



Failure Workshop

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GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE™
MOSCONE CENTER · SAN FRANCISCO, CA
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<joke> wikipedia defines failure as </joke>

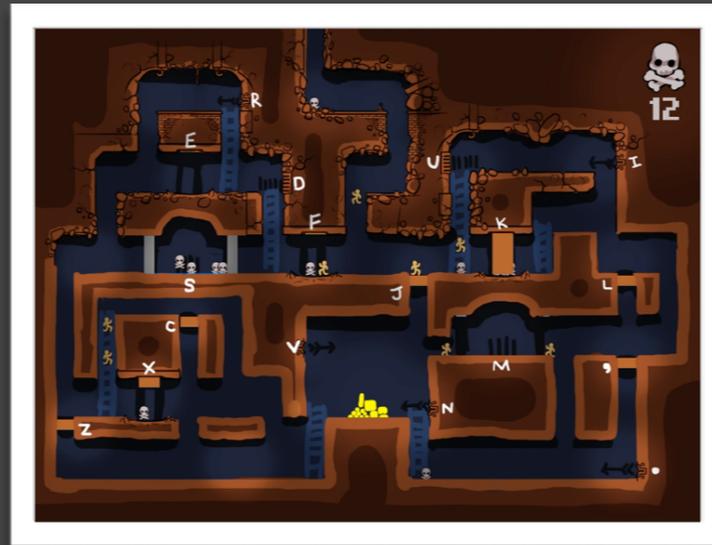


finji is our new name for our same old thing
we make original games for all platforms and also quasi-publish games by other indies
cofounder + wife bekah is speaking at the rant later today!

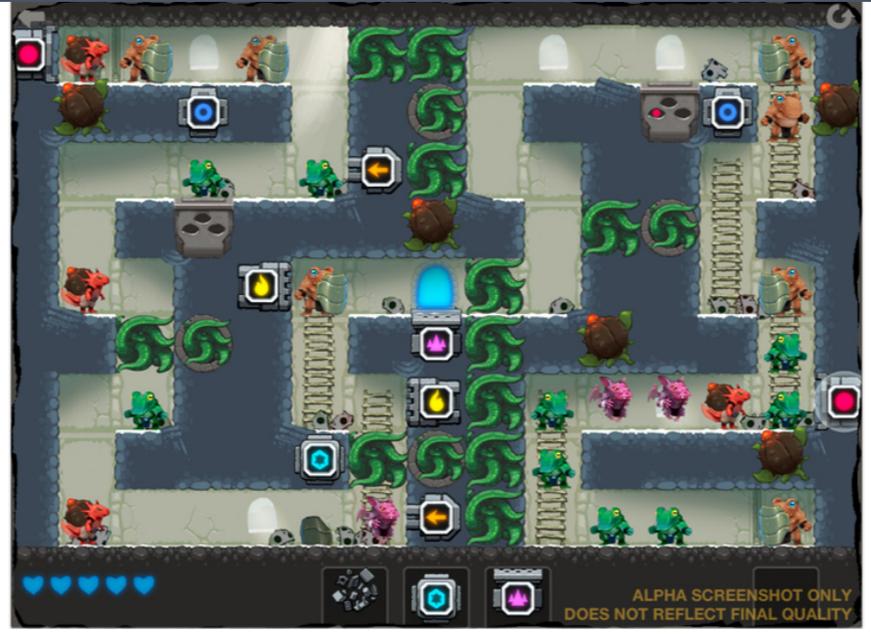


PORTICO

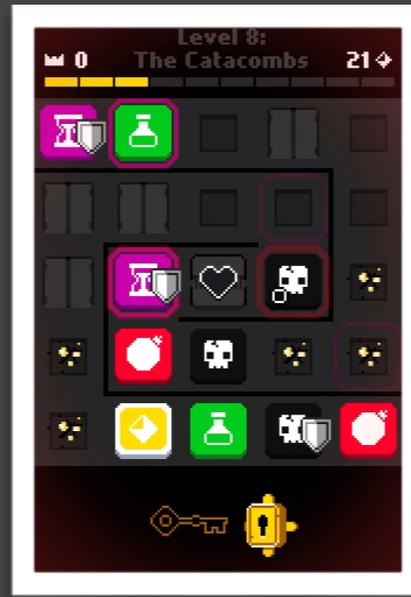
steve invited
a "troubled" project



this is the story of how we went from a game that looked like this



to a game that looked like this



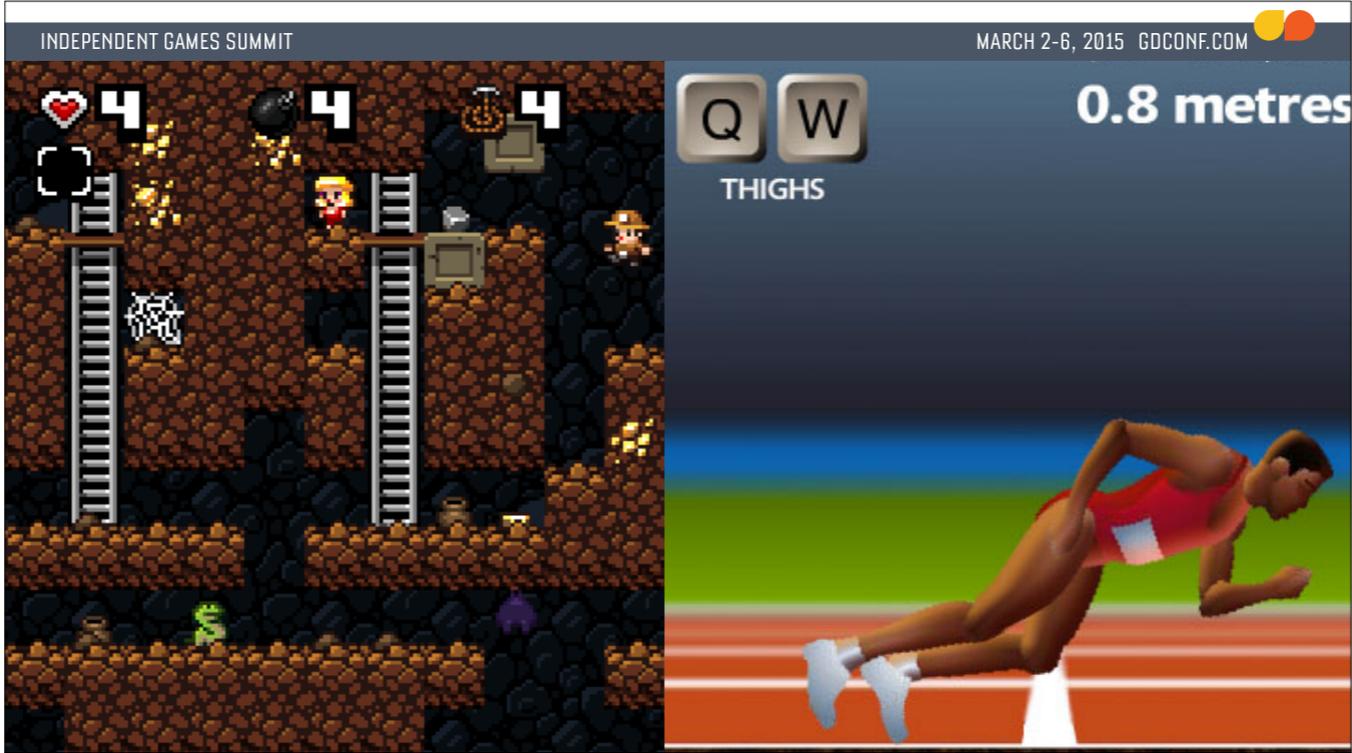
ultimately to a game that looked like this - why that took over 4 years and why that's fine and some of what we learned



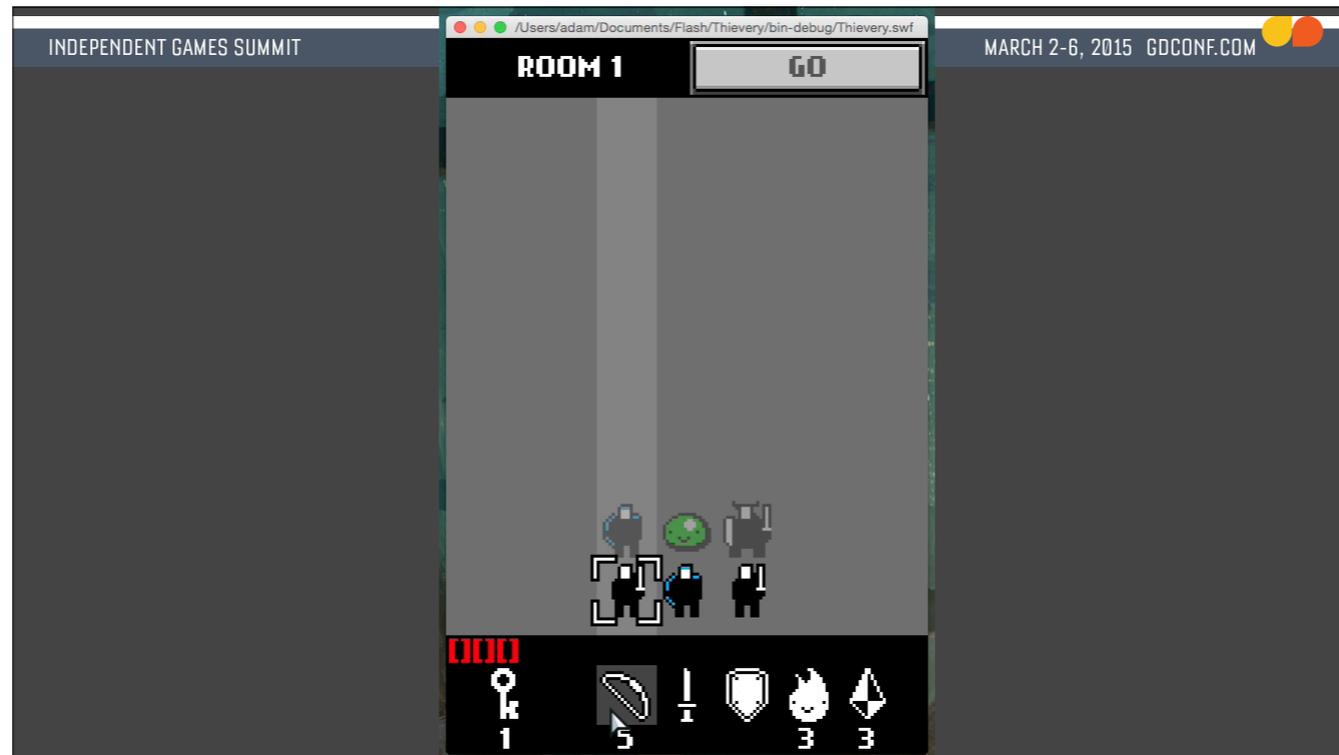
ok so lets go back to 2011



LD48 #20 - "grave robbers"
don't remember theme, do remember i did a bad job following it
reverse indiana jones



inspired by spelunky and qwop



another prototype from around then



inspired by clash of heroes



then i abandoned projects completely for at least 2 years

===== 90 SECONDS =====

CRAP THIS IS 3 MINUTES?!



2013 - rough times with a former collaborator
lost a year of production time
lost tens of thousands of dollars not counting uncountable lost sales from late releases
this took place over well approximately 2 years

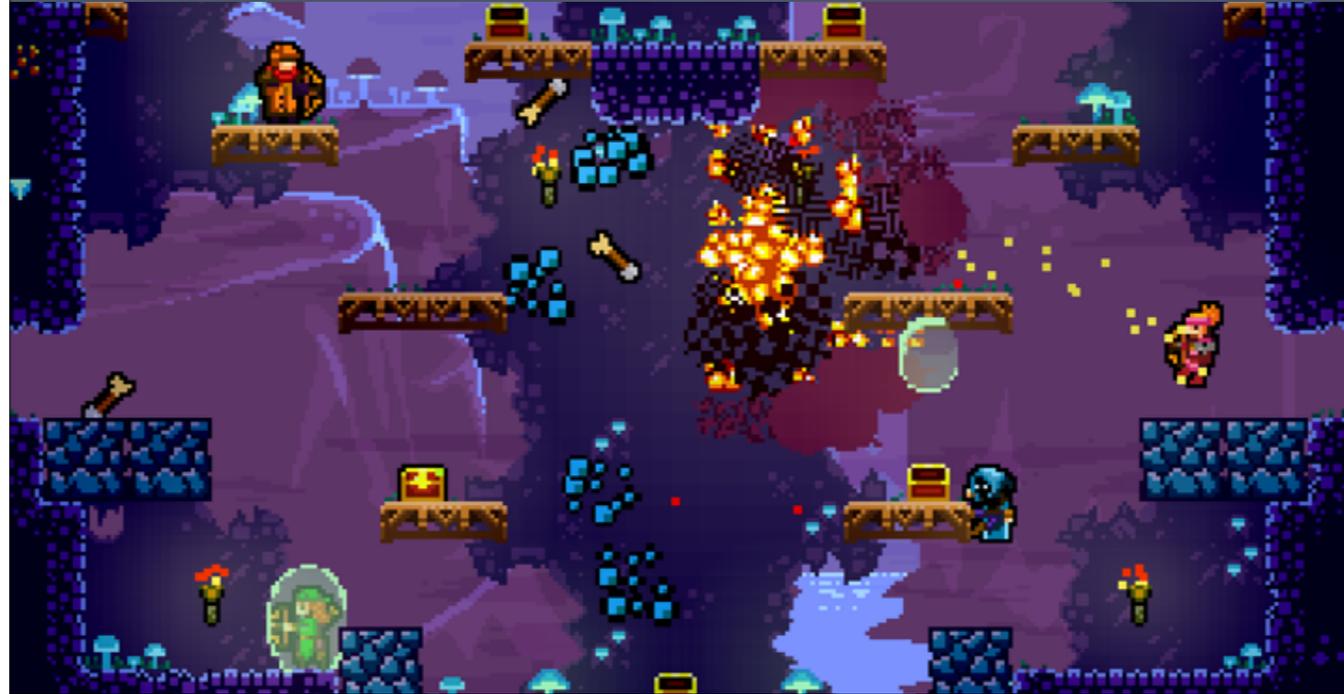


i was anxious and upset a lot
desperate to sit down and just make something and just enjoy the process of making again
there was only one thing to do: call Alec Holowka



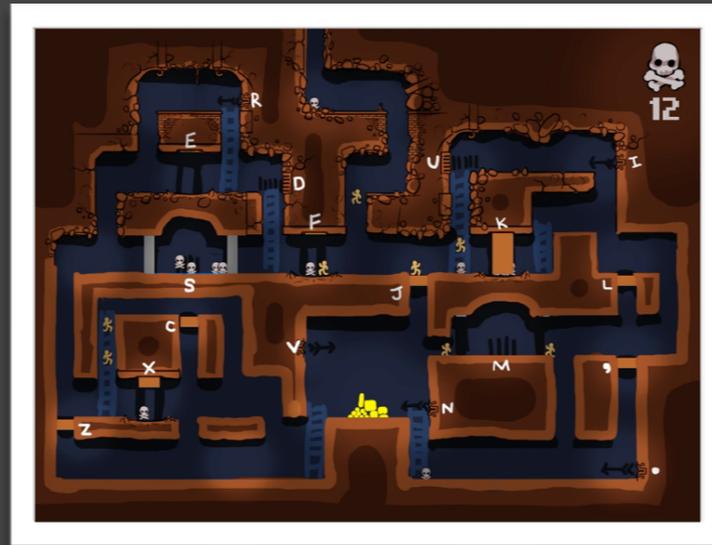








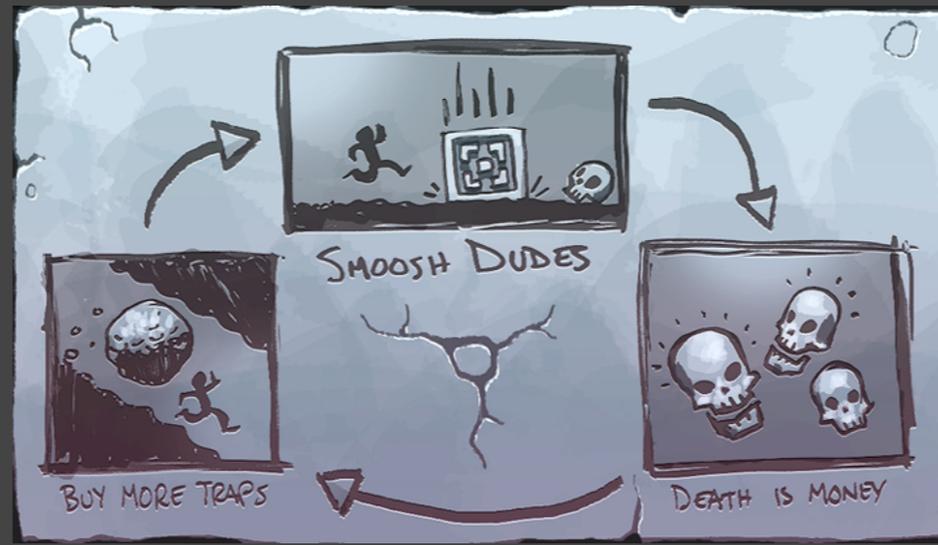
BUT back in 2008 we made a thing called Paper Moon and it was really fun we started at least 3 other projects since then but they didn't really happen so we started looking around for something new to work on



which was when we found "grave robbers" and were like yes
this could be a thing



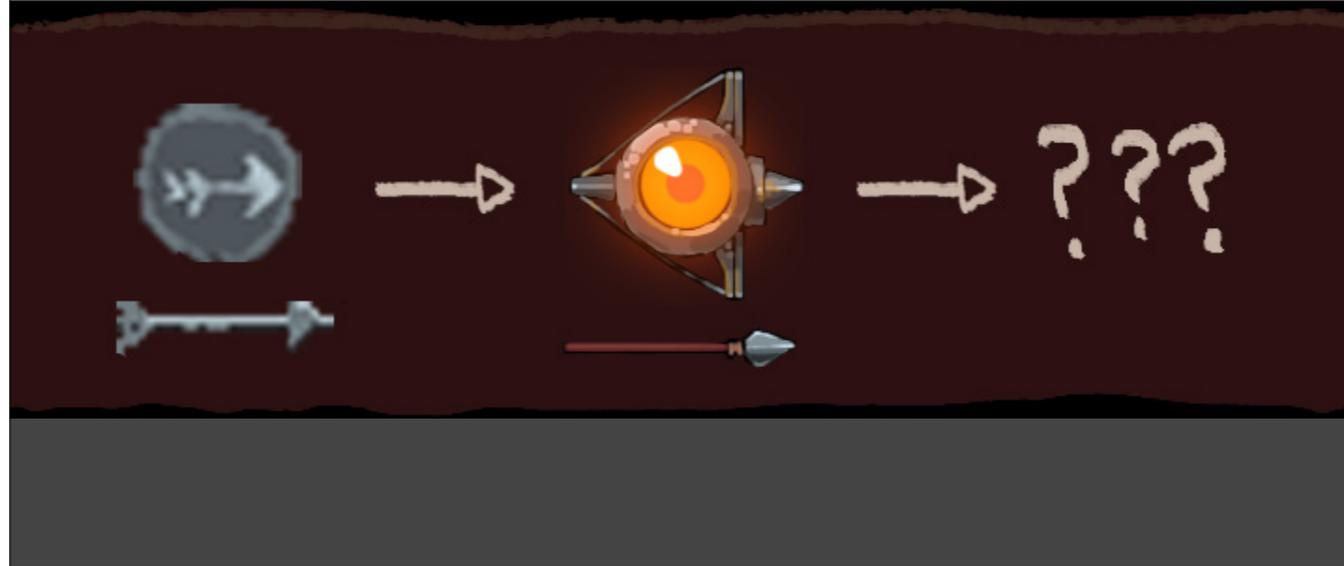
so we ported it over to Unity, tweaked some things, made this nifty logo, and announced
this may have been slightly premature
for about 11 different reasons



but we had a good hook!!



we did lots of concept art



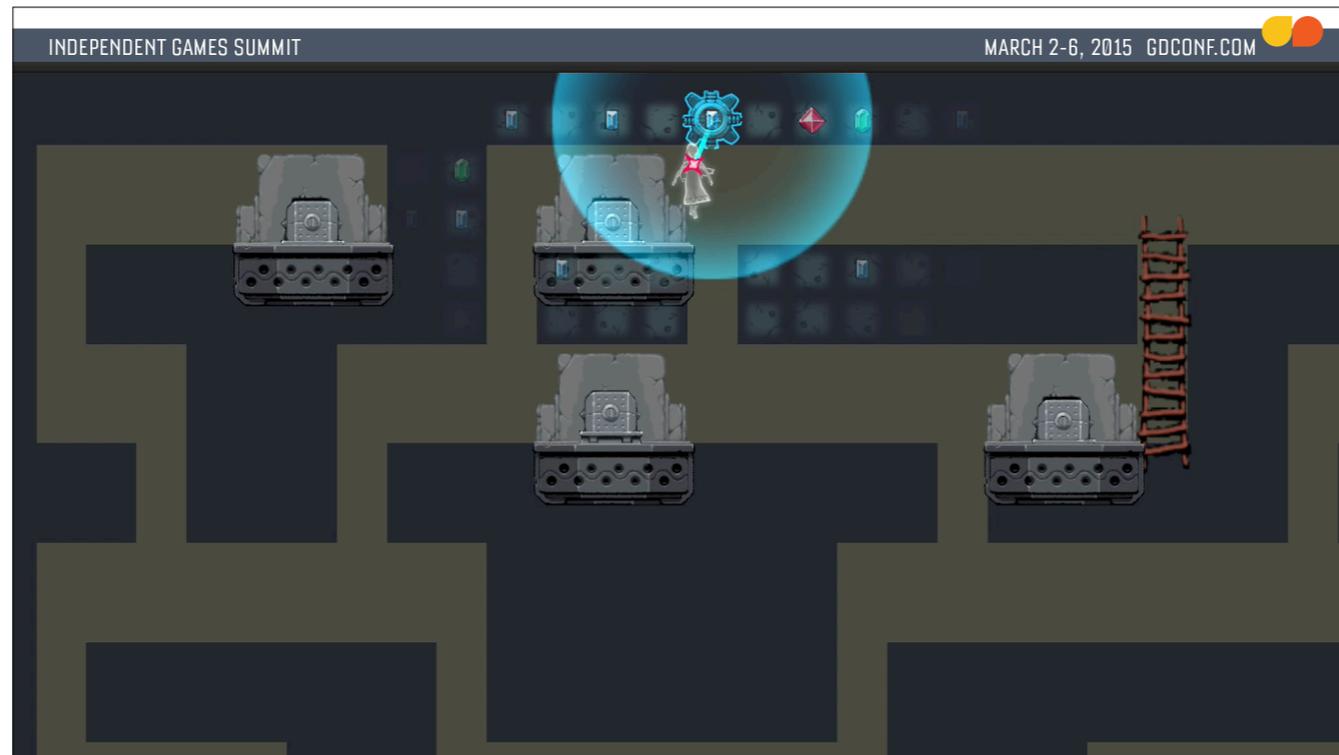
and iterating



but then we realized we could easily adapt the current controls to gamepad



so we designed a player avatar and a cool new control scheme



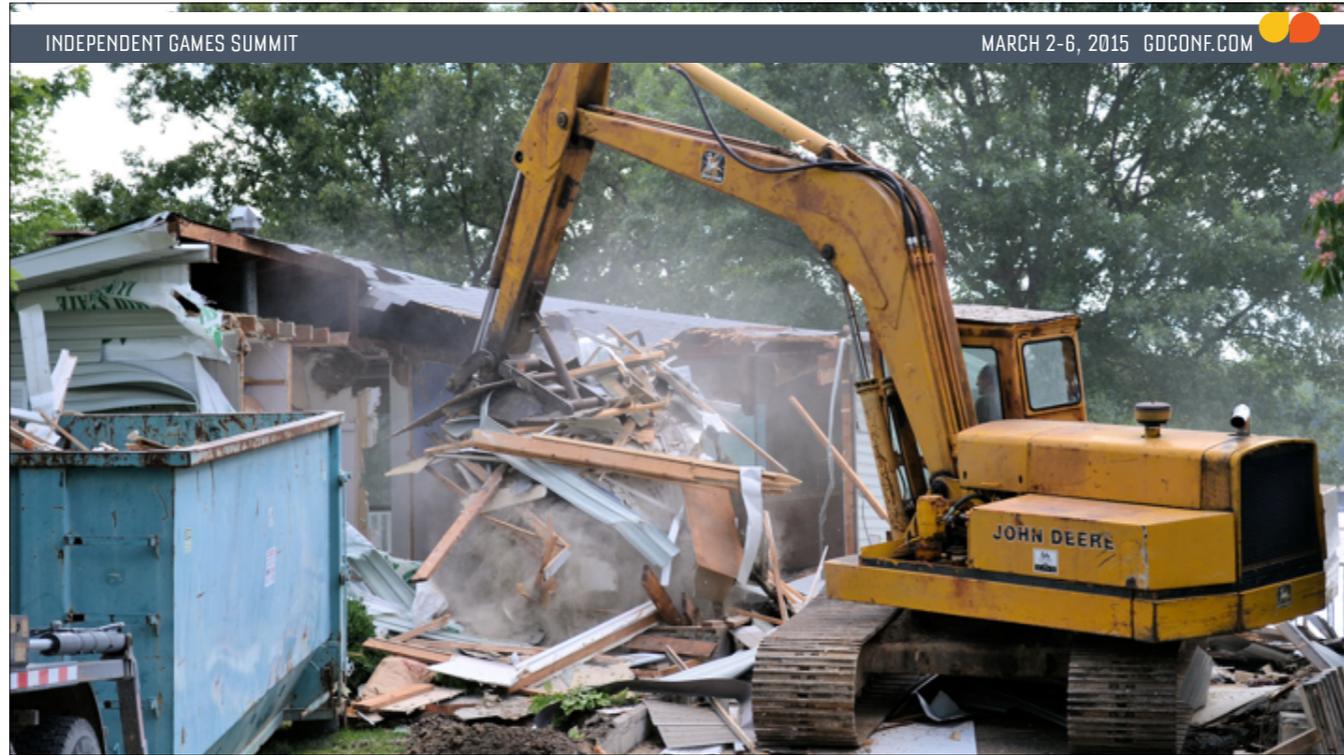
"As I dearly hoped, we do seem to generally be on the right track"

A THING I ACTUALLY WROTE

not that this thing doesn't have its... virtues, but

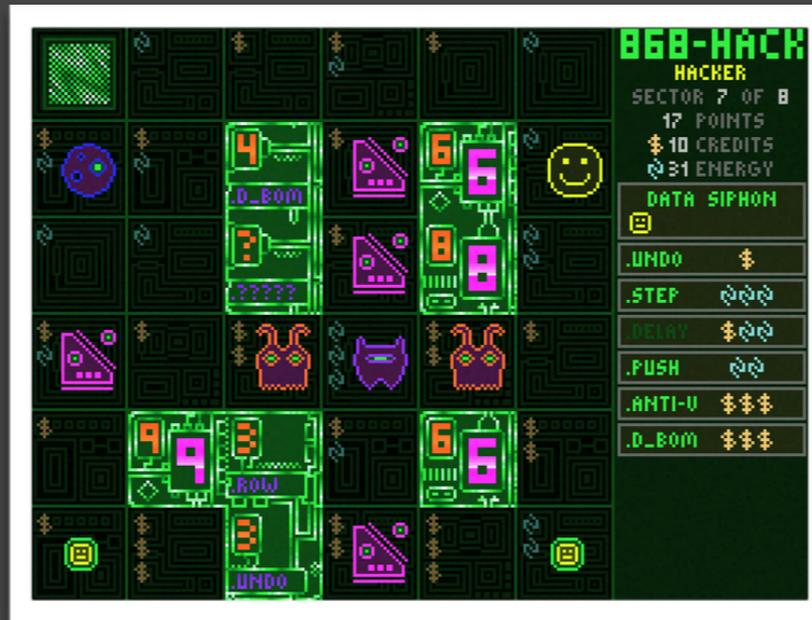
that i am an optimistic person i think is the optimistic takeaway from that

===== FIVE MINUTE MARK =====



from the dev blog: "we were so busy cleverly solving so many other design issues that I think we may have missed the forest for the trees"

eventually had to confront the fact that Alec and I were the only two humans alive that could play the game



as a side project, was wondering how a game like this might play on tablets, one of the platforms we wanted to support
what if it was very different, almost a mini-game or side game? like Anomaly?

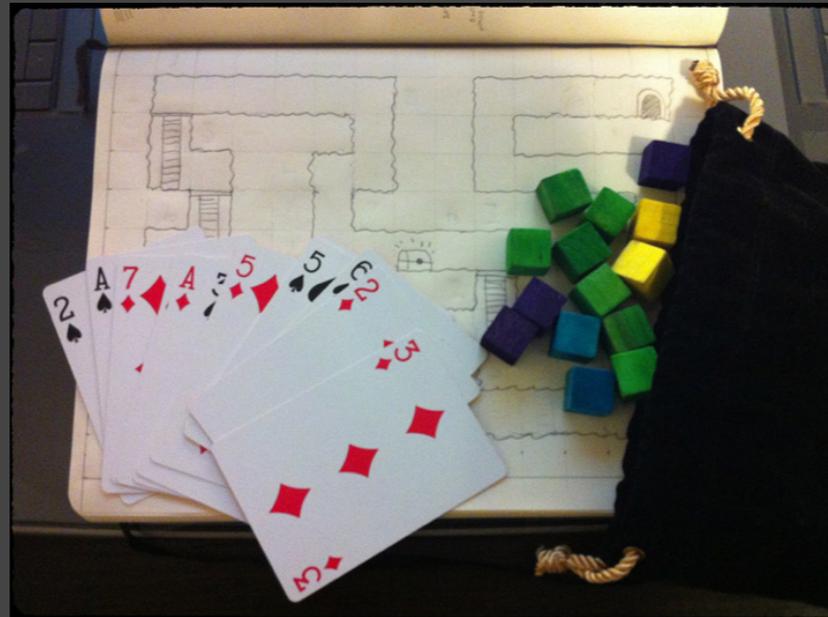
(squirrel)

so:

turn-based game

smaller grid

hrrrrmmm



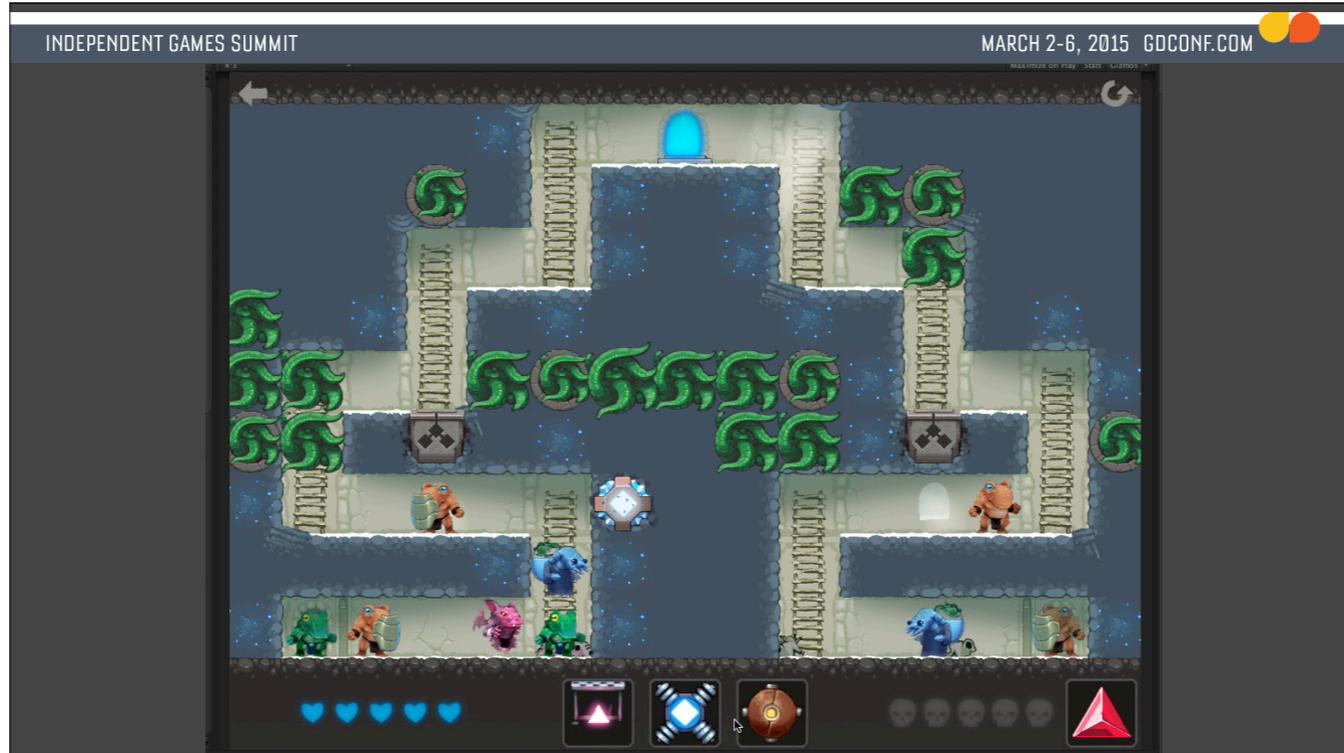
well, we already sunk a bunch of time into one digital prototype
maybe i can detect awesomeness / failure better or faster with a paper prototype
really cut the fat
it turned out super promising!?



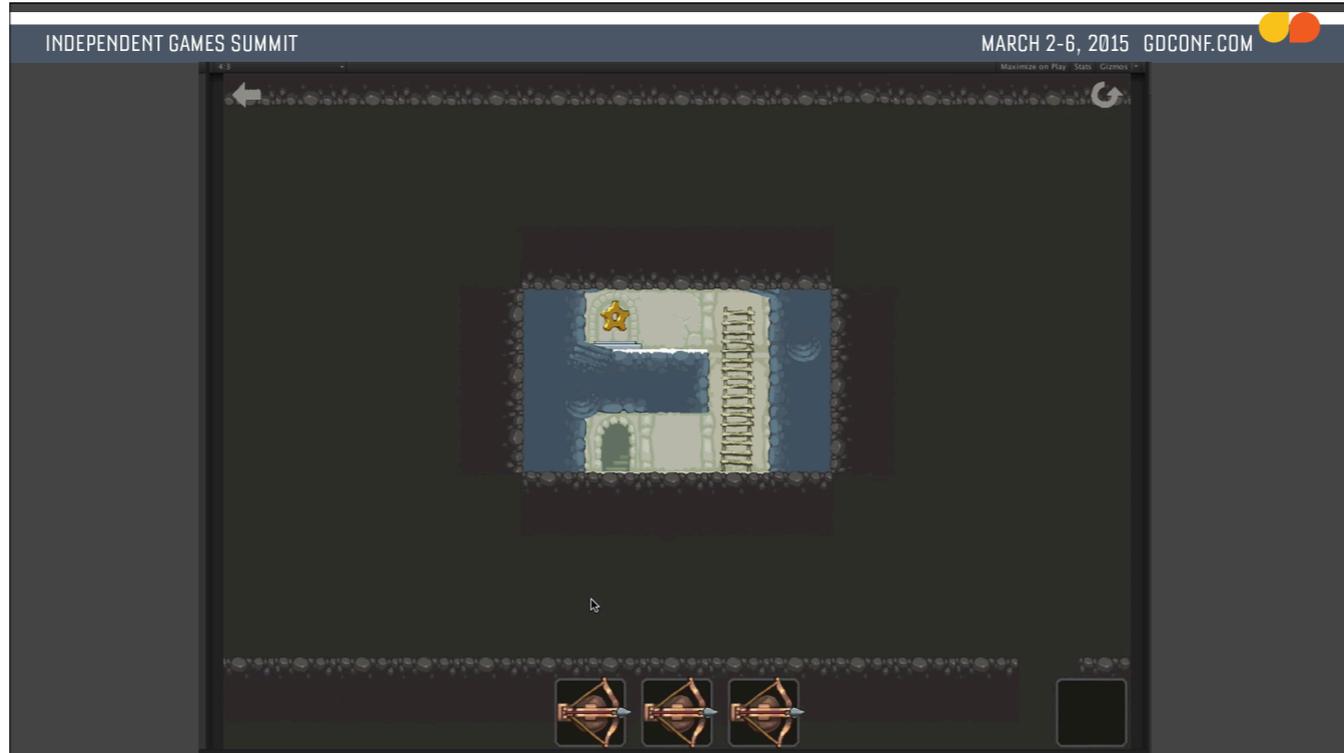
and in a week or so we jammed out this new fully playable prototype based on the new ideas

we iterated and iterated and by this time last year we had essentially a brand new game

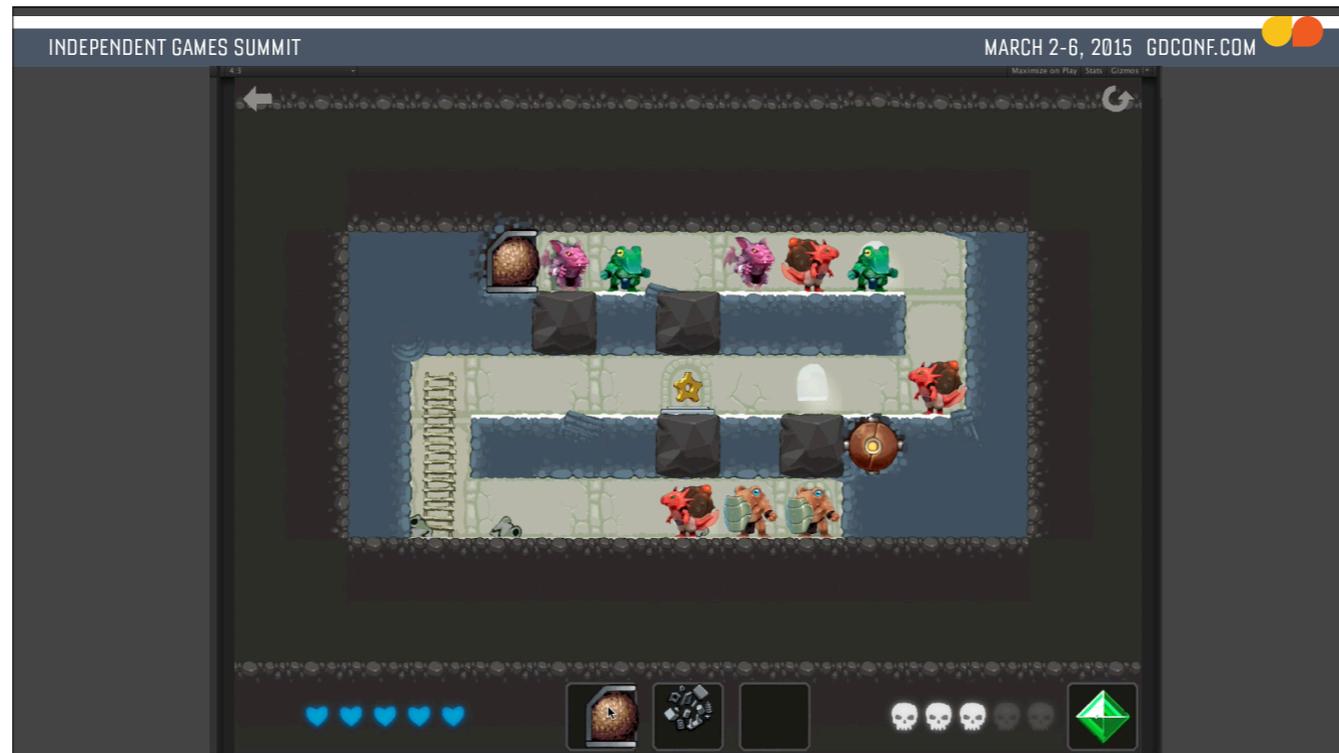
after fully committing to real-time Grave at the end of 2013, we brought turn-based Portico to GDC 2014 just a few months later



core idea is still to build traps to stop invaders
but we boiled it down to a simple choice every turn
> build a trap, OR, trigger a trap. can't do both



made a series of tutorials



the response was overall very positive

"spelunky for old men" claimed one well known designer



even had a world map and some lore about cave monsters etc

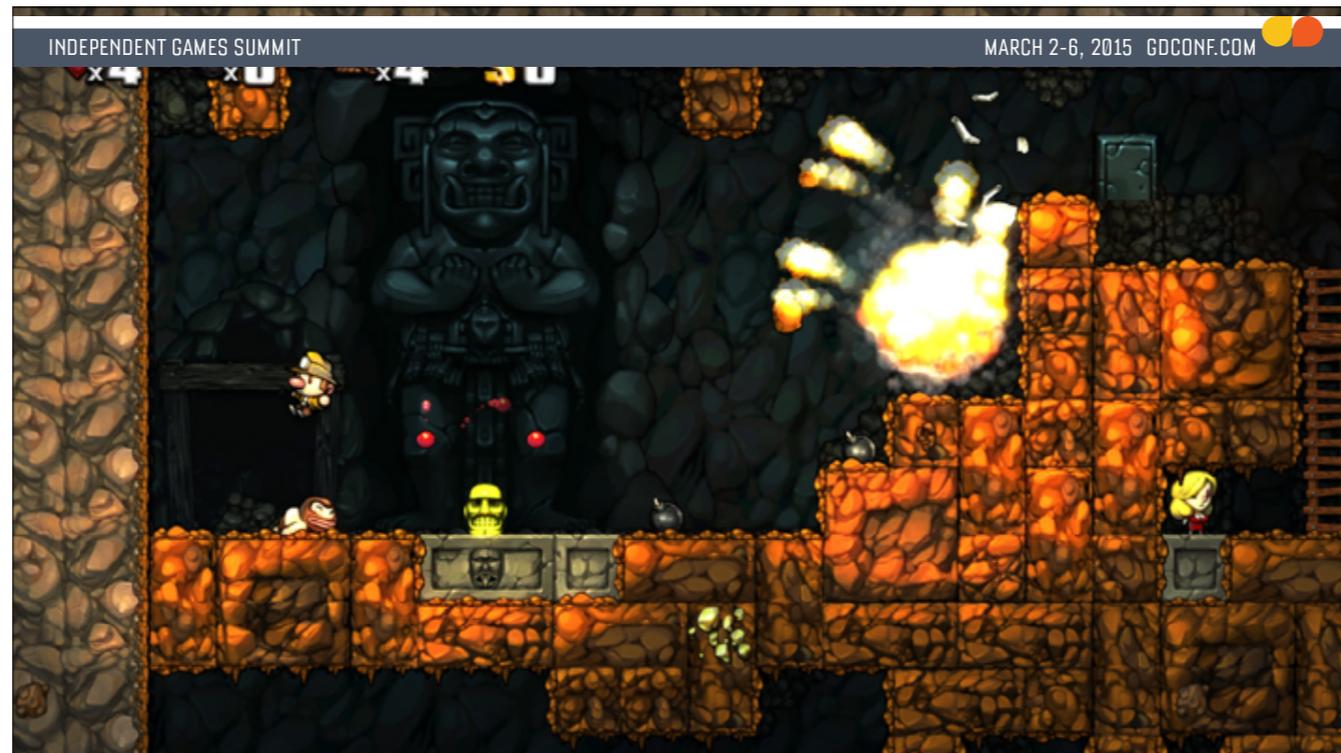


so we declared the project dead and not worth continuing

===== 7 MINUTE MARK =====



???

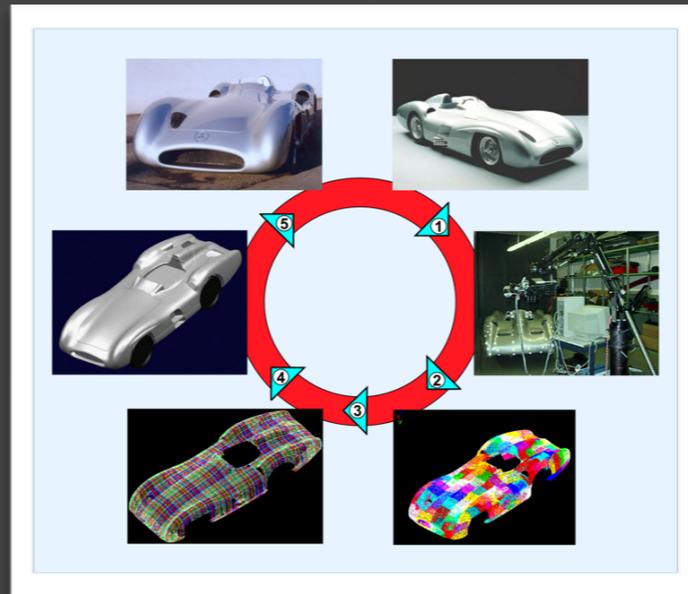


going to use Spelunky for this example but there are lots of games that i love (868 hack especially) that would be perfectly representative also
so far me the magic of spelunky is something i will call unpacking



- Throwing a rock to hit an enemy, missing,
- Teleporting offscreen and dying as a result
- Teleporting into a sealed room, then losing
- Teleporting into a sealed room, then attacking
- Teleporting into the Ghost.
- Teleporting into the Abyss.
- Teleporting into a wall.
- Teleporting away from a wall and into an enemy
- Teleporting.
- Teleporting into a Vault

unpacking is the process of figuring out what went wrong when you died just now



it's sort of like reverse engineering something

you can see the end product
you might know some things about how that product came to be

can you use that information to update your mental model and produce better results

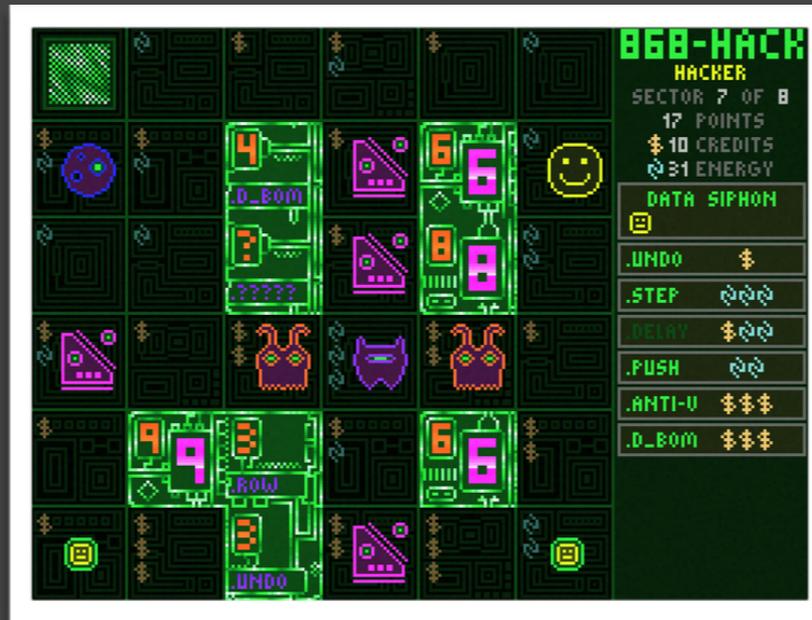
that's unpacking



FAILURE

and unpacking is *massively* important for one of the game genres i love most:

FAILURE GAMES



games where you die a lot, or lose a lot, or whatever, and in doing so, you learn and improve

unpacking is the most crucial part of these games functioning and finding their audience

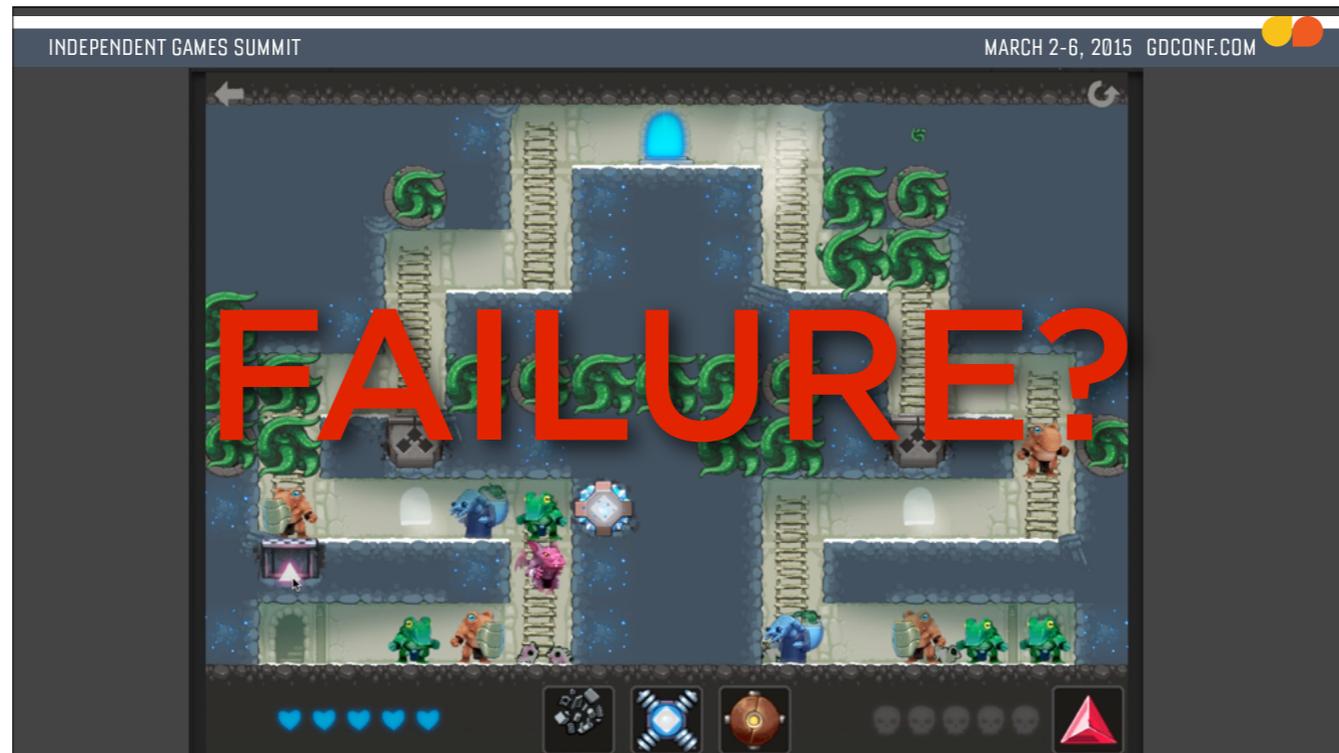


generally these “hard” games aren’t just demanding, they’re also kind of weirdly generous

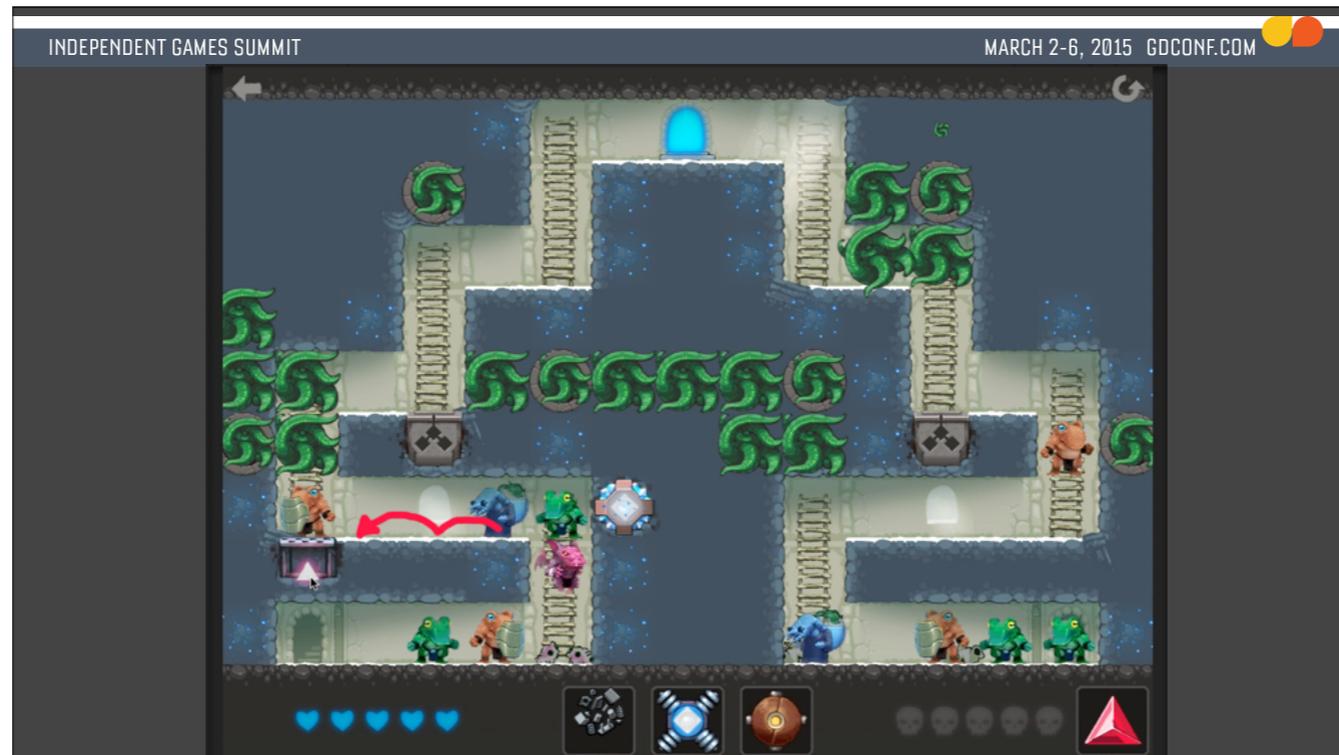
someone put a lot of time and energy into making sure players could reverse-engineer their failures in a way that was satisfying

its their secret way of saying “yes its hard but its not THAT hard, i’m giving you clues, if you just know where to look”

we don’t learn through failure. we learn through failures that we UNDERSTAND

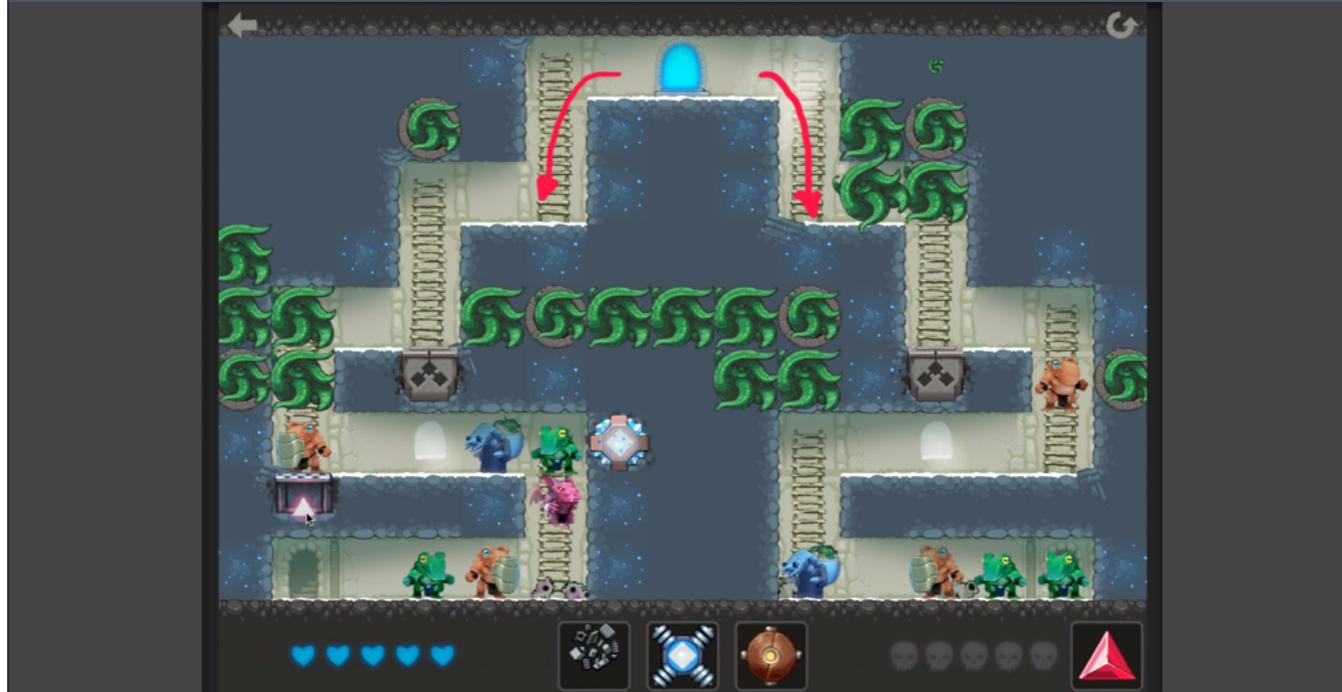


most people that sat and played Portico really did enjoy themselves
and they really did have a lot of problems unpacking their experience
they were confused about why they failed
so they didn't know how to do better next time

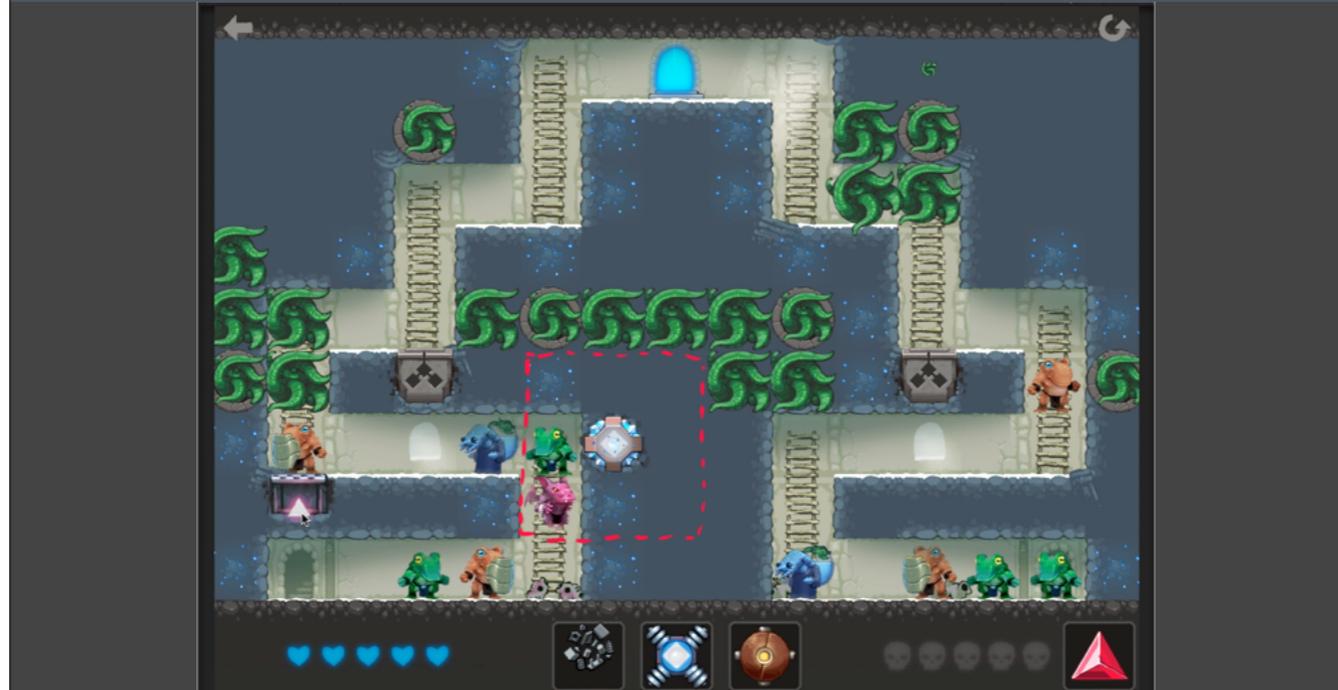


i think part of this is due to a couple of weird mechanics

monsters had to move two spaces at a time for the mazes and traps to add up right



falling off ledges in a single move was a neat emergent discovery but also really hard for people to remember



players struggled to remember the different danger zones of different traps
but we couldn't draw them all at once, there might be a dozen traps on screen or more

and so on



so what happened that we put so much time and effort into games with what i consider to be deep flaws?

- bad luck?
- poorly defined problems ****
 - we were solving problems left and right, but problems are everywhere
 - finding the right problems to solve is its own weird skill
- designers spend most of their time solving problems
 - consequences for solving the wrong problems under time pressure can be significant
 - portico had no time pressure
- sometimes things don't work

BUT: sometimes its just fun to build things even if they don't work

i was really, really happy working on this project

===== 10 MINUTE MARK =====



2014





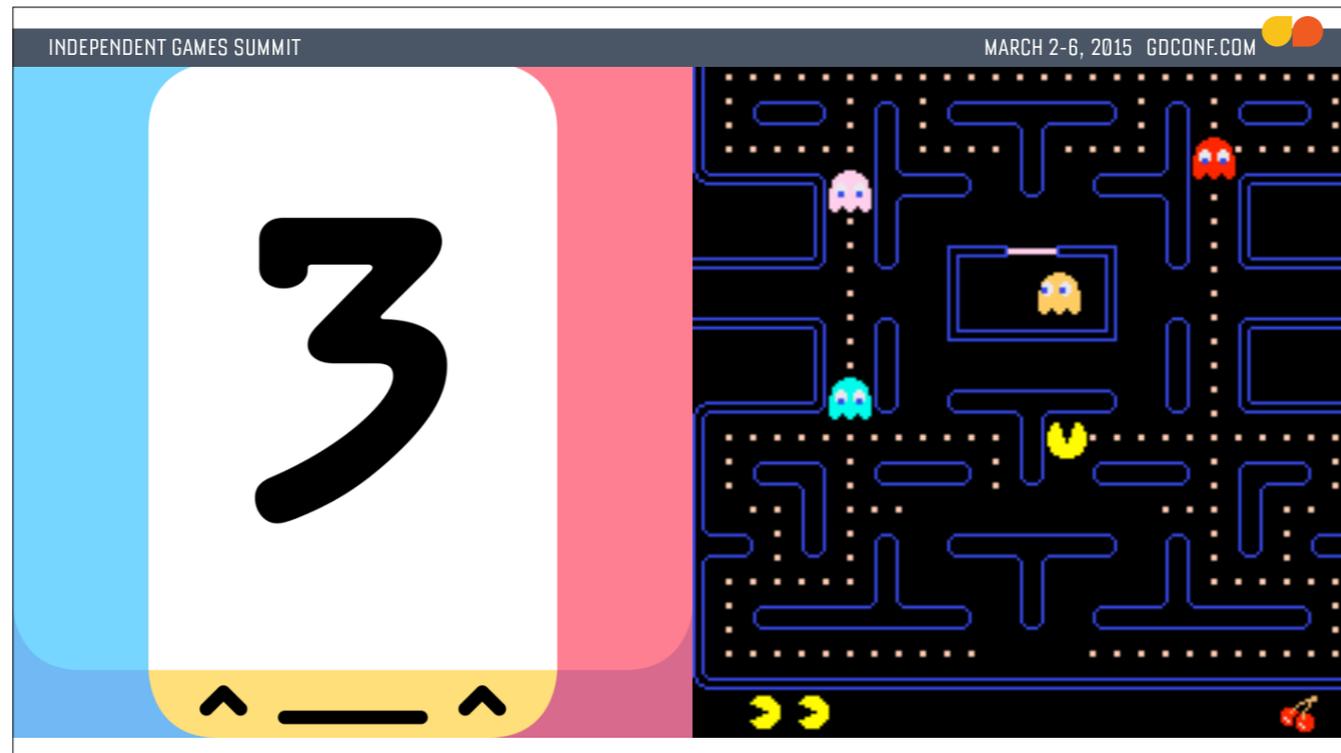
all told we spent about 9 months on portico

i couldn't stop thinking about it though

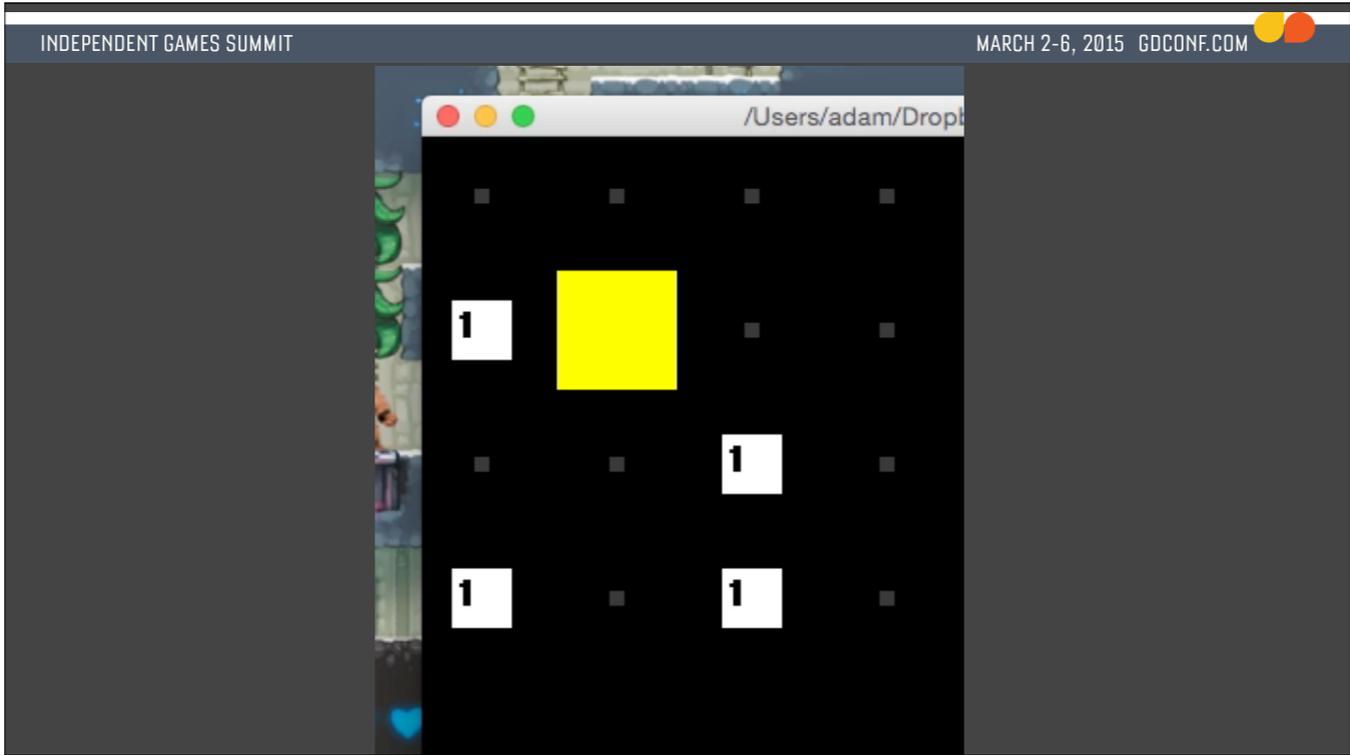


last fall i was traveling a lot and starting making weird little prototypes on the longer flights

i had basically from takeoff until the laptop battery died to make something interesting



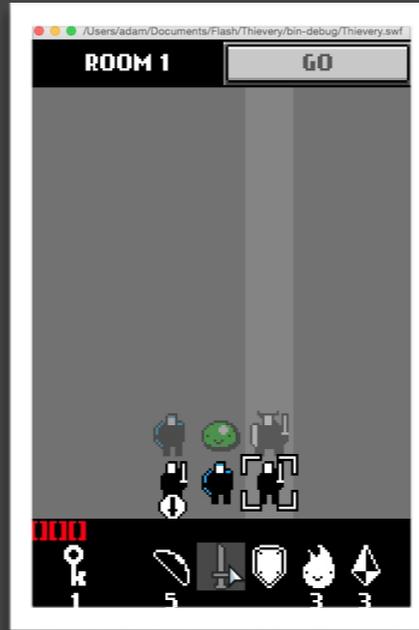
the first of these was a pacman/threes! mashup called stacman
you're welcome



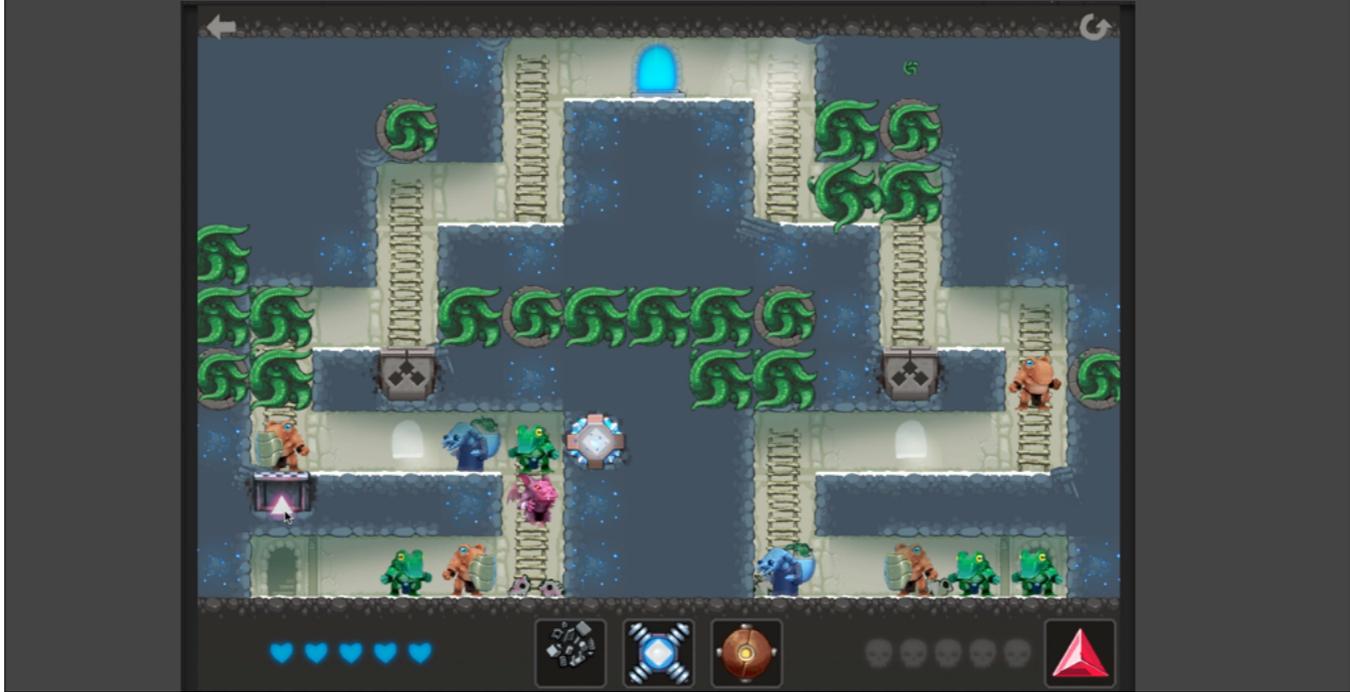
it was super broken



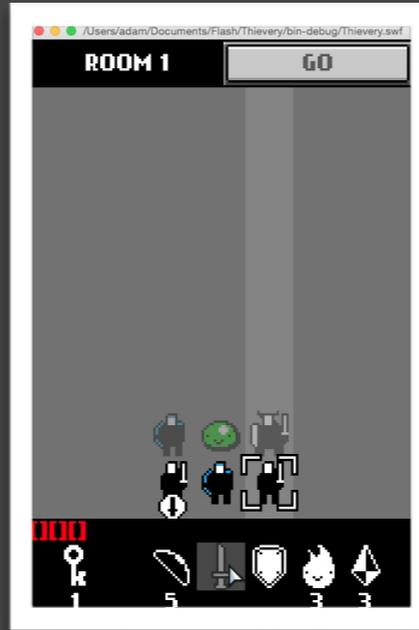
couple flights later



i was thinking about this busted old thing

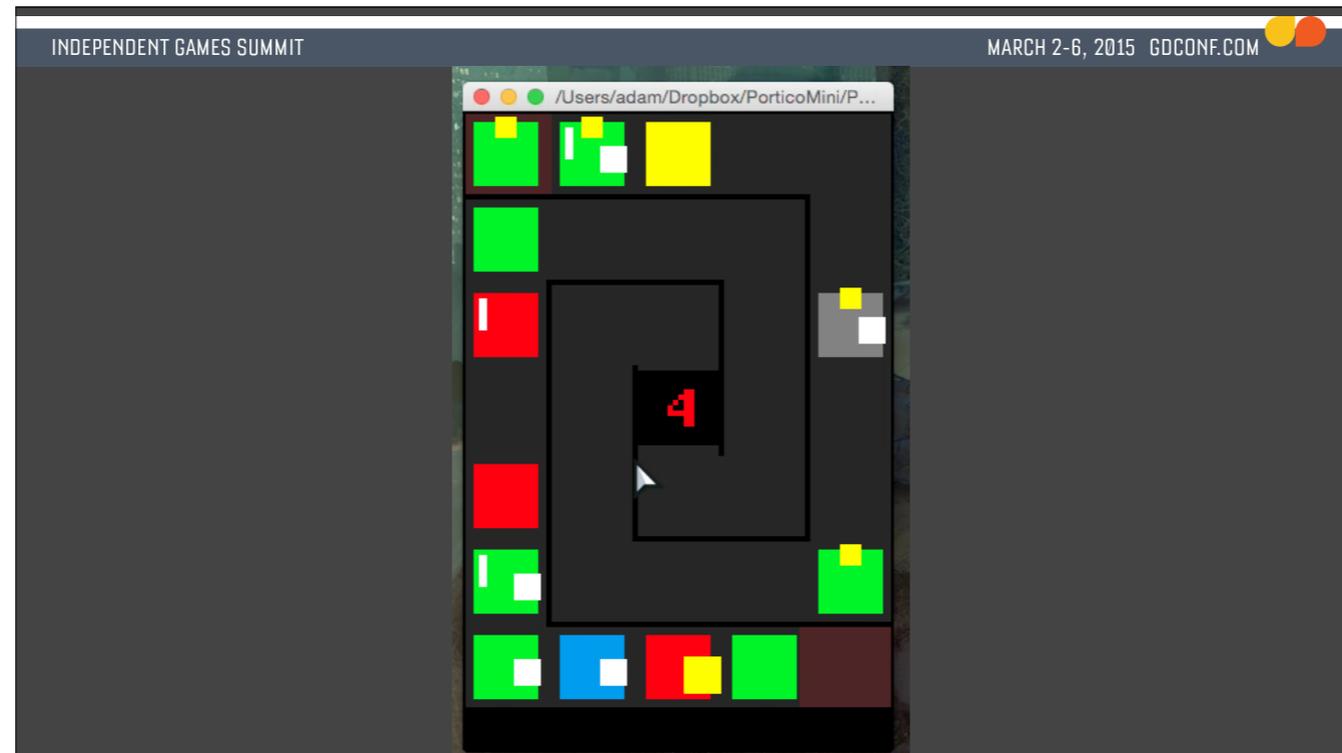


then i was thinking about this busted old thing



and then i was thinking about this one again

ok so here is a thing that we've never ever shown publicly anywhere



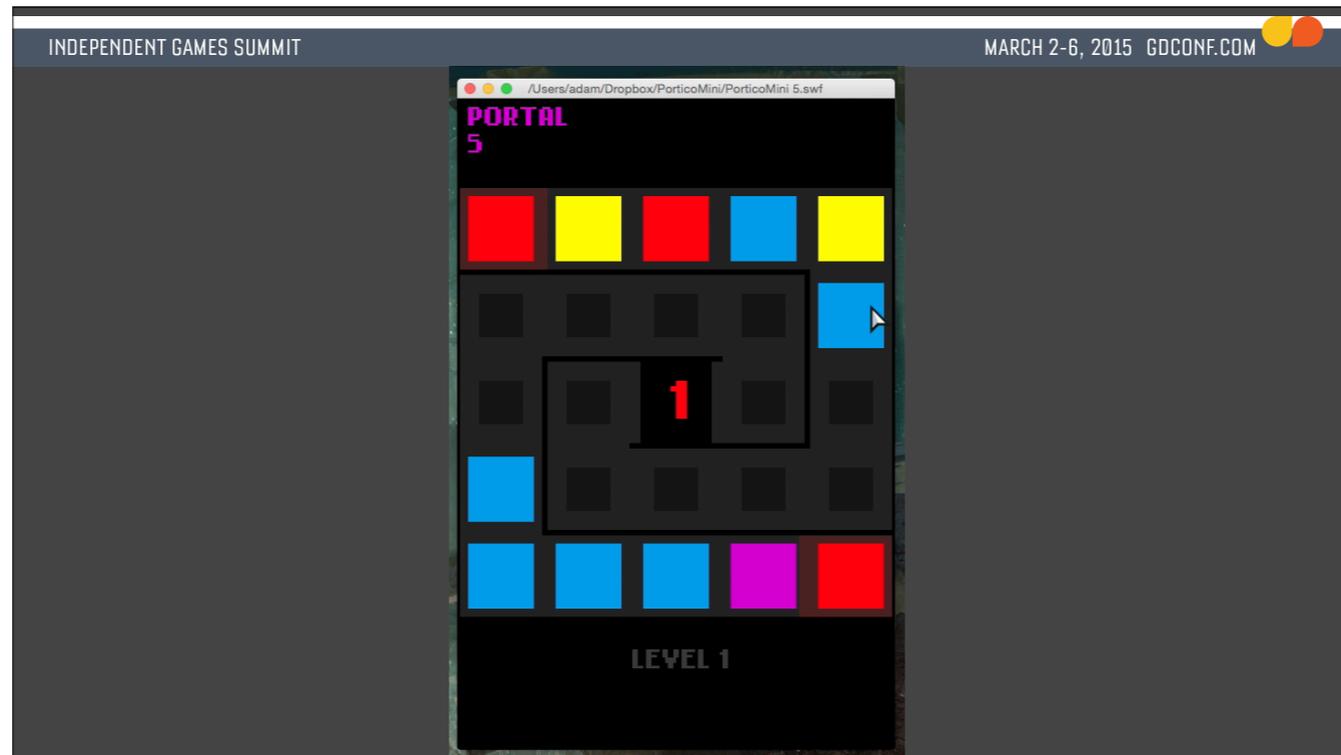
PORTICO MINI
built this in a couple of jam sessions using the broken code from stacman
basically tried to defrag even turn-based portico as much as possible

no such thing as monsters OR traps anymore
the monsters ARE the traps
only one action - click on a thing
no room for confusing cause and effect

new mechanics like the crown (can't click directly)

BUT

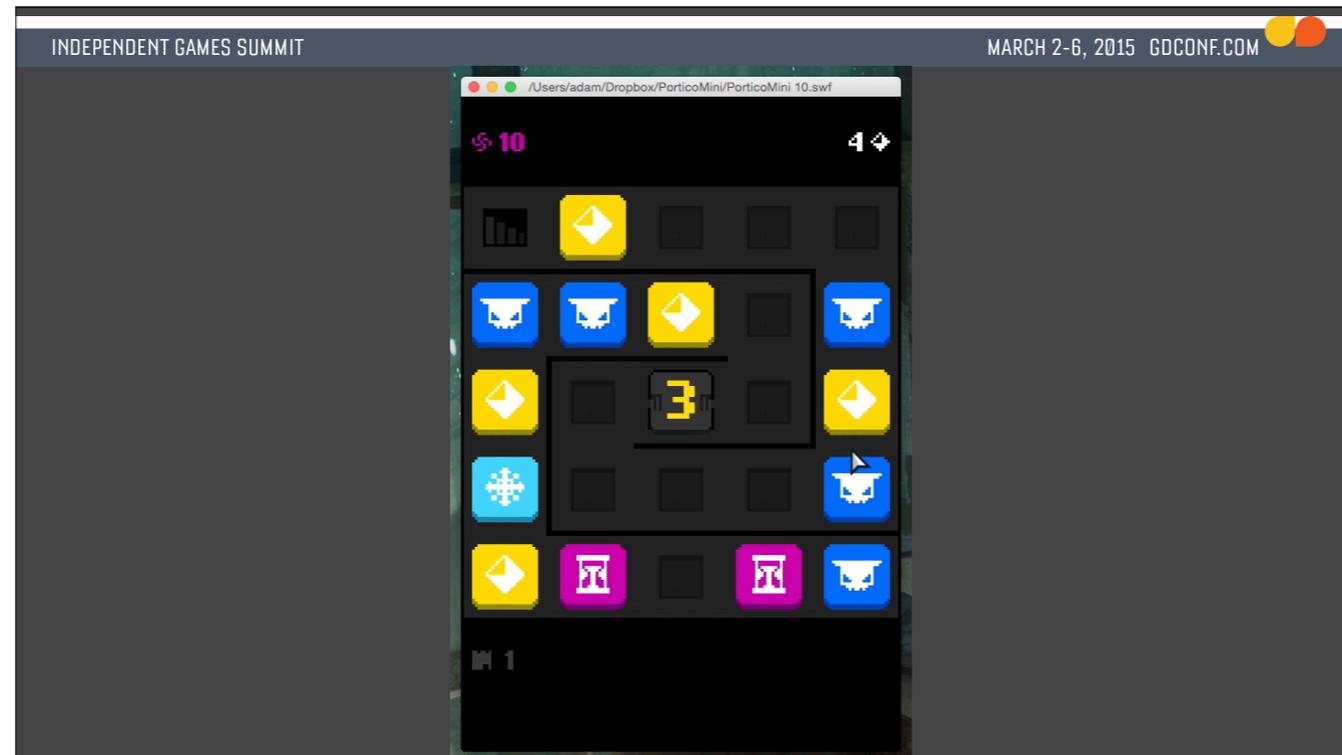
this version sucked in its own ways



zoo machines jam in france
jammed with paul vauvrey from spacebear (designer of Kindo)
defragging again: smaller grid, no more swords

the code for this game is awful but also powerful, ~5 minutes or less to try weird new rules / mechanics

this version sucked in its own ways still but
it was the least sucky version ever
strangers playtested at the jam got hooked



hauled it around on some more flights
my nephew quinn really liked it but couldn't keep track of the color-squares so i made him some icons
brought back the freeze trap behavior from the GDC version of Portico

lost count of the mechanics and variations that we tried and then threw out in this version
it was just so fast/cheap/easy to try new things - a new game piece, even in this version, was always < 1 hour
could try 3 or 4 completely new ideas in an evening



ok so a quick tour of where the game is at now



so.... what did we learn?

<joke> if you just work hard and stick with it you are Guaranteed To Succeed </joke>

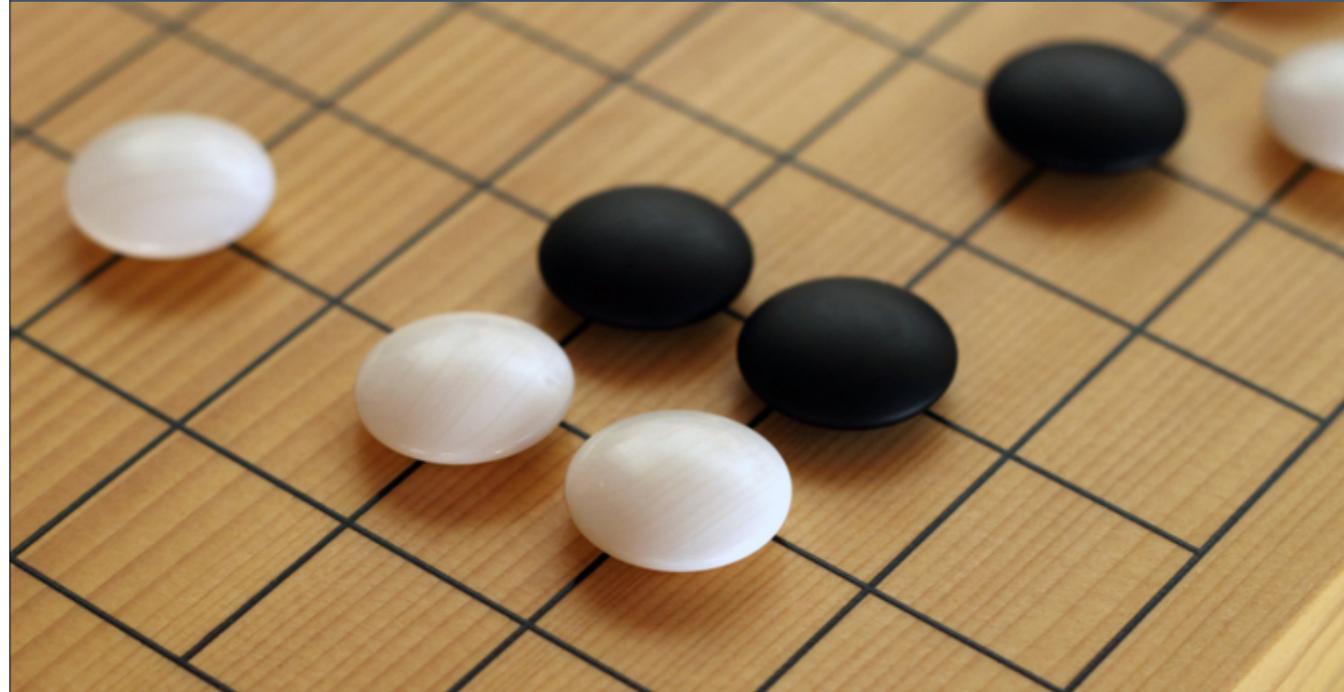
ok so but there are some parallels between portico and our main project Overland that do stand out to me



i have a really hard time focusing on solving the right problems without some kind of looming deadline

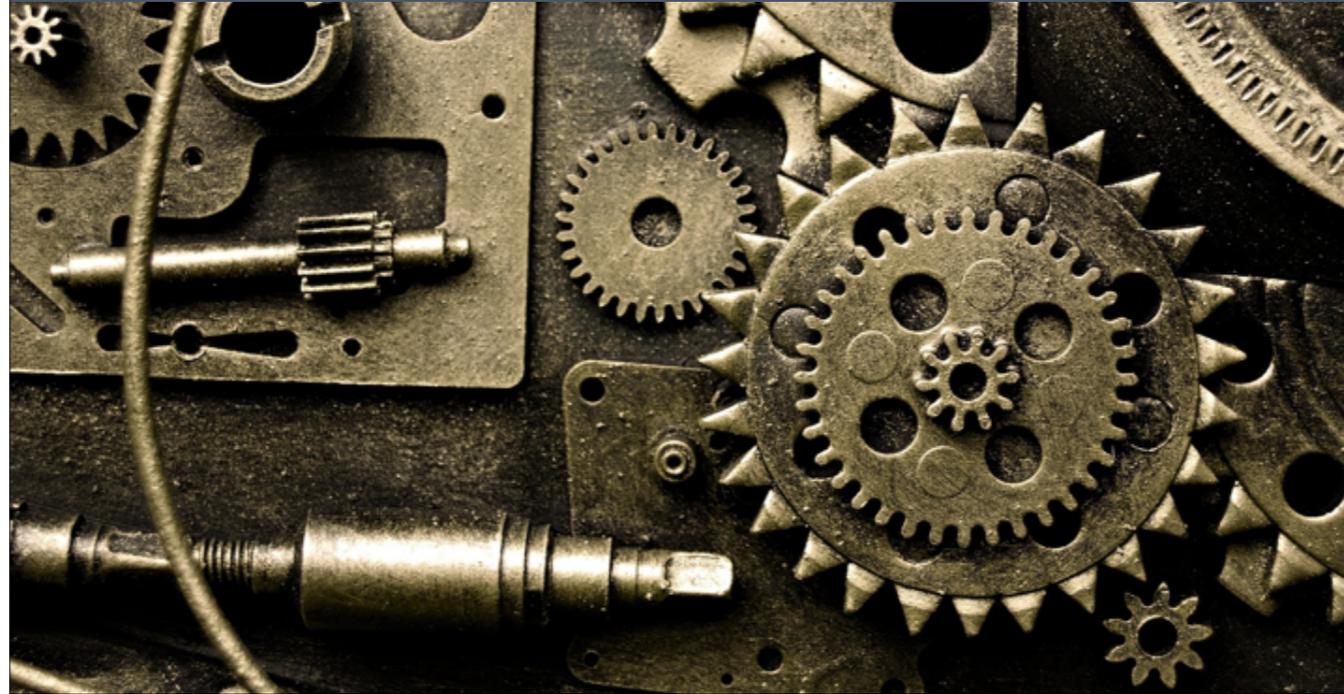
not sure what to do about this except keep making promises i don't think i can keep and then somehow keeping them anyways

but that doesn't really seem ideal



OBLIGATORY GO SLIDE

I thought this would be the perfect picture for what I wanted to say next but it turns out its a really bizarre counter example so let's do this instead



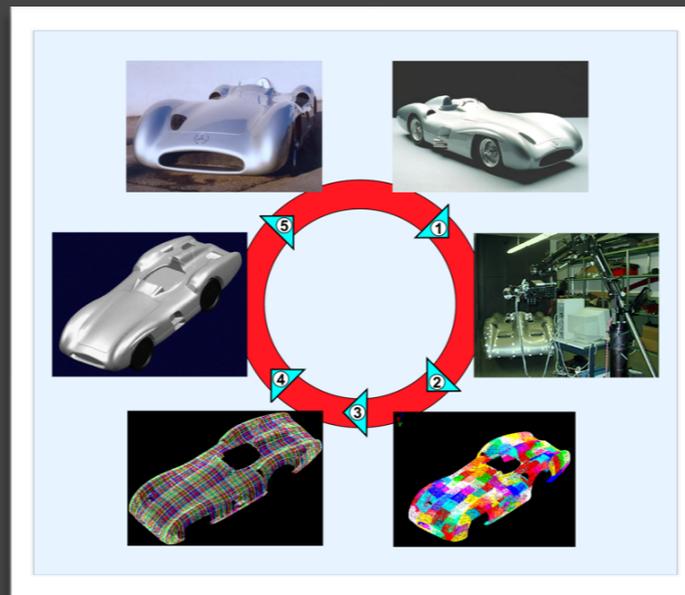
that's better

something we've found on both Portico and Overland is that often, things that are really hard to build are also really hard for people to understand

if something is hard to communicate in your design it might be that it needs more "juice" but it might be that the idea itself you are trying to communicate is too weird. usually it's both.

sometimes what you need is NOT hard work, it's time to figure out what's REALLY wrong

THEN do the hard work to make it click



UNPACKING

if people are supposed to be learning from their failures in your game, **MAKE SURE THEY CAN LEARN FROM THEIR FAILURES**

this can be deceptively challenging to implement and design

it maybe sounds obvious in retrospect but in most challenge-based games this is the top of the pyramid.



PORTICO

so whats next? i'm hoping for the best, but planning for the worst. like usual!

Portico's code is still a calamity but it's also still very easy to try new ideas.

I like a lot about where it's at but... it still feels like something's missing.

And that's ok.



thanks