Lecture 8:

Discussion of the Reading
Stone, A.R. "War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age." Chap. 6, Cyberdammerung at the Atari Lab (pp 122-155).

Researchers sometimes don't respond well to the pressures of the corporate world. When you apply pressure in one area, count on it coming out someplace else.

Anecdotal Story
Brenda Laurel came from MIT and went to work at Atari during the height of the Atari's fame While a young researcher, she had an idea that she ran by Alan Kay, the head of the laboratory. She suggested they try to create a synthetic personality, an avatar. The avatar would operate in the laboratory's small scale environment, (this was to be an internal project) but yet of a substantial enough nature to be interesting. They decided to name the avatar Arthur Ficial. They created a persona that was debonair, charming and had a cultured English accent. (Arthur vaguely mirrored a young Nicholas Negroponte who was here at the Architecture Machine Lab—which was the precursor to the Media Lab.) The character was initially listed as a manager, but had not really been seen around the lab. The word was spread that, although brilliant, Mr. Ficial was a somewhat reticent fellow. He preferred email to personal meetings. A fascinating thing that happened is that other employees in Atari started writing Mr. Ficial asking for advice. Allen Kay decided to kick it up a notch and he published a memo saying that he would be taking leave, but Arthur would substitute in his absence.

Brenda called a VP of administration, (by using an audio harmonizer and playing the part of Arthur) and convinced him that he —Arthur—was now acting director of the lab. Brenda decided that Arthur should hold a teleconference telling this to other Atari employees. She donned a wig and mustache and played the part in front of the cameras in a sophisticated technological con. During the teleconference, cosmopolitan Arthur spoke briefly with the Eiffel Tower in the background and, when they cut to a different angle, he looked into the camera and seemed to be speaking to them from Rome. This was a technique often used today in news programs, superimposing Arthur using a "blue screen" against backdrops of French and Italian posters. After Arthur finished his short speech, he then asked for questions. There were some interesting camera moves and additional inserts that seemed almost too professional for a regular teleconference. The most striking result was that other employees walked away somewhat skeptical that the conference had been live—they thought it was recorded from somewhere else. Then they argued over how it would not be possible to answer questions if the conference was taped. But they key is that the employees completely bought into the fact that Arthur existed. It was the opposite of what the team expected. They thought that everyone would get that Arthur Ficial (aka Arty-Ficial) was a sophisticated test of our perception of what constitutes a real person for us. Obviously, people are far more accepting than anyone

ever realized! They had fooled virtually everyone at Atari outside of the little avatar creation team who were all sworn to secrecy.

Clearly Brenda et al were willing to push the envelope. They had no idea what they were doing in terms of the psychology of character instantiation and social aspects of "mob influence". Just imagine the power this team felt by the response to the avatar they created. They tested limits and found amazing things happened. "Never assume" is one of the first rules we are taught as engineers. I think it is very applicable here as well. Don't self-limit creative spirit. Be bold and think outside of the box.

How this story relates to the student projects
This story relates to your upcoming pitches. The people who watched the teleconference did not realize what they were watching was all sleight of (technical) hand. They didn't look "behind the (technical) curtain". When you make your pitch, don't commit yourself to someone else's assumptions. If you really want to think out of the box, then think of what you want to get across and how best to achieve that goal. Don't think about what the audience will accept because you'll just be limiting yourself. Reset their baseline to yours.

Students' Questions Answered
What are some sources for game sales figures?
NPD and Media Metrics have some. Wal-mart has something called EDI where they get week to week sales figures, but they don't share them unless you are one of their providers. None of these sites are very good though in terms of numbers. This is a weak area in the industry.

Is it better to follow a big hit or should you push the envelope and innovate?
It depends on who you are. It's also about how much you are willing to risk. The first Elder Scrolls game cost $3 million and the most recent one was just short of $20 million. The risks are much higher now. If a game isn't very expensive, you can generally afford to take risk and try something innovative.

Many people ask the question, is it possible to make a game that is as compelling as a movie? When you watch a movie you see the vision the director's vision wants you to see. Games are stories that flow with choices of different paths.—and they are ideally never the same twice. Look at "Final Fantasy". You are telling the player a story, but the story unfolds for them uniquely. People keep making the comparison because they perceive a relationship between movies and games. There's a relationship in the sense that they're both visual media. However, the same components exist in children's story books, speak and tell, comic books, etc. The similarities stop at anything more than a superficial level. Games are a unique medium.

In terms of the core pitch issue
Remember that you are asking for money from experts in the games industry who listen to pitches for a living. Why are they going to give their money to your team? You need to answer that question. You have to achieve that goal and you need a great pitch to get

there. This isn't about marketing yourself, but about marketing your team and the idea. The judges will ask you questions—hard questions. Then they will discuss which team they think should get the money and why. If you do it right, you will learn a great deal about what goes into making a pitch and winning another person's confidence. And the good news is that even if you do it wrong, you will still learn a lot about yourselves, your fellow students, and others who listen to what you are trying to convey.