We don’t play games
TALES FROM A SEMESTER OF GLOBALLY DISTRIBUTED GAME DEVELOPMENT.

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Writing software in collaboration with a team located in the same city is easy; a real challenge is to do it with a global team. Here’s our adventure of implementing a multi-player board game in a distributed setting.

“We don’t play games…” was the stone-cold answer we got from our Russian team members when we asked them what kind of game they’d like to implement as a semester project during the course Distributed and Outsourced Software Engineering (DOSE) in September ‘11. The course brings ETH students together with students from 10 other universities all over the globe, teaching hands-on the dos and don’ts of distributed software development. For three of us (Chris, Antti & Claude) that meant teaming up with three students from Russia and three from Italy in order to design and implement a multi-player board game.

Quotes from various student emails:
“Aleksey couldn’t read any emails last week because his Internet cable had been stolen by a drunk bear.”
“We cannot use Google Docs with the team in China.”
“I’m sorry I could not make it to the implementation meeting yesterday. A water pipe in
my apartment burst ... After some frantic hours of fixing and cleaning up, it is now more or less OK.”

Another thing we learned is that distribution affected our ability to verify what our team members were saying. We heard repeatedly from the Russian team that everything was on track and that the project will be completed soon. Two days before the project was due, we had our bi-weekly meeting, and when we asked one of the developers whether his portion of the project was, he told us that he hadn’t started... after all there was plenty of time left (1 day). Had we been all working together in the same university, we probably would have found out about this much sooner and taken appropriate action.

Despite such struggles, we ended up with a nice implementation of the game “Puerto Rico”; a German board game for three to five players in which the player assumes the role of a colonial governor on the island of Puerto Rico during the age of Caribbean ascendancy.

DOSE universities in 2011:
• ETH Zurich
• University of Zurich
• Odessa National Polytechnic (Ukraine)
• University of Nizhny Novgorod (Russia)
• Politecnico di Milano (Italy)
• University of Debrecen (Hungary)
• Hanoi University of Technology (Vietnam)
• University of Rio Cuarto (Argentina)
• ITMO (Russia)
• IT University of Copenhagen (Denmark)
• Universidad Politécnica de Madrid (Spain)

As we weren’t under the pressure that would occur when working in industry, we could afford to take risks and learn from our mistakes without severe consequences. We learned the tremendous importance of having a good team structure and experienced how much effort needs to go into communication between the different team members in order to ensure the success of a project. And although things can always go wrong, we will hopefully be able to avoid the mistakes we made if (or more like “when”) we end up working with a distributed team in the future.

It was a lot of fun to collaborate with people from different countries and cultures on the same project and the skills we learned in the course do certainly not only apply to distributed settings, but to team management in general. So despite all the trouble we went through, we can recommend taking up opportunities to work with a distributed team if any present themselves. After all, you will also end up with a bunch of new and funny anecdotes to tell…

Official course website:
http://se.inf.ethz.ch/courses/2012b_fall/dose/