Why Indies Need to Think Backwards To Move Forward

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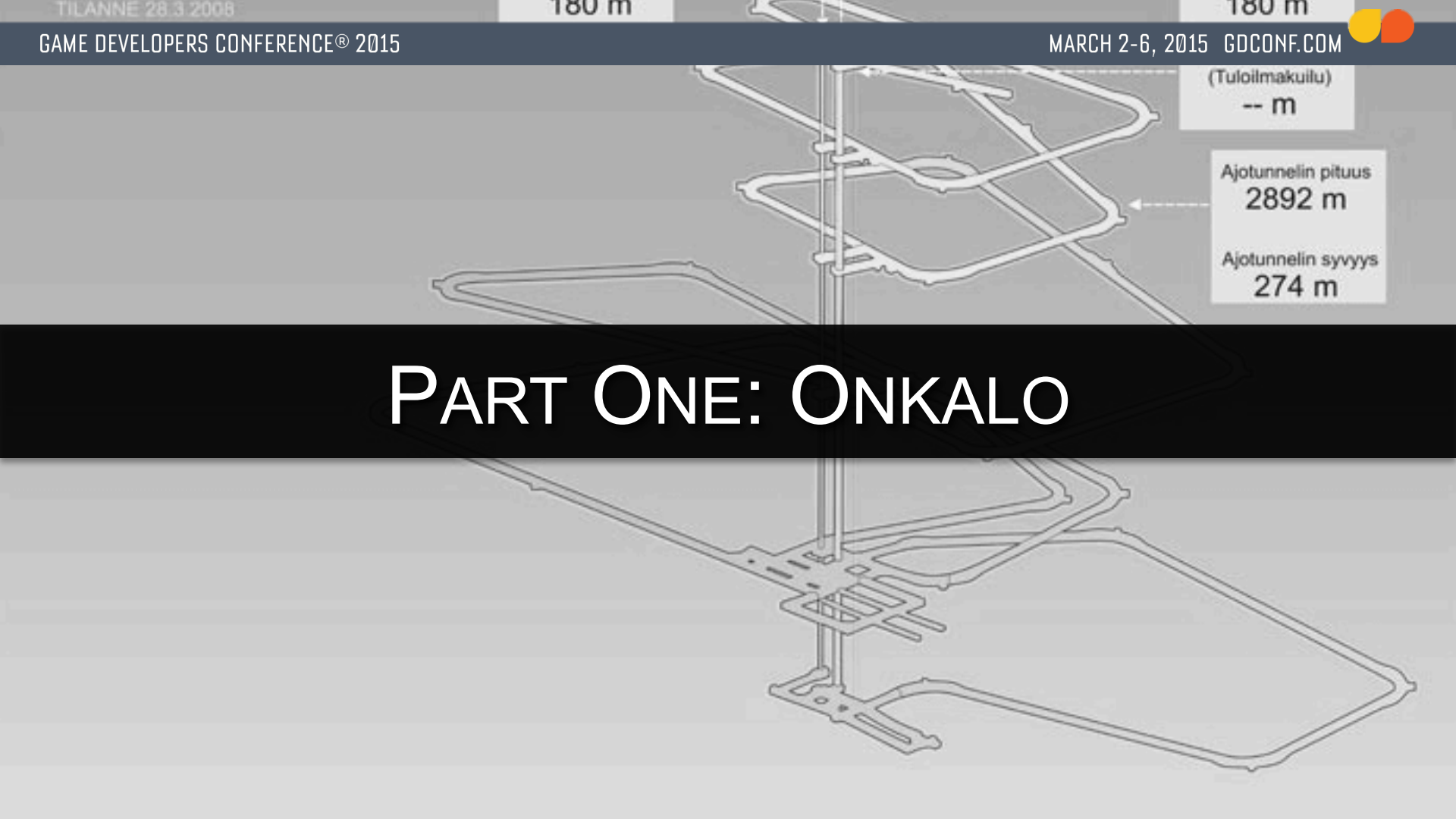
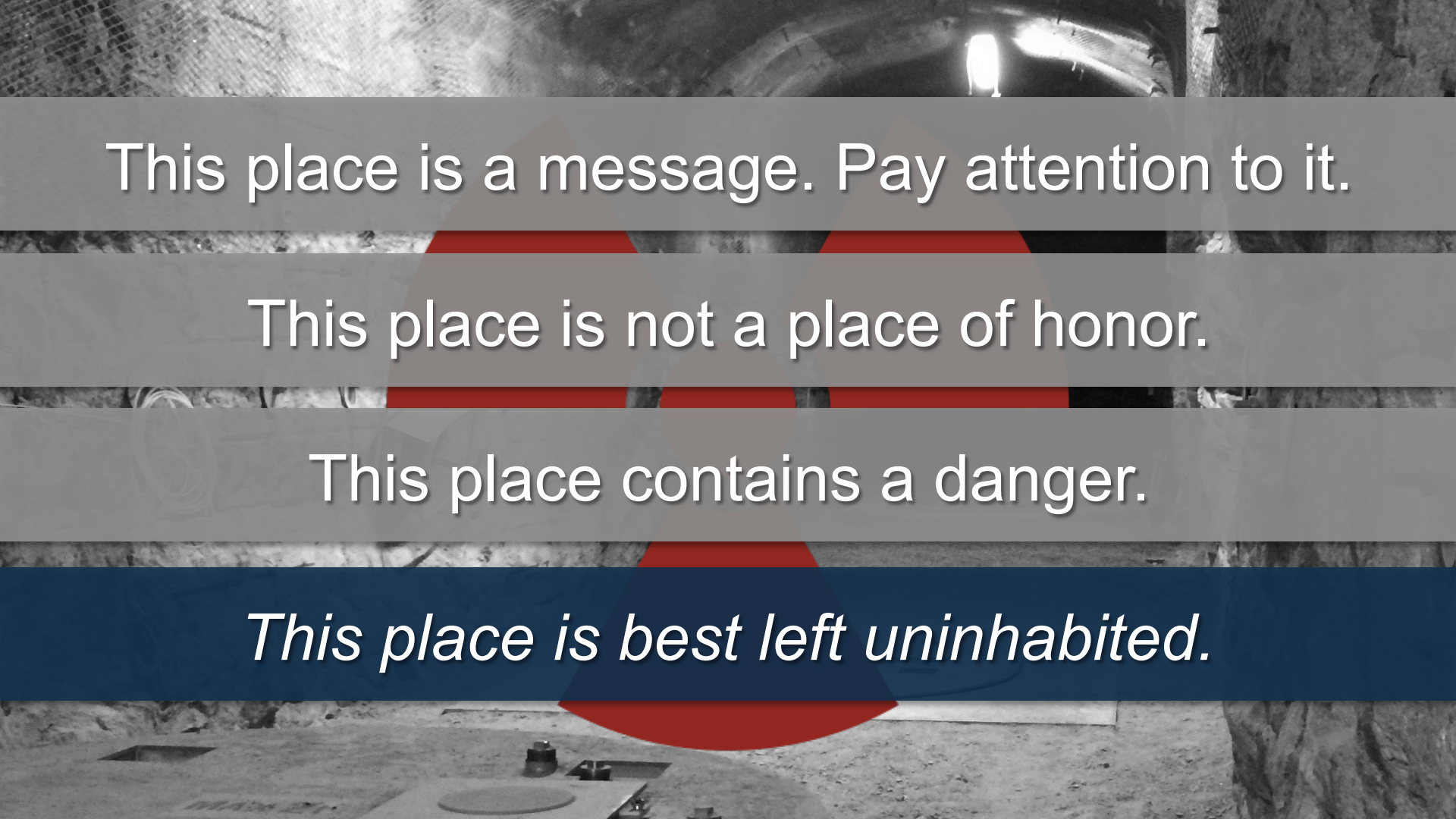
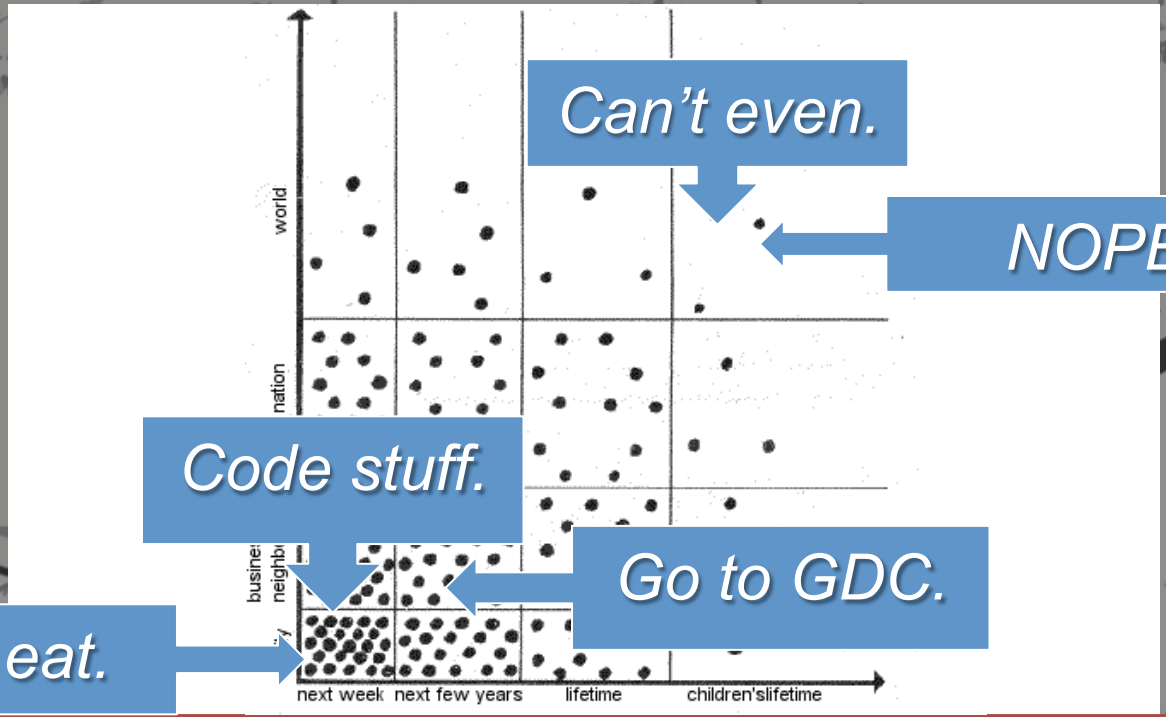
GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE®
MOSCONE CENTER · SAN FRANCISCO, CA
MARCH 2-6, 2015 · EXPO: MARCH 4-6, 2015



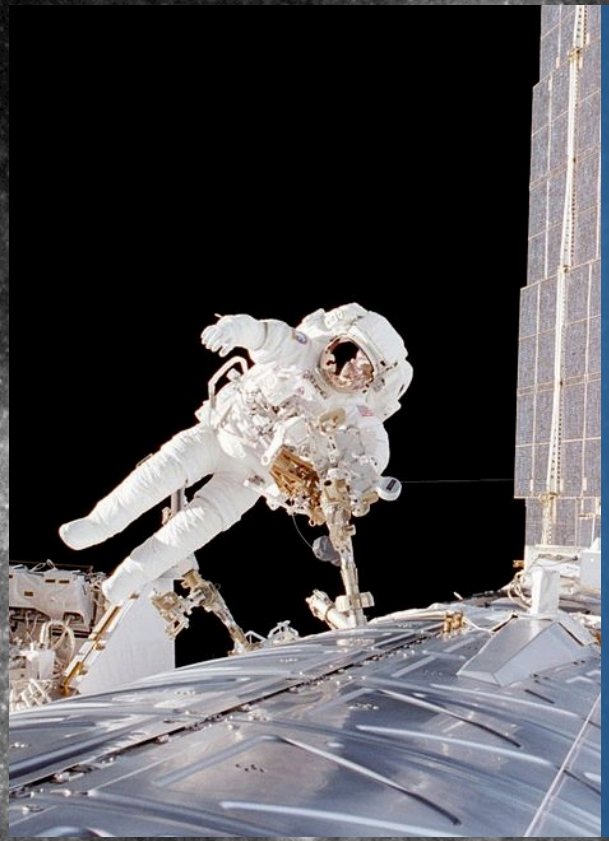
PART ONE: ONKALO


This place is a message. Pay attention to it.
This place is not a place of honor.
This place contains a danger.
This place is best left uninhabited.

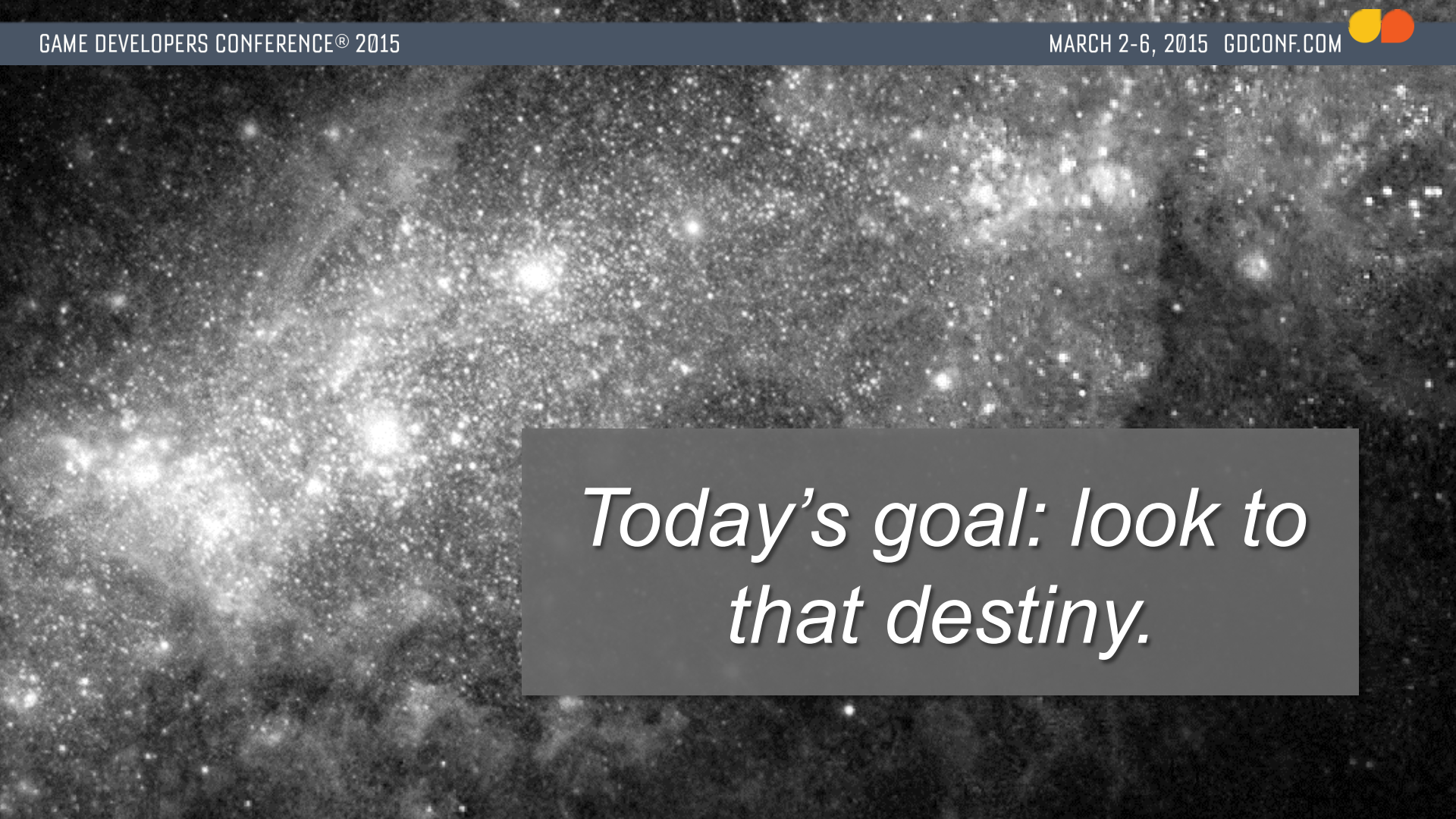


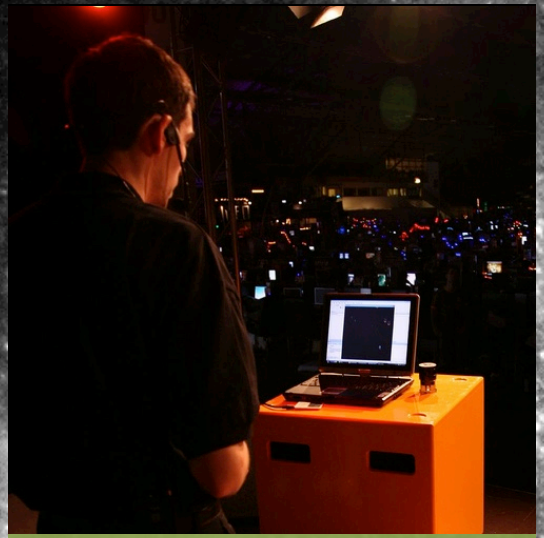
Focusing Beyond is Difficult.

Further Reading: Meadows, Donella H. *The Limits to growth…* 1972.



More and more of us want to gain a measure of reliable control over not just our creative and technical process, but our *destinies* as game developers.


Today's goal: look to that destiny.



13 Years AAA:
MS, Sony

Life Savings to
Go Indie

Status:
Still Alive

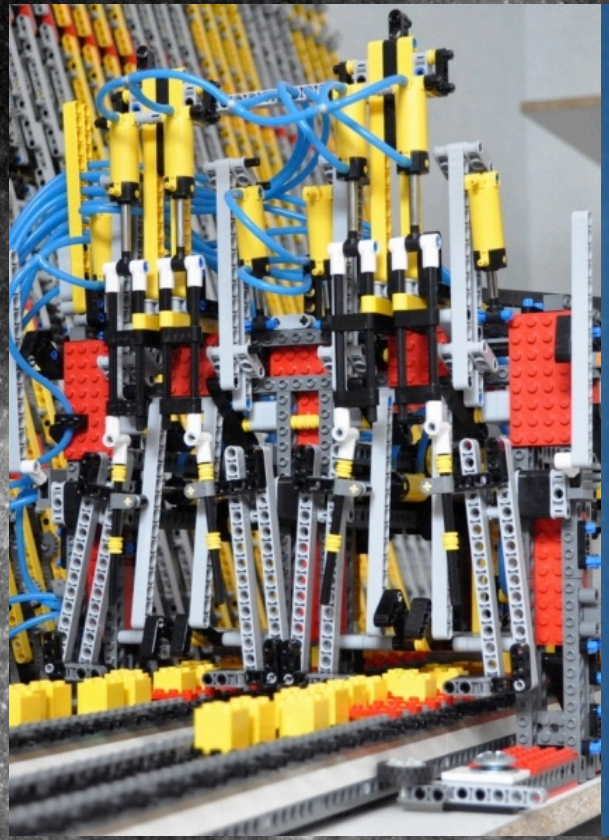
A dangerous condition exists for indie developers.

This talk is not a StatsDump™.

I am not here to argue philosophy.

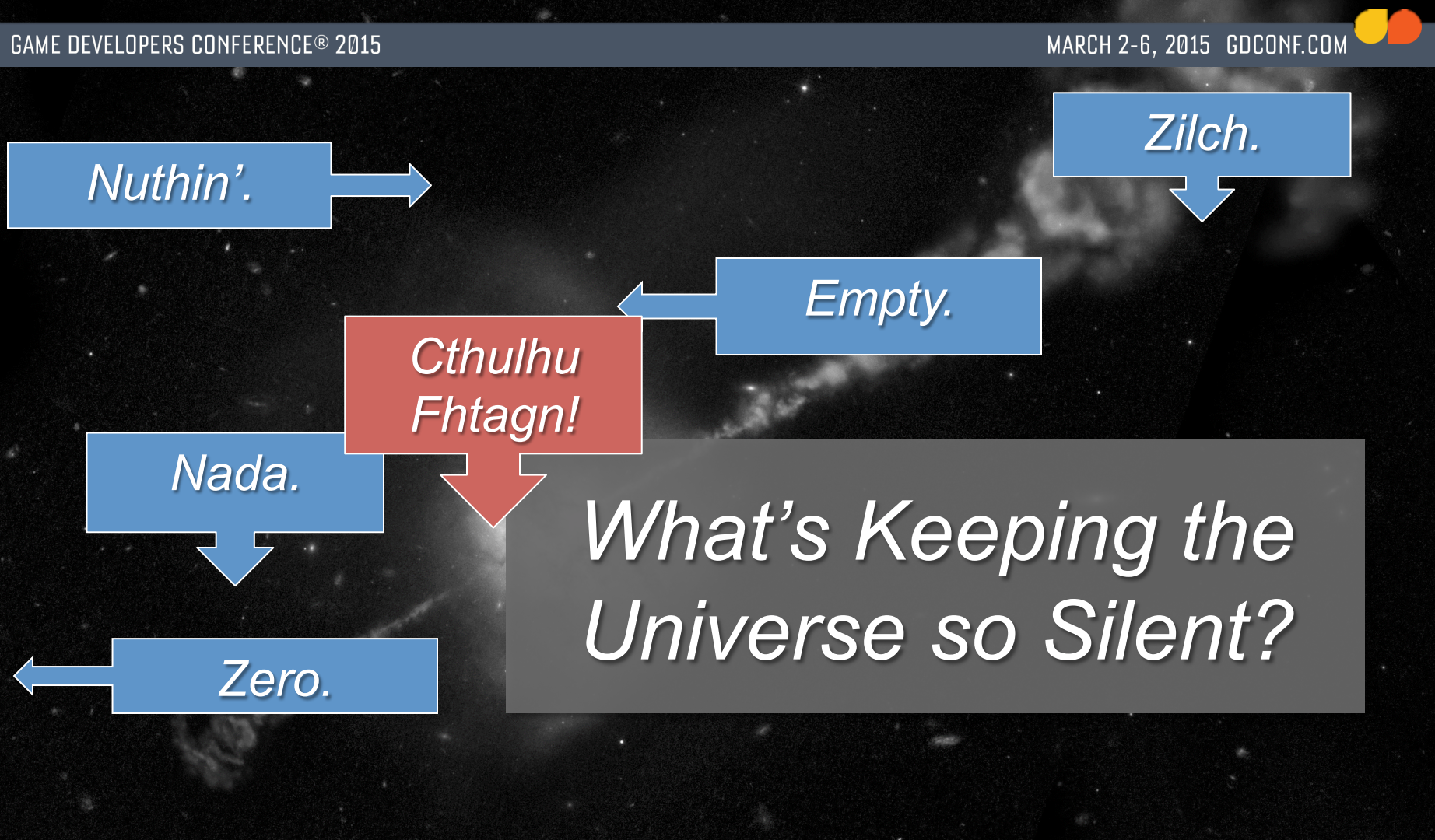
These are my conclusions.

I am here with an agenda.

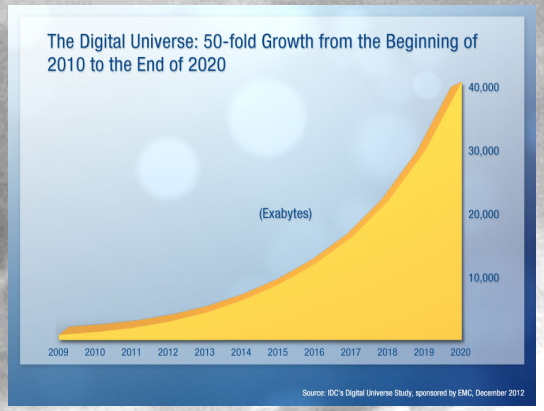


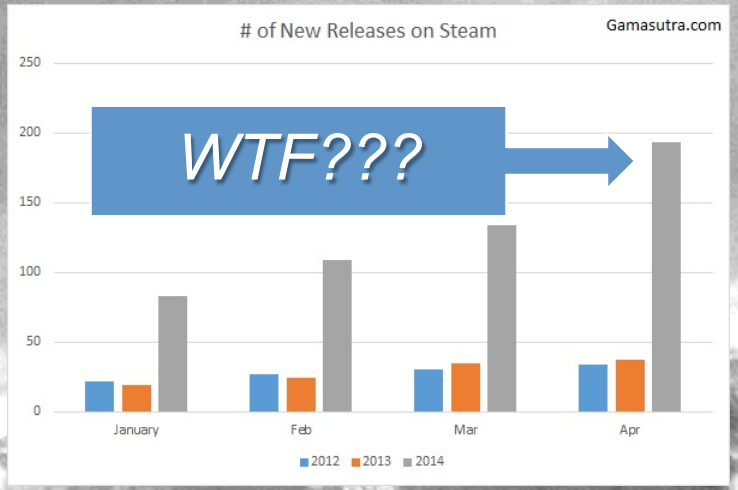
We [indies] need to act with *intelligence* as well as courage, with *healthy skepticism* as well as firm belief, and with *respect for ourselves* as creators as well as respect for our players.

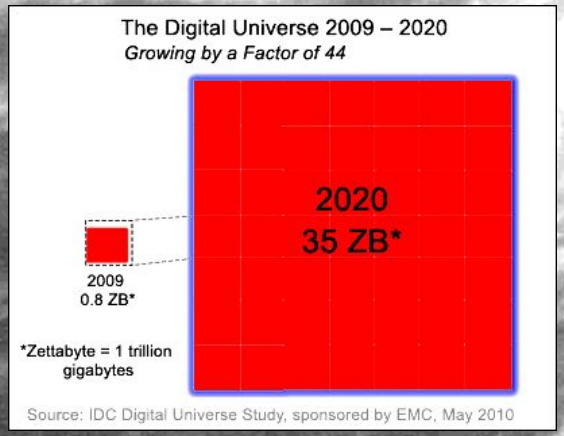
Part Two: Bono in The Halls of R'lyeh



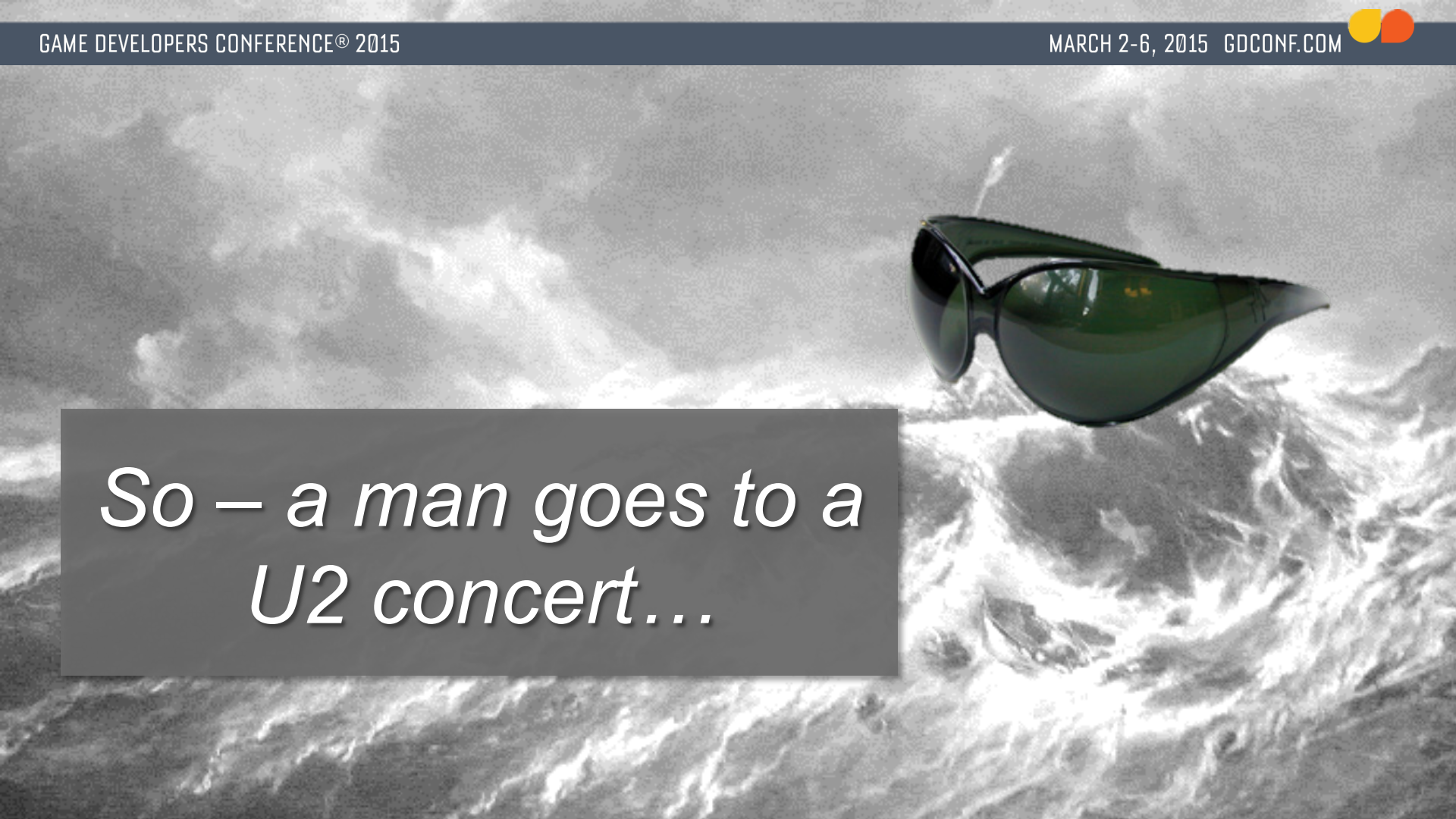
What's Keeping the Universe so Silent?

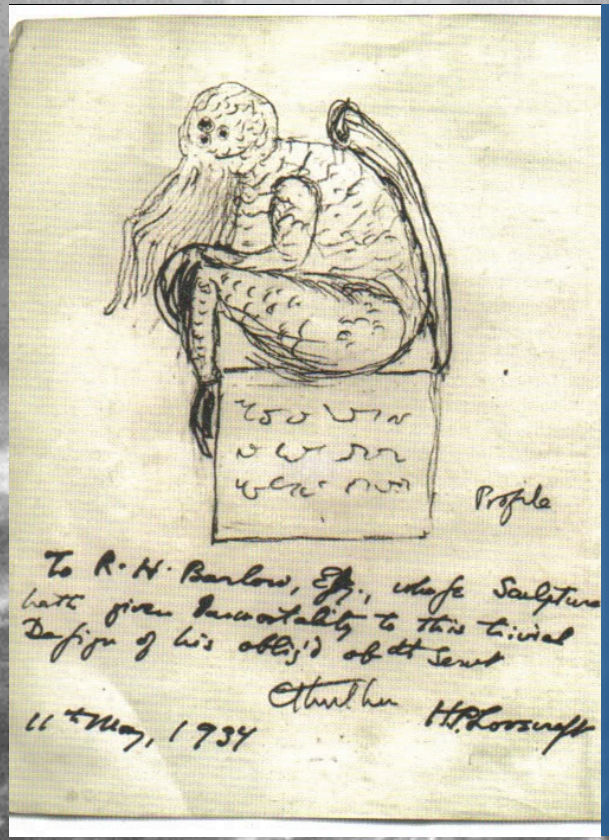






We are drowning in content.

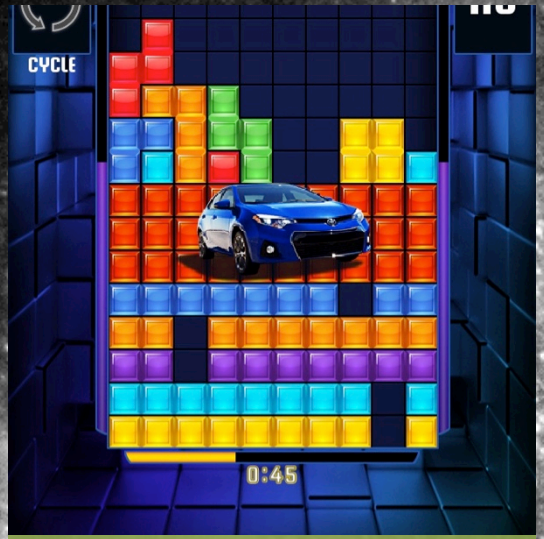

So – a man goes to a
U2 concert…



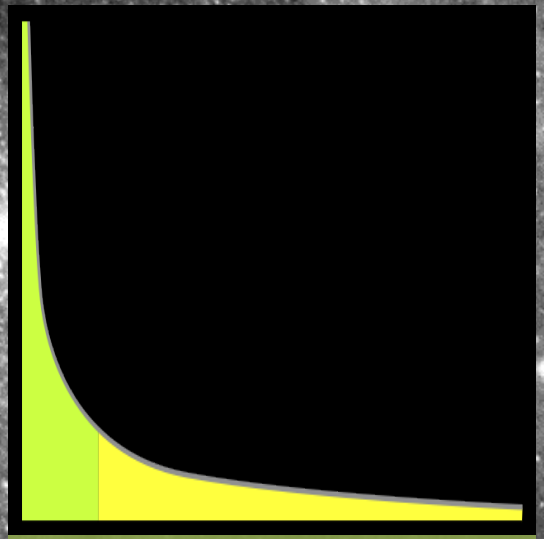
Developing *deliberately* is our way through this death trap of myth and falsehood, while maintaining our sanity, our survival, and creative control of our games.

Part Three: Myths and their Cures

Myth 1: Success is Random

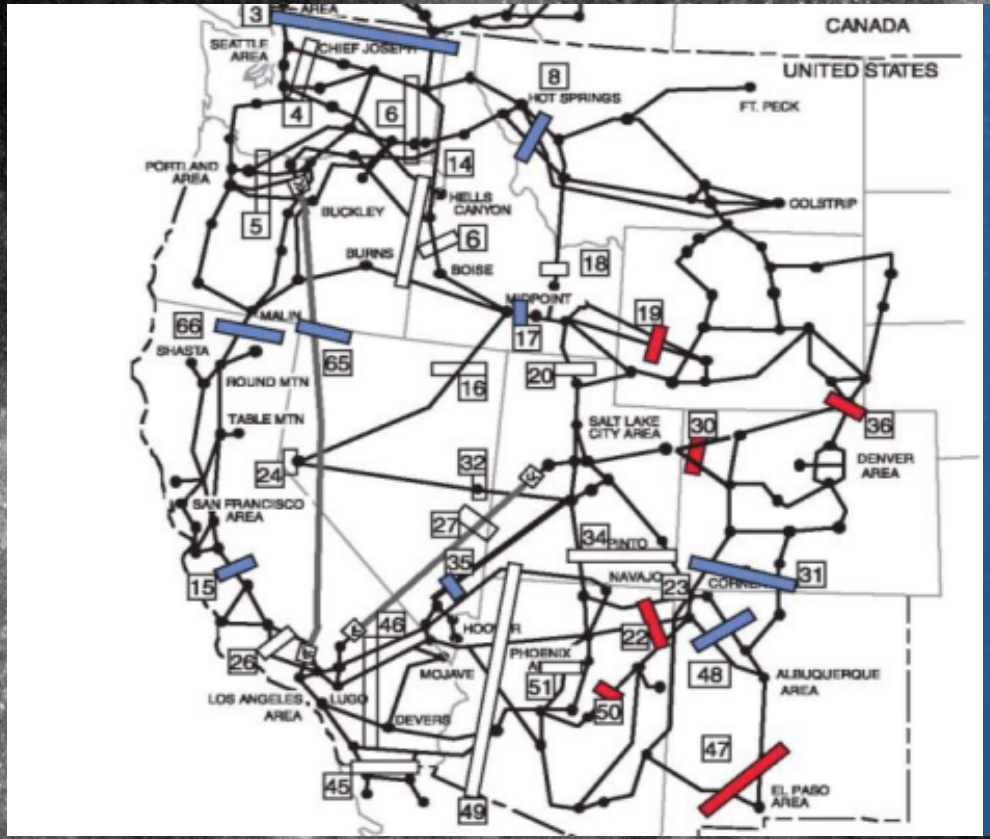


Games are Commodities



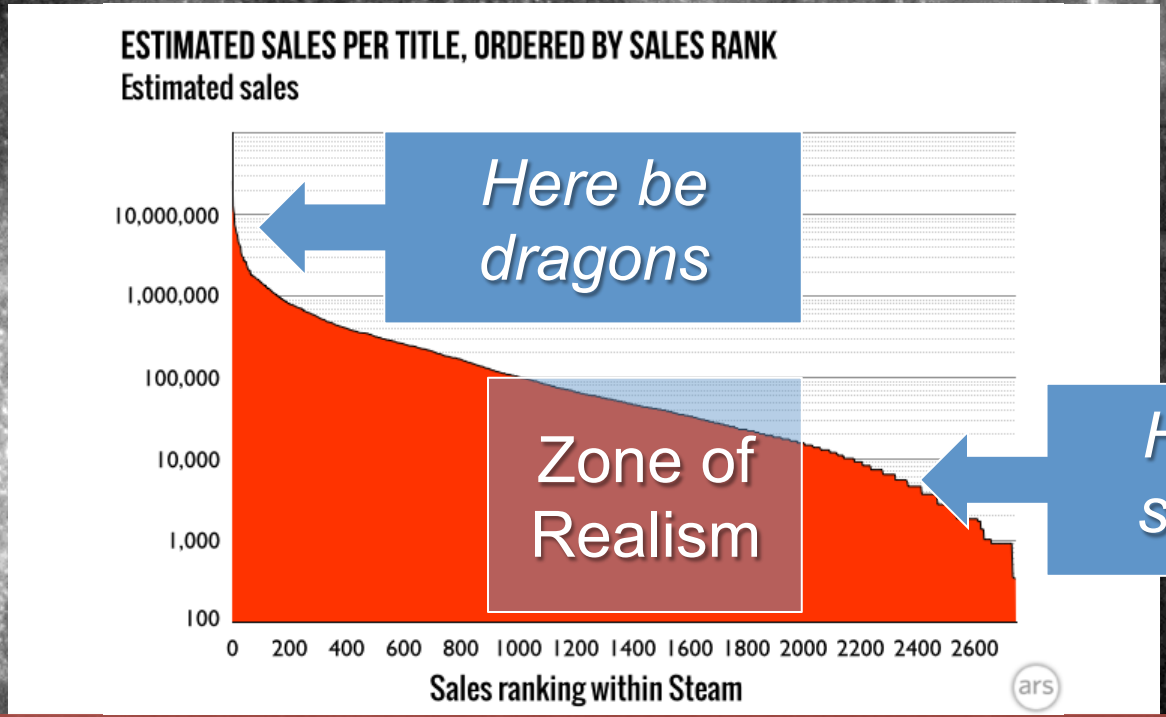
The Long Tail is Unequal

The Demo is Dead



Success is not chaos, it's chaos theory.

Multiple connected interdependent systems.



Picking the Right Neighborhood

Further Reading: Elberse, Anita. *Blockbusters: Hit-making, Risk-taking...* 2013.

USASCII code chart

b_7	b_6	b_5	Column → / Row ↓	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
0	0	0	0	NUL	DLE	SP	0	@	P	`
0	0	1	1	SOH	DC1	!	1	A	Q	a
0	1	0	2	STX	DC2	"	2	B	R	b
0	1	1	3	ETX	DC3	#	3	C	S	c
1	0	0	4	EOT	DC4	$	4	D	T	d
1	0	1	5	ENQ	NAK	%	5	E	U	e
1	1	0	6	ACK	SYN	&	6	F	V	f
1	1	1	7	BEL	ETB	'	7	G	W	g
1	0	0	8	BS	CAN	(	8	H	X	h
1	0	1	9	HT	EM	)	9	I	Y	i
1	1	0	10	LF	SUB	*	:	J	Z	j
1	1	1	11	VT	ESC	+	;	K	[	k
1	0	0	12	FF	FS	,	<	L	\	l
1	0	1	13	CR	GS	-	=	M	]	m
1	1	0	14	SO	RS	.	>	N	^	n
1	1	1	15	SI	US	/	?	O	_	o

Success is Organized

Success is Targeted

Success is Supported

Reverse-Engineered a Postmortem for Audience+Revenues (thanks Dustforce!)

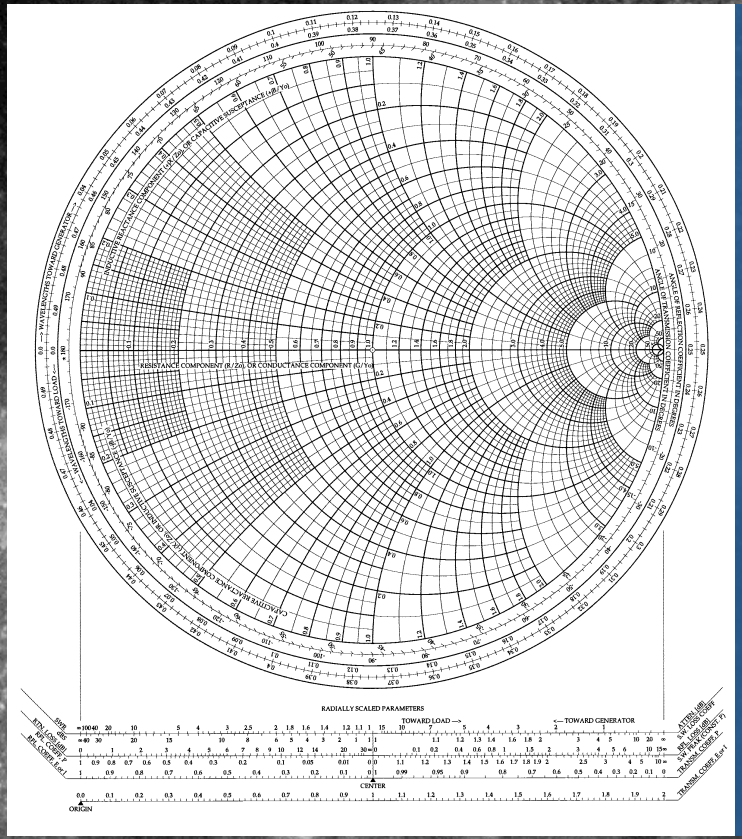
Followed Genre Kickstarter Targets and Seasonal Data for Initial Funding

Built a Cost Sheet for 4-Person Team to Find Monthly Burn Rate

Derived Launch Date and Early Access Date from Burn Rate on KS Funding

How We Planned It

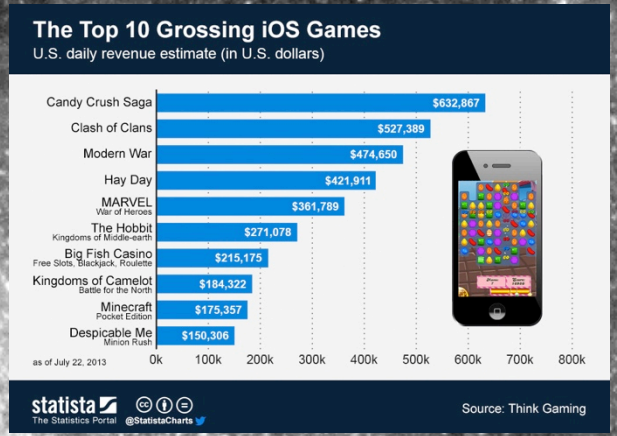
Further Reading: Hubbard, Douglas W. *How to Measure Anything…* 2014.



Success is not random.

Develop *deliberately*:
Set a realistic target - in numbers, dates, features.
Everything derives from a target you can hit.

Myth 2: Breadth is King



TOP 10 ONLINE GAMES BY FREE-TO-PLAY EARNINGS—WORLDWIDE

SuperData Research

Rank	Title	Publisher	2013 Revenues (mil $)
1	CrossFire	Tencent/SmileGate	$957
2	League of Legends	Tencent/Riot Games	$624
3	Dungeon Fighter Online	Nexon	$426
4	World of Tanks	Wargaming.net	$372
5	Maplestory	Nexon	$326
6	Lineage I	NCSoft	$257
7	World of Warcraft	Activision/Blizzard	$213
8	Star Wars: The Old Republic	Electronic Arts	$139
9	Team Fortress 2	Valve	$139
10	Counter-Strike Online	Valve/Nexon	$121

Top 10 US Digital console titles by worldwide revenues—January 2015

	TITLE	PUBLISHER	DIGITAL CONSOLE REVENUE ($ MILLIONS)
1	Grand Theft Auto V	Take-Two Interactive	$31.8
2	Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare	Activision/Blizzard	$23.5
3	Destiny	Activision/Blizzard	$14.2
4	Dying Light	Warner Bros.	$12.0
5	Battlefield 4	Electronic Arts	$11.7
6	Resident Evil HD Remastered	CAPCOM	$10.8
7	Minecraft	Microsoft	$10.3
8	Call of Duty: Ghosts	Activision/Blizzard	$9.2
9	Madden NFL15	Electronic Arts	$6.1
10	Call of Duty: Black Ops II	Activision/Blizzard	$3.5

SUPERDATA

Source: SuperData's *Monthly Digital Console Report* for the month of January, 2015. Titles shown are largest for US market and ranked by worldwide digital console revenues. Worldwide revenues include full-game digital downloads and DLC/additional content. All numbers subject to change. Figures based on a monthly digital game spending among 37 million paying online gamers. For more information on our methodology, please visit our site: **www.superdataresearch.com**

We are held up to impossible numbers.

Subgenre Loyalty or Nuanced Mechanics

Progressive or Diverse Stories and Characters

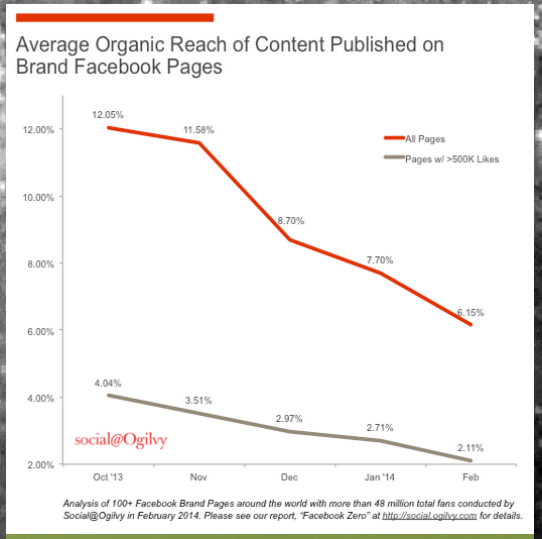
New or Nonstandard Hardware

Livable-Wage Price for Creators

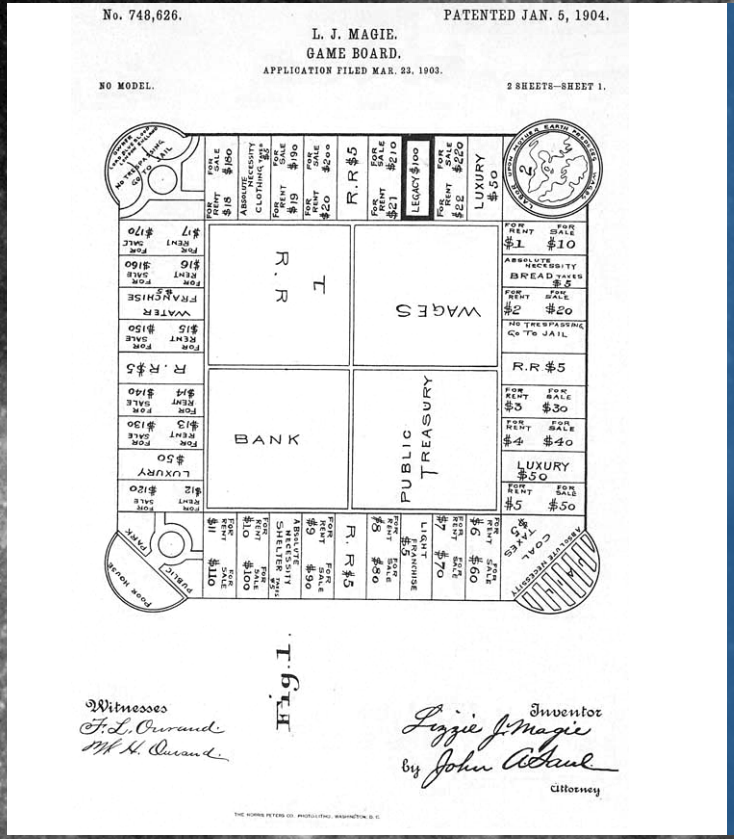
Would You REALLY Sacrifice These for “Breadth”?

"Gamers" No Longer a Demographic.

Platforms Fragment, Loyalty Stays.



Decentralized Paid Social Media.


No. 748,626. PATENTED JAN. 5, 1904.

L. J. MAGIE.

GAME BOARD.

APPLICATION FILED MAR. 23, 1903.

NO MODEL. 2 SHEETS—SHEET 1.

Fig. 1.

Witnesses
F. L. Ourand
M. H. Ourand

Inventor
Lizzie J. Magie
by John A. Faust
Attorney

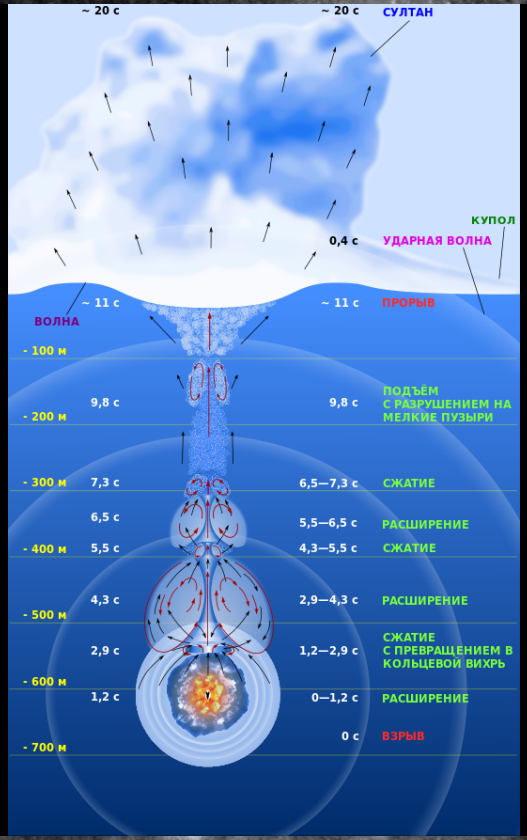
THE HORNE PETERS CO., PHOTO-LITHO., WASHINGTON, D. C.

You will *not* win on price or pixels, not when big houses can drop $1M on an ad campaign and get 100,000 users overnight.

The Problem with
Breadth is Data Loss.

- Picked a Friendly Platform and Genre
- Knew our Competition, Inspirations
- Announced to Press for Target Players
- Made the Bet on What Was Weird

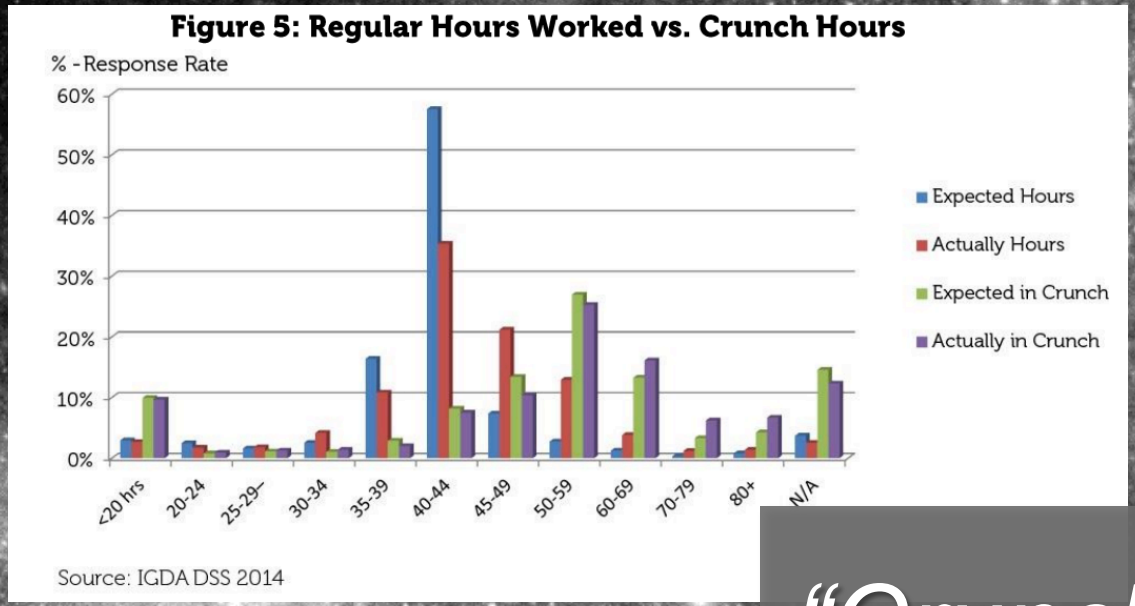
How We Found Players



Breadth is not king.

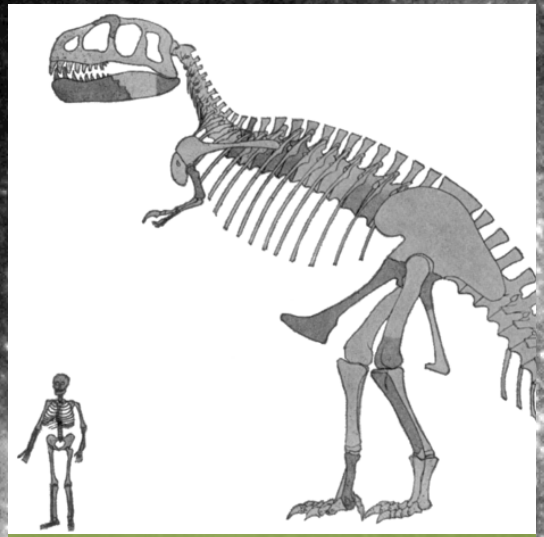
Develop *deliberately*: Pursue a deep, small audience you understand. Do not sacrifice your vision or your price point.

Myth 3: Alone in Crunch

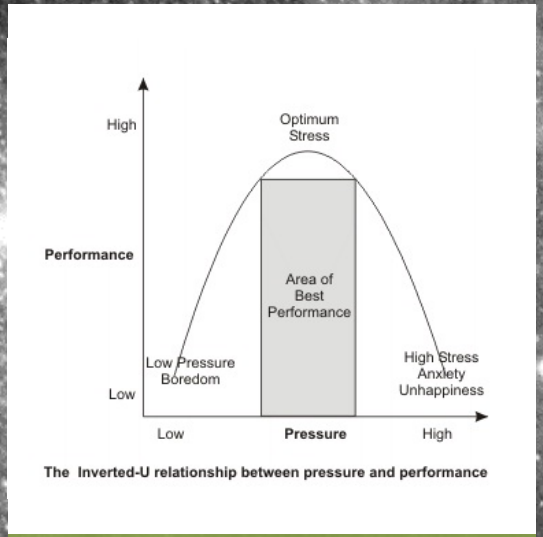


"Crunch Time" is toxic industry waste.

And it affects indies.

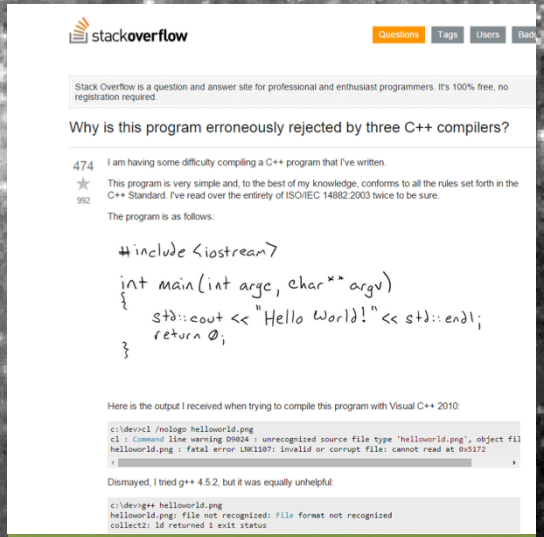


System Stacks Against Individual.



The Inverted-U relationship between pressure and performance

Human Performance is Cyclical.



You're Already Part of a Team.

Revolutionary Gameplay Changes

New Marketing Ideas

Deep Networks of Support

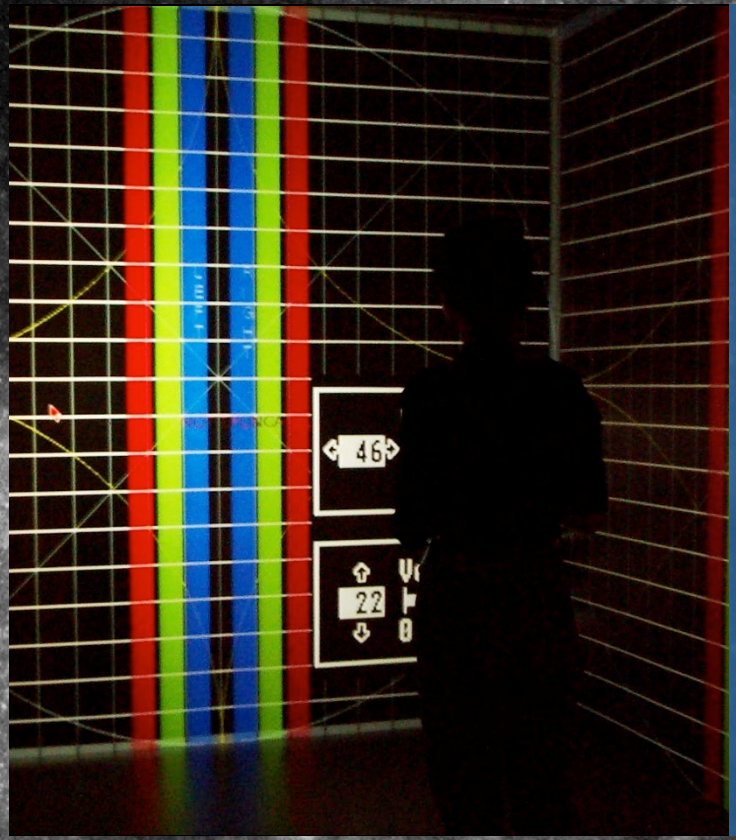
Storytelling and Creative Energy, and More…

Get a Team, and Get these Things. Don’t abuse!

- 4 Hrs In Office, 4 Hrs Out
- Save In-Office For Group Problems
- Track Features, Not Hours
- Slip Features, Don’t Crunch

How We Did Teamwork

Further Reading: IGDA Developer Satisfaction Survey, 2014: https://www.igda.org/?page=dss2014



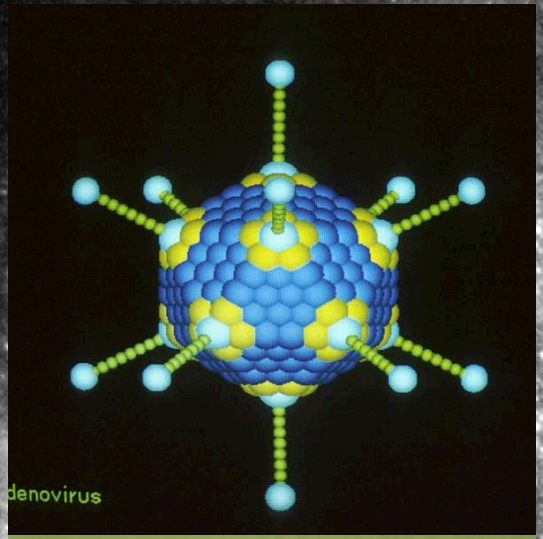
Indie dev isn't alone until you die of exhaustion.

Develop *deliberately*: Augment your strengths, work with human cycles, calibrate to the team.

Myth 4: Marketing is Evil

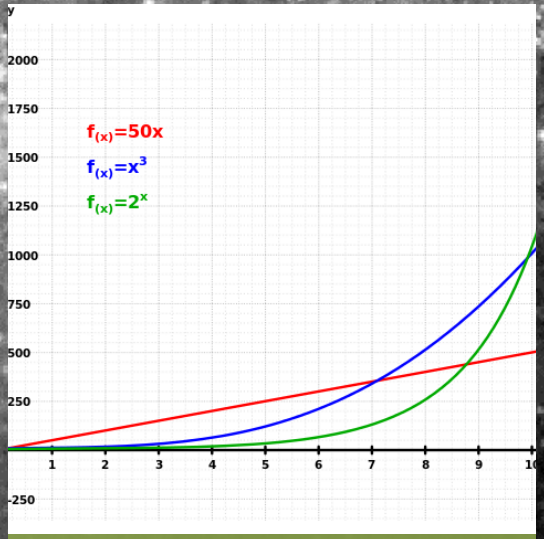
"Bad marketing all over the place. 'Discoverability' is exactly the consequence for bad marketing."

- Eric Harris (of the Internet)

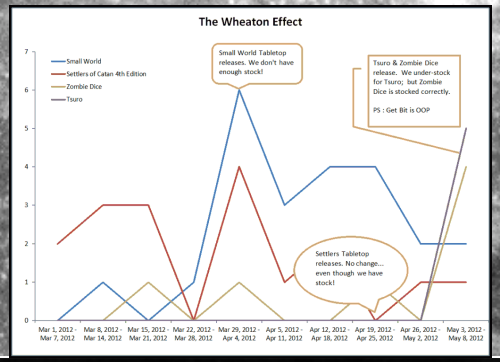


Virality is a Lie, Energy is Required.

A Mention isn't "Word of Mouth".



Storefronts Don't Promise Exp. Growth.



The "Spike" Graph Hid All The Marketing.

Now it's visible.

How We Did Marketing Backwards

Indie dev doesn't mean ignoring marketing.

Develop *deliberately*: Grow your community as you go, a beat at a time. And START NOW.

PART LAST: DEVELOPING DELIBERATELY

AKA - Let's Recap.

Set Realistic Targets.

Pursue a Small Audience Deeply.

Build a Team of Three and Fit to Their Output.

Grow Community As You Go, a Beat at a Time.

This Is Your Passion – *and* Your Business.

"Personal brand"
What you bring is valuable.
Treat it that way.

charles@4gency.com