to constrict what the player can do, both because you can't anticipate the—what the result would be of every choice they make and because at some point you want to exercise control over the narrative and its meaning.

And that weakness that you described to me, right? That this game was built to be a satire and ultimately, you know, the values of the various factions in the game kind of boil down to the same—to the same juice—strikes me as endemic to that process. Like, at a certain point if you get to like let your player choose which team to be on, you have to say they all have the same value, because otherwise your player might have chosen the crappy team. |
| 00:26:35 | Jason | Guest | Yeah! Well, I—there are games that do that. Well, so, *BioShock Infinite*—actually I wouldn't call it an open world game, necessarily. It's pretty linear in that it's like funneling you along a story and it's—the story's all told to you very heavily handed. And I think that's one of the things that really drove controversy afterwards. But actually, you would be surprised at how much interesting narrative stuff has happened in video games. I don't know if you've played—have you played *Fallout: New Vegas*? |
| 00:27:01 | Jesse | Host | No, I played the previous *Fallout* game, which, um… made me feel mad. *[Laughs.]* |
| 00:27:09 | Jason | Guest | You should play *Fallout: New Vegas*, 'cause it's very different than previous *Fallout* games.

[Jesse affirms with a laugh.] |

			It's made by a different company. It's made by Obsidian, as opposed to Bethesda, which made *Fallout 3* and *Fallout 4*. Um, in *Fallout: New Vegas*—
00:27:19	Jesse	Host	I loved, by the way Jason, people are gonna get mad at me and email me. I loved the like game part of it a ton. You know? I loved going around, collecting stuff. I loved building up my powers, shooting evil mutants, all that stuff was super fun. It was the narrative part that made me roll my eyes for this same reason—that it was—I was like, "Oh, so it kind of—" It like, in the end, *[chuckles]* none—like, the game's theoretically about values and like the player choosing values. And I'm like, "Well, in the end, it did not matter what values I chose! In the end, all values are the same?!"
00:28:00	Jason	Guest	Yeah, you should play *Fallout: New Vegas*, 'cause that is a game that explores the exact—it kind of tries to find its own answers to the exact questions that you're asking, and it lets you choose which factions to side with and some of the factions are very clearly like not good people and the game very definitively has a point of view. Another game you should check out if you're interested in narrative in video games is a game called *Disco Elysium*. Just came out on PS5 and there's a new version on PC. You can play it on a computer. It should run on pretty much most computers. Highly recommend that game. That game is a masterpiece of storytelling and lets you—does some things with interactivity that are really, really interesting that I think you might—you might enjoy. So, check out both of those games. Those are my recommendations. Let it be known that Jesse Thorn is walking away from this podcast with some homework to do.
00:28:53	Jesse	Host	*[Laughs.]* Besides just replying to angry emails?
00:28:57	Jason	Guest	Exactly. Well, you'll get some happy emails being like, "Oh yeah! You have to play these games! You have to play Disco Elysium!"
00:29:03	Jesse	Host	So, let's talk about Ken Levine and the process of making *BioShock Infinite*. As you mentioned, *BioShock* had been a huge, you know, a huge megaton bomb dropped on the video game industry. An incredible, original idea that had been both critically acclaimed and very successful, sales-wise. *BioShock Infinite* was a sequel that was partially developed in parallel to a different sequel to *BioShock*. What was the vision of the game?
00:29:34	Jason	Guest	In terms of the story vision or the creative—?
00:29:38	Jesse	Host	So, these designers go into a room and they try and figure out what is our *BioShock* game? It's not just recreating the last one, because there's more than one sequel happening at the same time. So, that's not even a choice. So, what do they—in their process of spending a few months drawing things on whiteboards—decide this game is gonna be?
00:29:58	Jason	Guest	Yeah, well, a lot of that is driven by Ken Levine by nature. He's kind of seen as this big creative force within the studio. And they were really changing things around a lot of the time. There was always the idea of like, "We want this to be a city in the sky." But the details around that changed a lot and people actually got a little frustrated that there were no decisions being made and that can be a very frustrating thing in game development, when it's like, "Oh yeah, we really wanna get started on this one piece of the game, but like we don't know what it's gonna look like. So, who knows? We don't wanna start only for it to change later." I think it was around 2010

when they finally nailed down some of the details, which were like, "Okay. It's a city in the sky, a floating city called Columbia. It's set—the game is set right at the turn of the century. Early 20th century. It is about American exceptionalism and fascism and racism and that's what the city is about. It's about wealthy parts and not so wealthy parts and it's got this ugly side and there's this guy who founded it, who is very clearly a fascist type. This guy, Comstock, and you play as a guy named Booker who is sent into Columbia to go rescue a girl named Elizabeth, who is in a tower there."

And that was kind of the core of what the story would be. And from there, they just kept changing and tweaking and adding things and subtracting things. There were some parts of the game that were in development for a while that never actually made it. Like a whole multiplayer mode that Irrational Games was working on that just was cut because it wasn't coming together and they didn't have enough time to finish it and—yeah, towards the end of production, they were all really nervous that they wouldn't actually finish this game. Things got really, really difficult. They had to crunch really, really hard. And yeah, they finally got it done in—I believe it was February of 2013 when the game came out.

| 00:31:52 | Jesse | Host | So, if you have a pretty successful, very critically acclaimed game, you have a director who is, you know, while perhaps hard to work for, generally considered to be a great artist in his field, and you have a—you know, a megacorporation that's brought home some money from this operation. What went sideways? |
| 00:32:15 | Jason | Guest | Well, a couple of things happened. And first of all, I should mention that Ken Levine declined to comment for this book. So, I've not talked to him about this stuff. So, Ken Levine—so, this is based on conversations I've had with other people as well as some of his own public record. So, Ken Levine essentially looked around and he said, "This was hell. This—working on this game was hell. I was miserable. I don't recognize half the people in the studio, because we've expanded so much that like suddenly we're 200 people when we used to be like 30 or 40, because you need—" Like I said, the numbers have grown exponentially over the past couple of decades. And so, he looked around he said, "I don't wanna do this again. I wanna start a smaller team and work on something with a way smaller scope and just do something smaller."

And what essentially happened was, as he did that, there were contract negotiations, behind the scene deals or whatever, and the way that he tells it—what he said publicly was that he went to 2K and he said, "I wanna do this thing." And 2K said, "Okay." And they gave him his own company and then 2K decided, "We're gonna shut down Irrational." Because Irrational Games cannot exist without Ken Levine. Ken Levine was seen as like the auteur, the creative vision, why would the studio need to like—the studio should not exist without him, according to 2K executives. Then Ken Levine—when the shutdown actually happened, Ken Levine kind of took responsibility, so it wasn't really clear if it was like his decision or 2K's decision or what. It seems like—what he said afterwards makes it seem like it was 2K's, but in his note where he read like—he read a letter to staff announcing the shutdown. He said, "I've decided to wind down Irrational Games." |

			So, who knows! But fundamentally, this was a decision that was made to shut down the studio, start something brand new under Ken Levine that would be a very small thing. And so, Ken Levine had to do the kind of—it was a very unusual situation, a very uncomfortable situation, because Ken Levine and another guy—this producer, Don Roy, who I spoke to—went around picking a handful of people, like around a dozen people, to come with them to the new thing. But the condition was they couldn't tell anybody. So, like you have this case where like a dozen people at the studio all know the studio is going to shut down, but like nobody else can know. And they can't tell their friends. And it was just like miserable and painful and excruciating for everybody. It was really just such an unfortunate situation.
00:34:39	Jesse	Host	And this is something that, in one form or another, is happening across the video game industry all the time.
00:34:47	Jason	Guest	Mm-hm. Yeah, it's unfortunate. And there have been—I will say that like with Irrational's case, at least people were able to get severance. People had like a buffer. People were given some time. They—at least a couple of months each to get paid while they look for whatever was—to stay on their healthcare while they looked for whatever's new. So, it's considered one of the more humane studio shutdowns, as opposed to 38 Studios, as an example—which is another studio I covered in the book that was the former baseball player, Curt Schilling's, studio. Whole giant, $150,000,000 disaster. And they straight up ran out of money, so they could no longer exist to the point where—and Schilling kept it a secret from his staff that they were running out of money to the point where suddenly one day everyone is not getting paid. And then a few weeks later, suddenly everyone is laid off and they all miss their final paycheck and suddenly don't have health benefits anymore and they're all just like totally screwed. So, yeah. I mean, there's a spectrum of like different ways to handle a studio shutdown. And the Irrational one was, at the very least, more humane, all things considered.
00:35:53	Jesse	Host	So, you outlined a few changes that could improve this situation. One is worker organizing. One is more remote work. That means that when a studio shuts down, the workers aren't required to uproot themselves to travel to wherever the next game developer job is. One is independent studios that may be more stable or at least more flexible. Do you think those things are things that are going to happen?
00:36:25	Jason	Guest	Yeah. I mean, unionization feels inevitable to me. I think that something like 50-something percent of game developers say that unionization feels like it's going to happen, and they want it to happen. Remote work also, as a result of the pandemic, feels like it's essential to just like be more—for companies to be more flexible, moving forward. I don't know if companies will be willing to hire people who are just fulltime remote. We'll see. I think the better companies will, the smarter companies will, because they'll get better talent, and they'll get more talent if they are willing to be flexible when it comes to that. As far as going indie, I'm not sure that going indie necessarily leads to more stability. In fact, it can be the opposite. But at least more control of your own destiny, which can make all the difference in cases like this. Part of what's frustrating about studio shutdowns and volatility is feeling like so much of it is happening over your head and it's like totally out of your control, what happens there.

One other model that I've explored a little bit in the book is this idea of more heavily outsourcing and more of like a film model, where rather than just like have a company and pretend that like, "Oh yeah, you can stay here for 10 years working on games." Because that really doesn't happen. More looking in the model of like, "Okay, we have this group of like for-hire programmers and this group of for-hire designers and maybe one company hires both of them for their next project and then they all go off on their separate ways after the project." And maybe you have more of a vision that—like a structure that is—that looks like Hollywood more. But that would also have to be entirely remote, because not everybody's in the same city. So, yeah. I mean, I think ultimately yes, that all of this very viable and I think it's the future—if the future is more sustainable, it's gonna look like a combination of all of these things.

00:38:14	Jesse	Host	You know what I think the future of video games is?
00:38:16	Jason	Guest	*Skyrim*.
00:38:17	Jesse	Host	Well. I mean.

[Jason laughs.]

I hope so. God, I love to—I'd love some new dragons to kill. I was just gonna say goose stuff. You know, stuff with geese in it.

00:38:26	Jason	Guest	Like *Untitled Goose Game*, *Untitled Goose Game 2*. Yeah. Got it.
00:38:29	Jesse	Host	Yeah, probably. And then maybe *3* or *4*. I don't know. You know?

[Jason agrees.]

And geese can do a lot of stuff besides just tug on shoelaces. You know? They can fly. There's all kinds of stuff geese can do.

00:38:38	Jason	Guest	That's true. Man, you should be a geese game designer.
00:38:41	Jesse	Host	Yeah, I probably should. Why did I get into public radio?
00:38:43	Jason	Guest	In another life.
00:38:44	Jesse	Host	Yeah. Well, Jason, thank you for taking all this time to be on *Bullseye*. And thank you for your amazing journalism about ethics in the video game industry.
00:38:54	Jason	Guest	Yeah! Thank you for having me, Jesse.
00:38:56	Jesse	Host	Jason Schreier. His new book, *Press Reset: Ruin and Recovery in the Video Game Industry*, is out now. As we said before, Jason is also the co-host of the podcast *Triple Click*, here at my company Maximum Fun. Jason and his co-hosts, Kirk Hamilton and Maddy Myers, talk about video game news and culture, answer listener questions, and sometimes replay old classics. You can find *Triple Click* wherever you listen to podcasts.
00:39:23	Music	Transition	Gentle piano music.
00:39:24	Jesse	Host	That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is created out of the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California—where just the other night I was waiting for my daughter to fall asleep, sitting in a chair next to her bed. Her breathing started to get slower and more regular, and I thought I was done and then she turned to me and said, "*Tom and Jerry* the movie is a very strange film." It is! I mean, Tom and Jerry are friends, and they sing songs written by Henry Mancini. It's a weird movie. The '90s one, not the new one. Anyway.

			The show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our producer is Kevin Ferguson. Jesus Ambrosio and Jordan Kauwling are our associate producers. Production fellows at Max Fun are Richard Robey and Valerie Moffat. Our interstitial music is by Dan Wally, also known as DJW. Our theme song is by The Go! Team. Thanks very much to them and to their label, Memphis Industries, for sharing it.
00:40:34	Promo	Promo	You can keep up with the show on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. We post all our interviews there. And I think that's about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature signoff. **Speaker**: *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

[Music fades out.] |