




SEE NOTES FOR EACH SLIDE FOR THE CONTENT OF THE TALK!

Hello! I'm Scott Brodie, Founder & Designer at Heart Shaped Games, and I'm here to give a Postmortem on the design of my game Hero Generations.

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Roguelike where every turn is 1 year of your life.


UIM

The image shows three chibi-style characters representing a hero's progression in a Roguelike game. The first character on the left is a young, healthy-looking man with brown hair and blue eyes, wearing a red tunic and holding a sword. The middle character is an older, more battle-worn man with a beard, a red scar on his forehead, and a sword and shield. The third character on the right is an elderly man with a long white beard, a black eye patch over his left eye, and a sword and shield. They are all standing on a light brown ground against a white background.


If you're not familiar with it, it's a Roguelike Strategy RPG where every step is 1 year of your hero's life.

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Find a mate, settle down, and have a child.



Before your character dies, you need to find a mate, settle down, and have a child.


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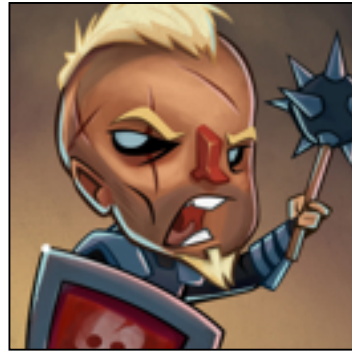
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Take control of your child and build a legacy.

You then take control of your child and adventure to improve your family legacy. In each life, you try to achieve Fame, while balancing the needs of your family, potential mates, and ultimately, the needs of the entire world.

Hero Generations in 2017



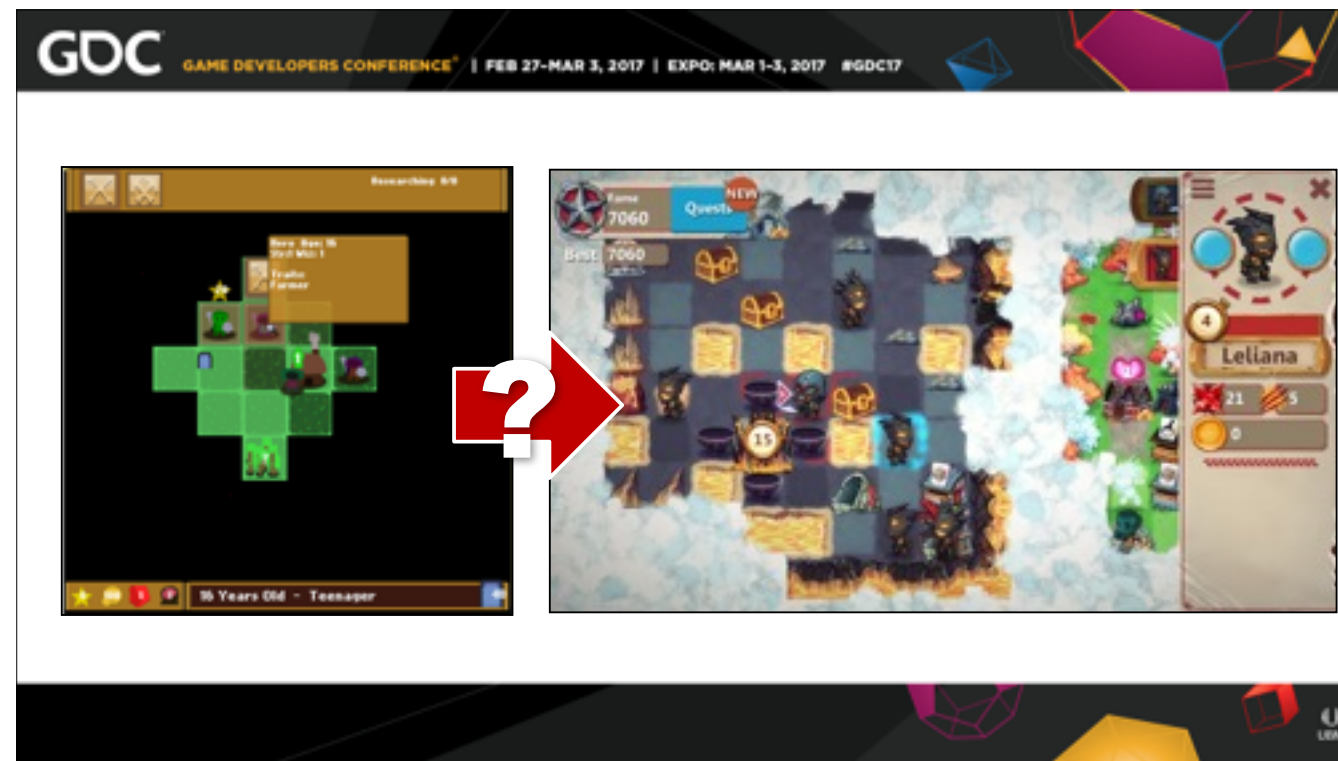
\$320,000 to date



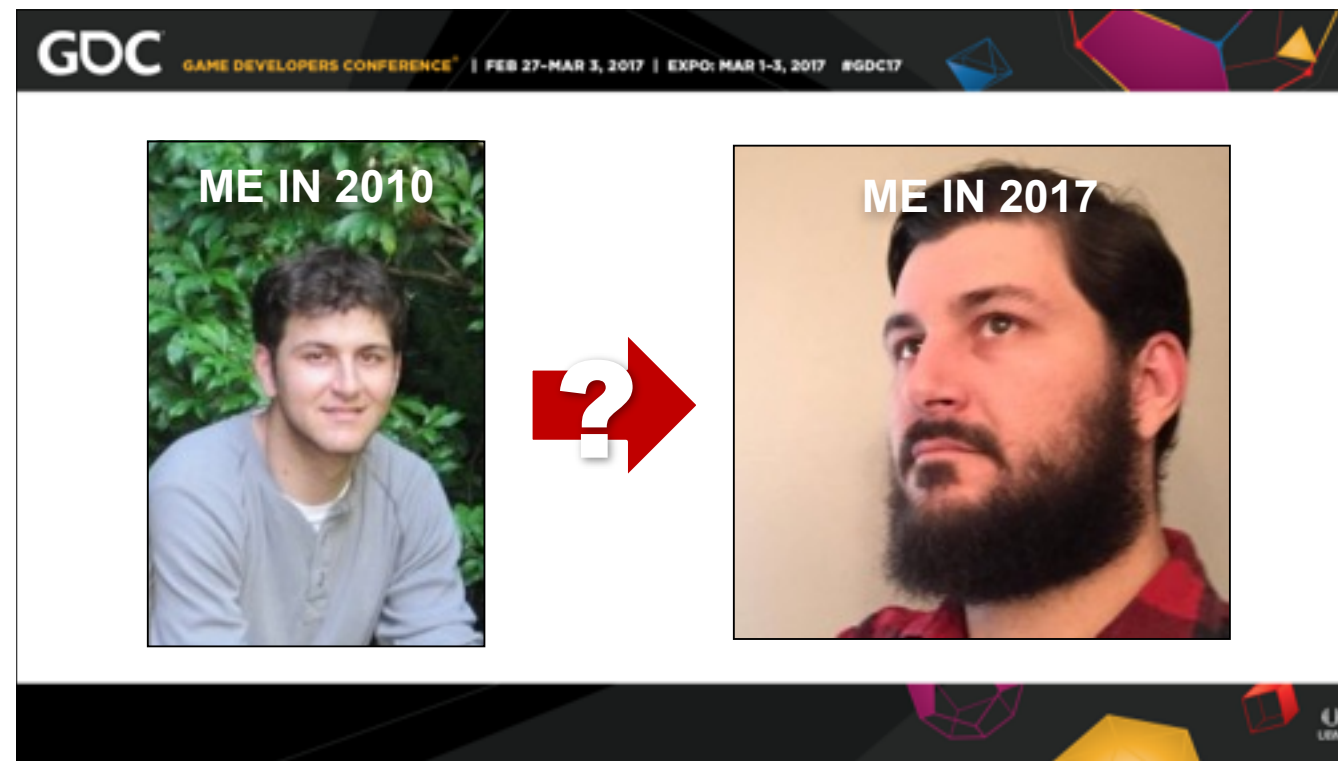
Now here in 2017, the game has become an award-winning mobile and steam game that has grossed just over \$320,000 dollars to date, on all platforms. We made in Unity with a team of 3, and self-published it everywhere. It even has screaming guy app icon.



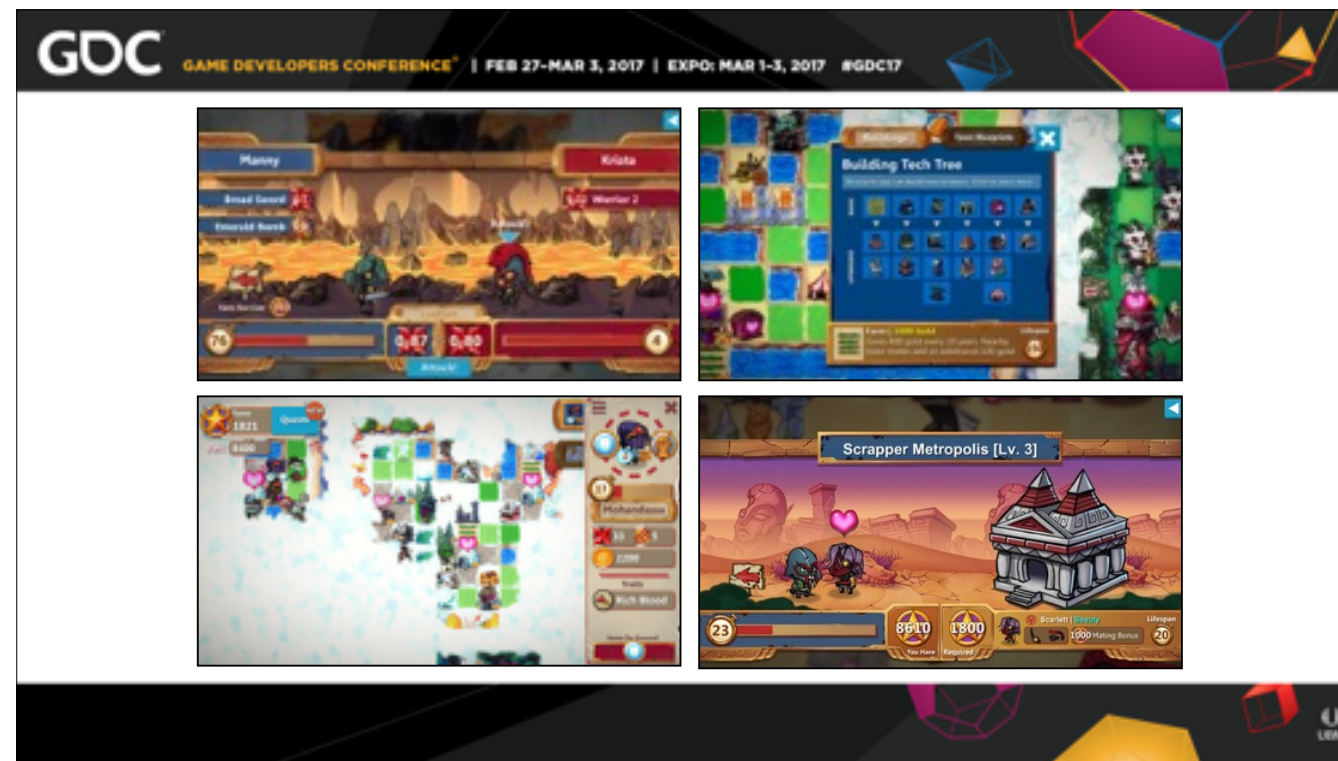
However, when I first started designing back in 2010, the game was on a very different path. I had just left my job at a big studio, and was working on my own. I was teaching myself Flash, dabbling in pixel art, and just beginning to piece together what the game was going to be.



So I in this talk I want share how the design transformed, from this, to this...



And show how I transformed from this to that....



...and share what I learned about game design and making mobile games along the way.

2010 — Early Design

So I'll just dive right in to the early design process, which I started back in 2010.

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Art Games

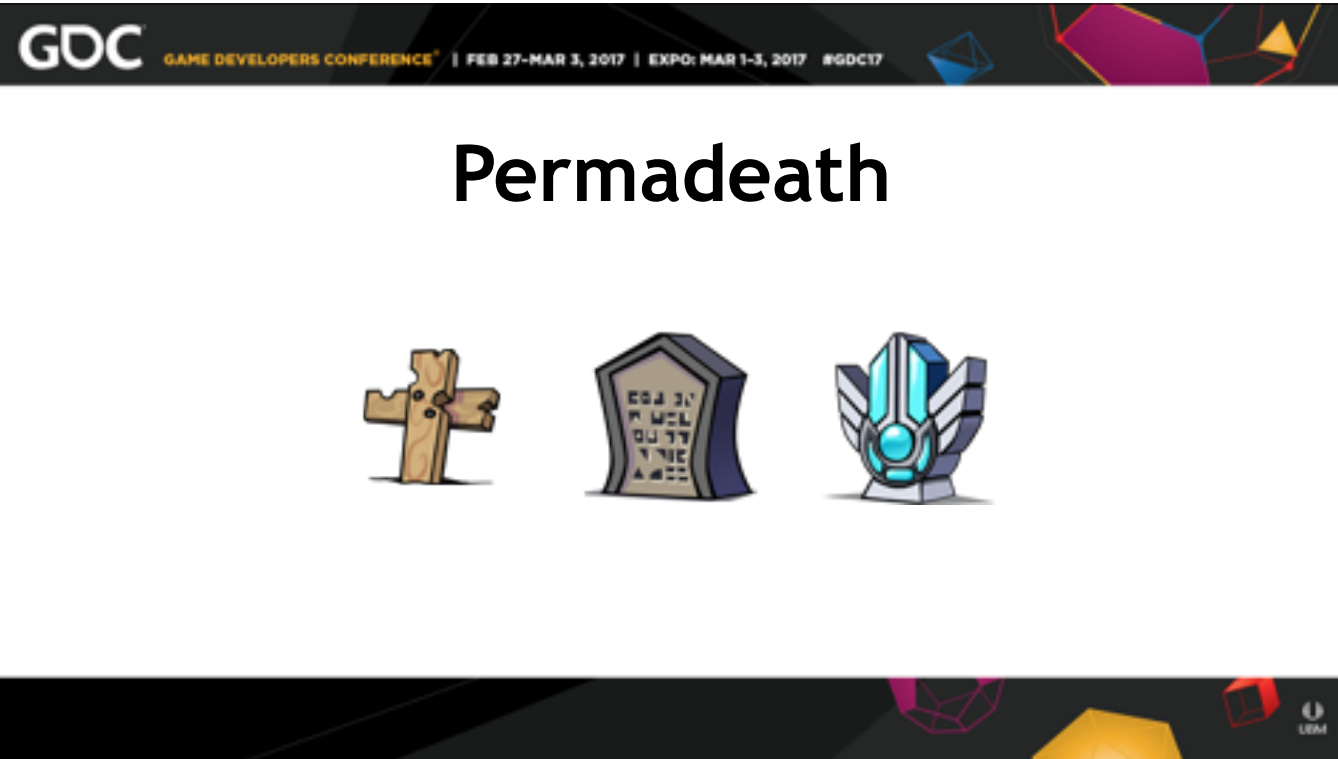


The core ideas of character aging and having kids were present pretty much from the start. However, at first I envisioned it as a sort of a side view art game, like Braid or Passage.

Procedural Generation



I also had a number of other design threads I wanted to explore. For example, I wanted the world and characters to be procedurally generated, inspired by Spelunky, and the indie MMO, LOVE.



I also had a vague idea that permadeath for your heroes was going to be important.

A black and white photograph of a forest path. The path is made of dirt and is flanked by trees and foliage. In the center of the path, there is a yellow sign with a black border and a black double-headed arrow pointing both left and right. The sign is mounted on a wooden post. The background is filled with trees and leaves, creating a dense forest scene.

And last but not least, I was motivated to make the game personal. Right around this time, I was juggling a lot of big life decisions all at once, and I felt inspired to make a game that explored my experience.

2010 — 3 Breakthroughs

Looking back, there were really 3 major design problems I had to breakthrough to tie the game together.



The first problem was the game perspective.

Early in designing, I was meeting weekly with my friend and design mentor Daniel Cook.

Game Perspective



Tone Shift

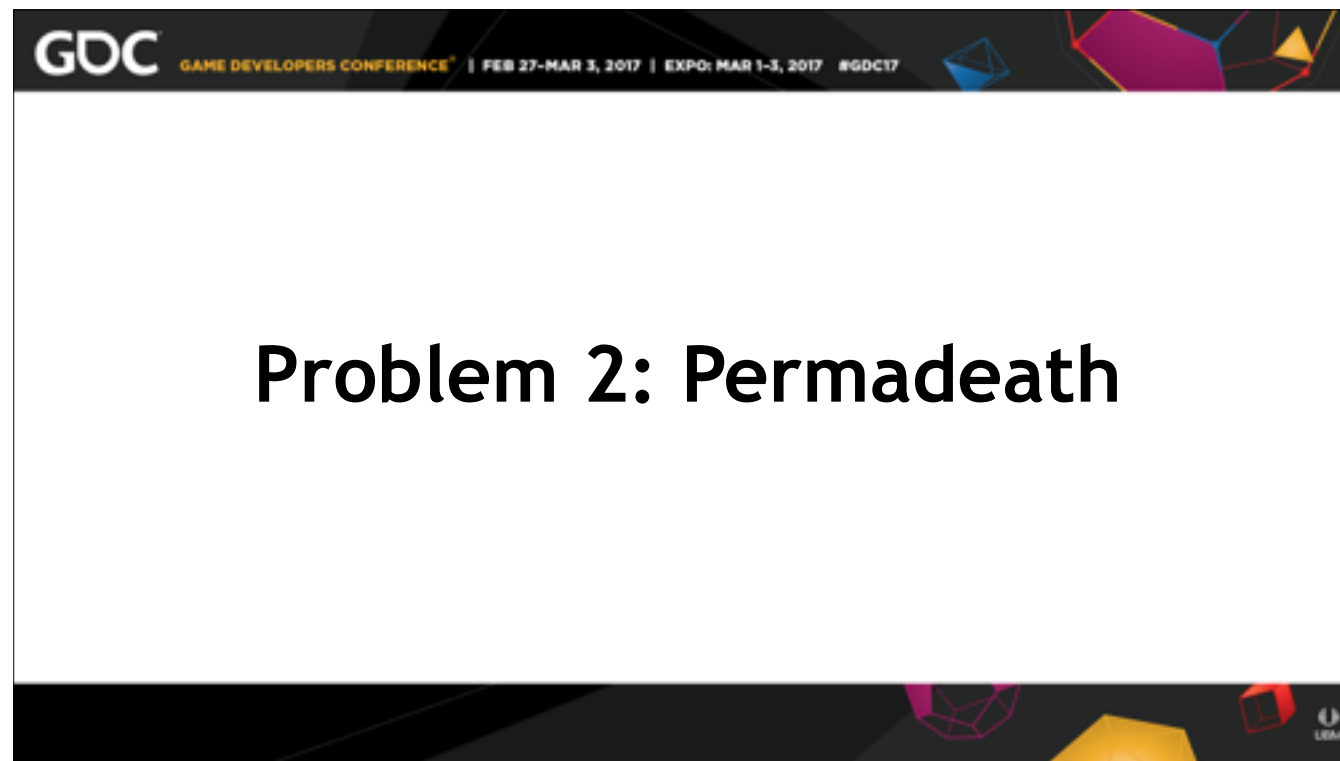
- Wrestling with multiple choices
- Thoughtful play style



And this perspective change made a lot of sense to me, and fit with my design goals.

A top-down grid let me add multiple paths in opposite directions, leading to more of that balancing of life choices.

Going turn-based made players pause to consider tradeoffs, and act more intentionally.



The 2nd problem had to do with embracing permadeath. That might seem silly to worry about now, but back in 2010, permadeath seemed like kind of a risky design choice. This was the era of casual and social games. Roguelikes weren't all the rage just yet.

Inheritance System

- Passed down traits, heirlooms & buildings
- Kept meaning & consequence, lessened blow of loss.



The solution that made permadeath work was adding the inheritance system. By passing on traits, items, buildings, and other attributes from your old hero to your new child, took the edge off of losing them.

This worked out nice, and I was able to keep all of the meaningful tension and consequence that comes with permadeath, but avoided the typical, deflating feeling of loss.

Problem 3: Complexity

- Top-down strategy led to interface & system complexity



Lastly, the early design suffered from a lot of complexity.

In a lot of ways, Hero Generations can be described as a sort of “life simulator.” Nearly everything in life was fair game for me to model. And as I added a bunch of stats and variables, the UI grew in complexity too.

The game was playing slow, and turned off a lot of my testers.

Looked to Casual Interfaces

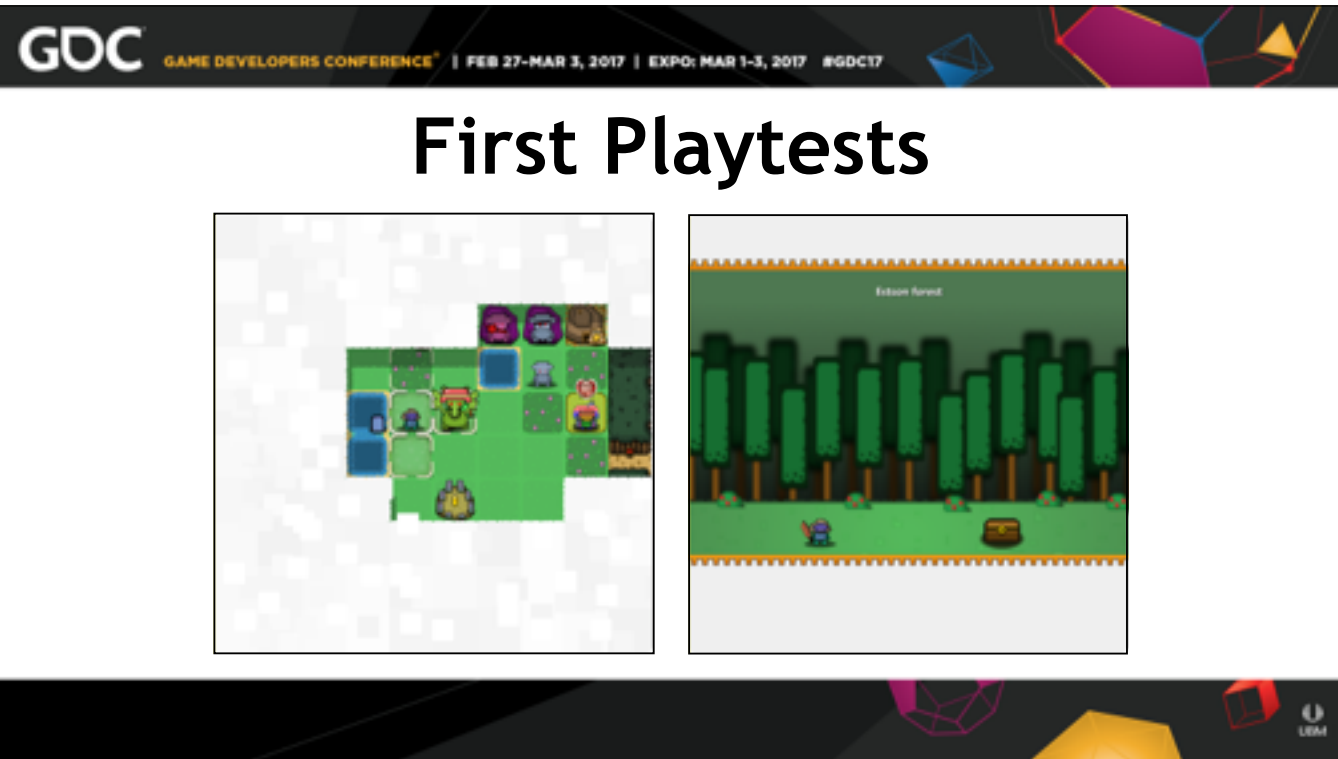


Looking to casual games helped solve this. In particular, Oasis and Civilization Revolution were great games to study. I condensed the character stats, and automated a lot of choices.

So combat now started automatically, items were automatically picked up, and so on.

2011 — First Release

So in 2011 I put out my first release, at the encouragement of my mentors and friends.



Believe it or not I actually thought this was starting to look pretty polished.

But getting this early version in front of real players turned out to be really important.

Early Results

- Highly rated 2 hours of fun
- Lots of requests for mobile version



I learned right away that the game worked, and had a surprisingly sticky 2 hours of fun.

There were also a lot of requests from players to see the game on mobile as well. But I didn't really have the skill or technical ability yet to act on that.

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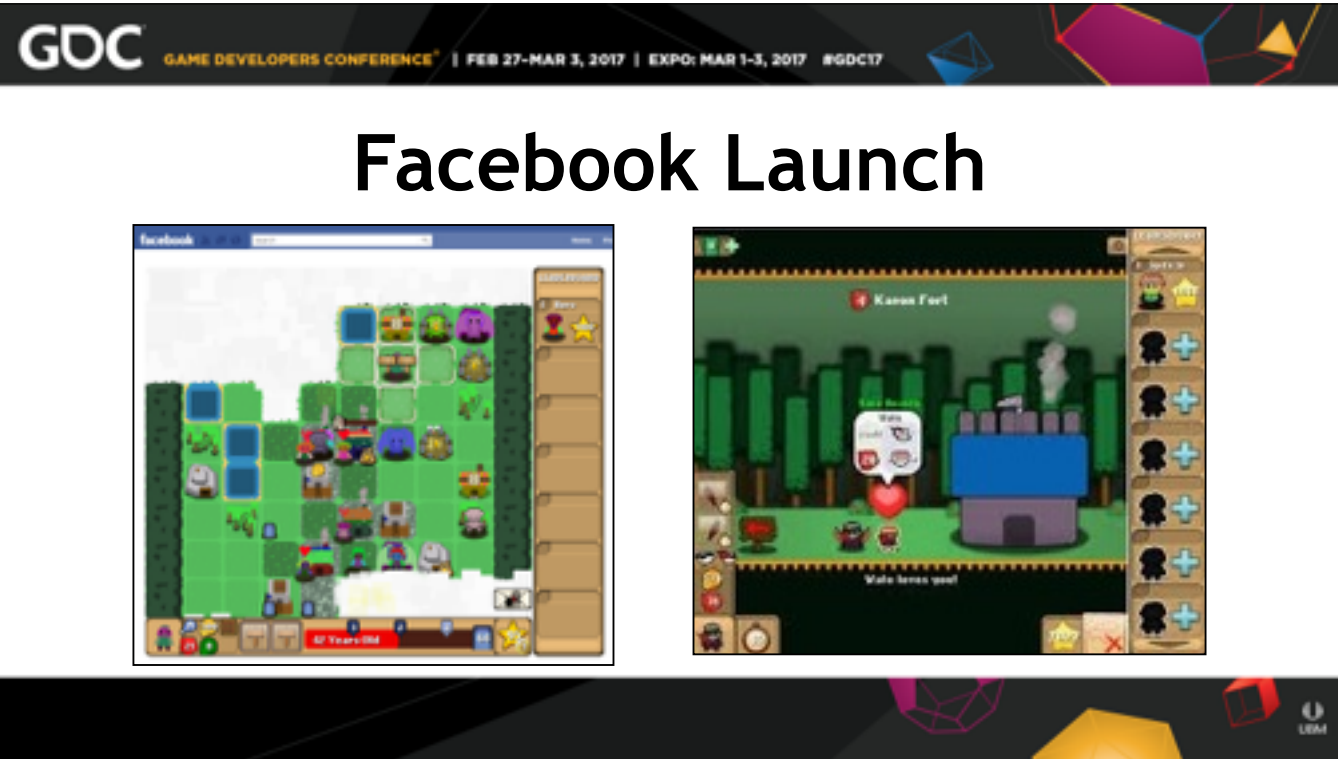
IndieCade



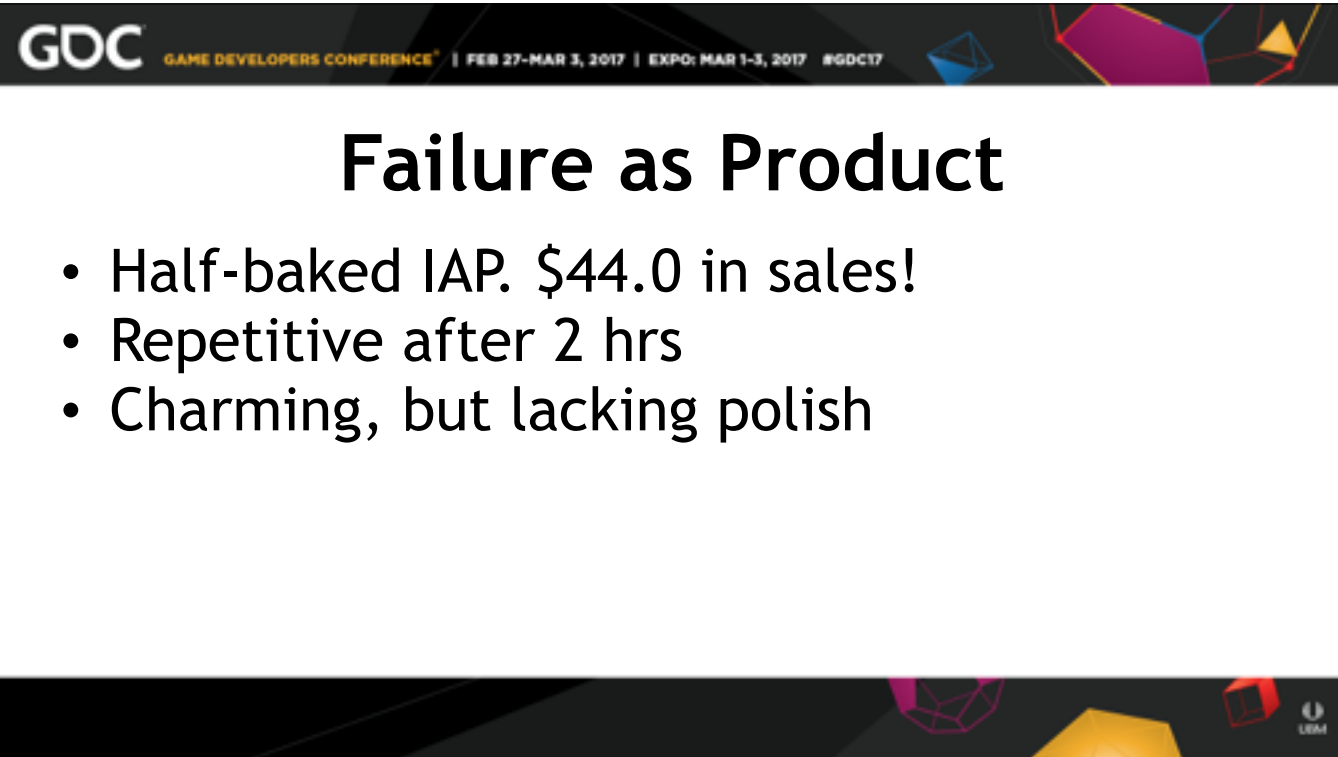
To my surprise, this early version also got some critical validation, by being selected as an IndieCade finalist. This was really a huge honor, and the festival was where our player community first started to form.

2011 — Facebook

After IndieCade, I finally decided to launch Hero Generations, on Facebook, as a free-to-play game.



So why in the world did I do that? Well in short at the time it was a big new market, and it also seemed to be friendly to casual strategy games. On paper it looked like an opportunity for me to find my audience without a publisher. It did feel at odds with my “art game” goals, but overall it felt like a good place to start.



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Failure as Product

- Half-baked IAP. \$44.0 in sales!
- Repetitive after 2 hrs
- Charming, but lacking polish

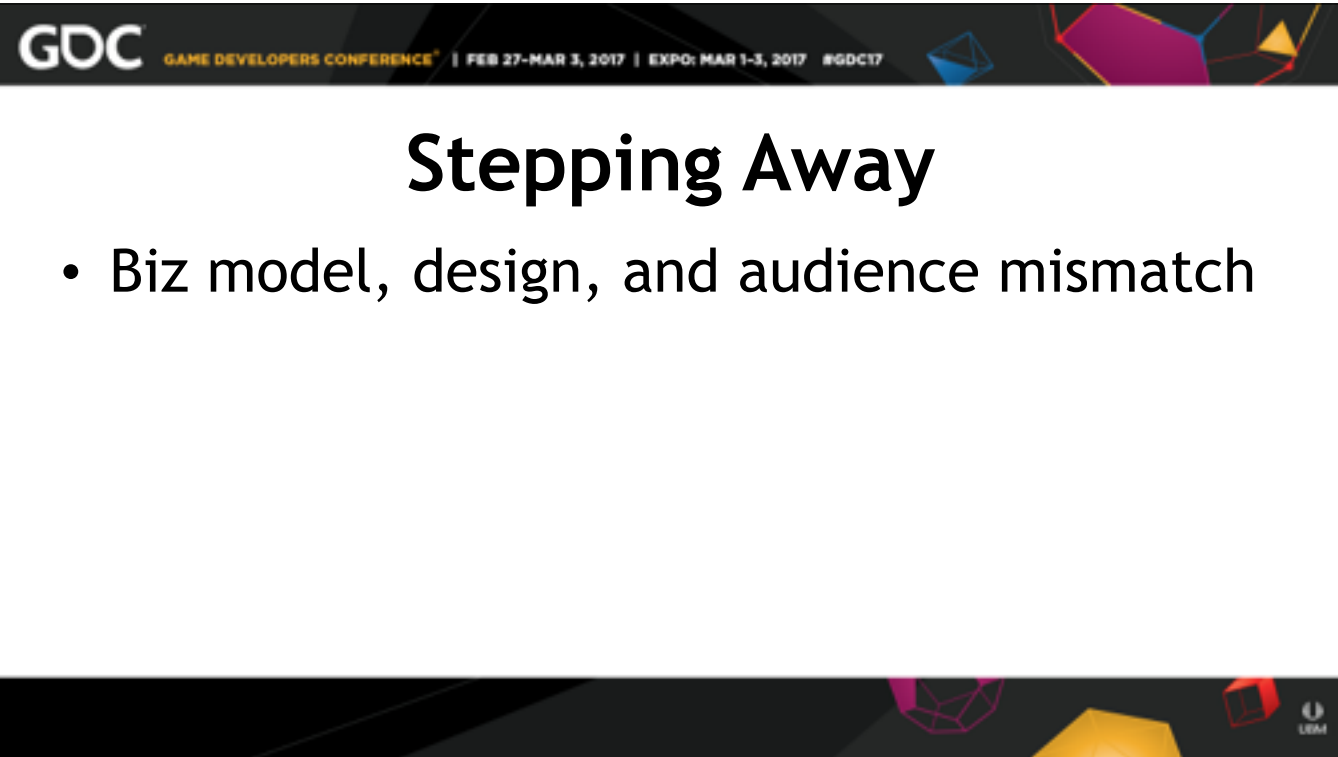
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But, the launch was a flop. I had no clue about free-to-play, and the game wasn't designed for it. I made \$44 in sales!

The main feedback was that the game got repetitive, and, though charming, it lacked some polish.

2012 — Cancelled

So at the beginning of 2012, I cancelled it.



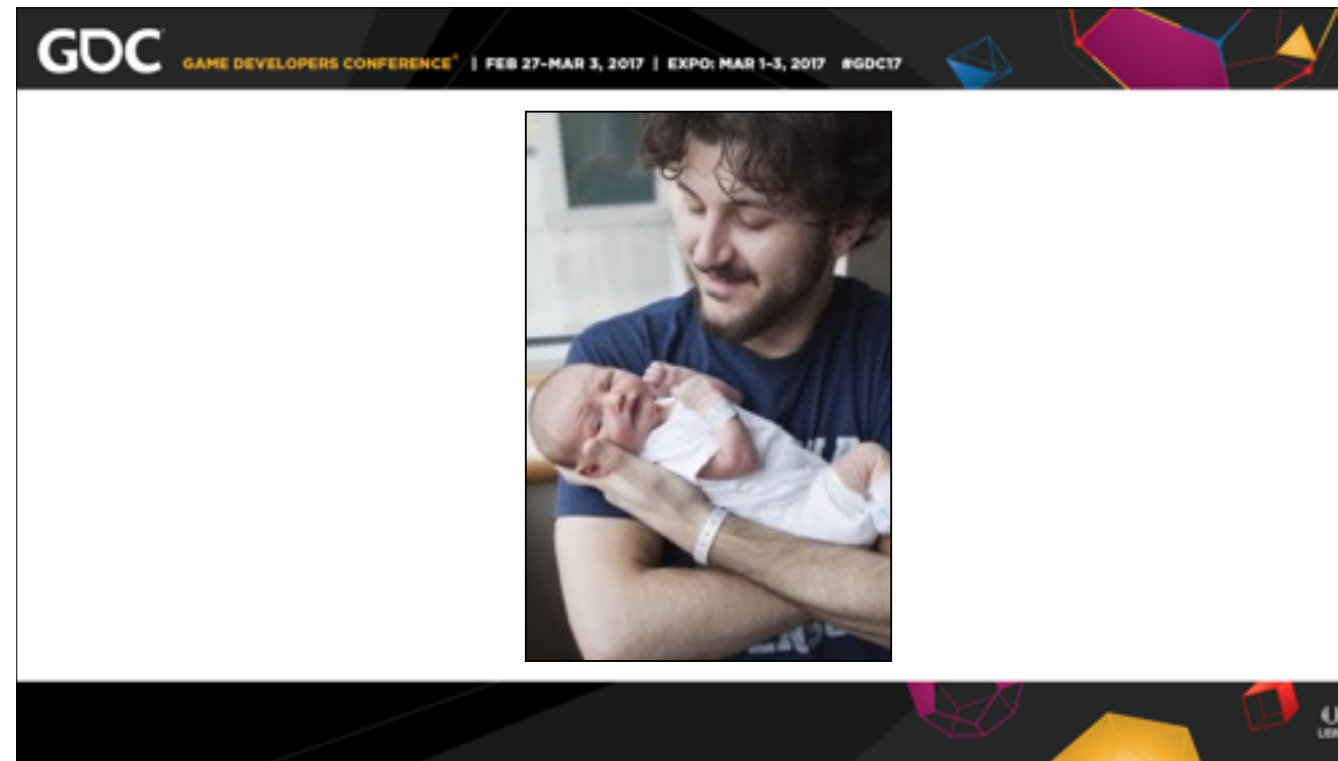
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Stepping Away

- Biz model, design, and audience mismatch

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There was really just a clear mismatch with the Facebook audience, and it was going take a lot of rework to fix it. Even then, there wasn't a guarantee it would be worth it.



And on a personal note, this was a real low point. I had taken the indie leap, and it hadn't worked out. This also happened at the same time my son was born, and that financial failure added a lot of stress.

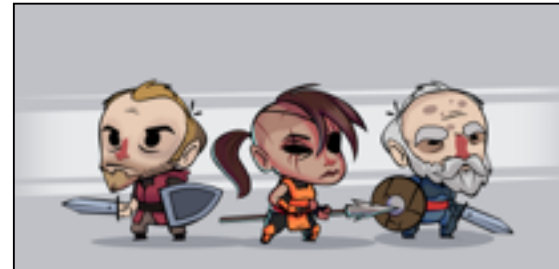
But in hindsight, I do really appreciate that killing the game and moving on was the right call.

2014 – Rebirth

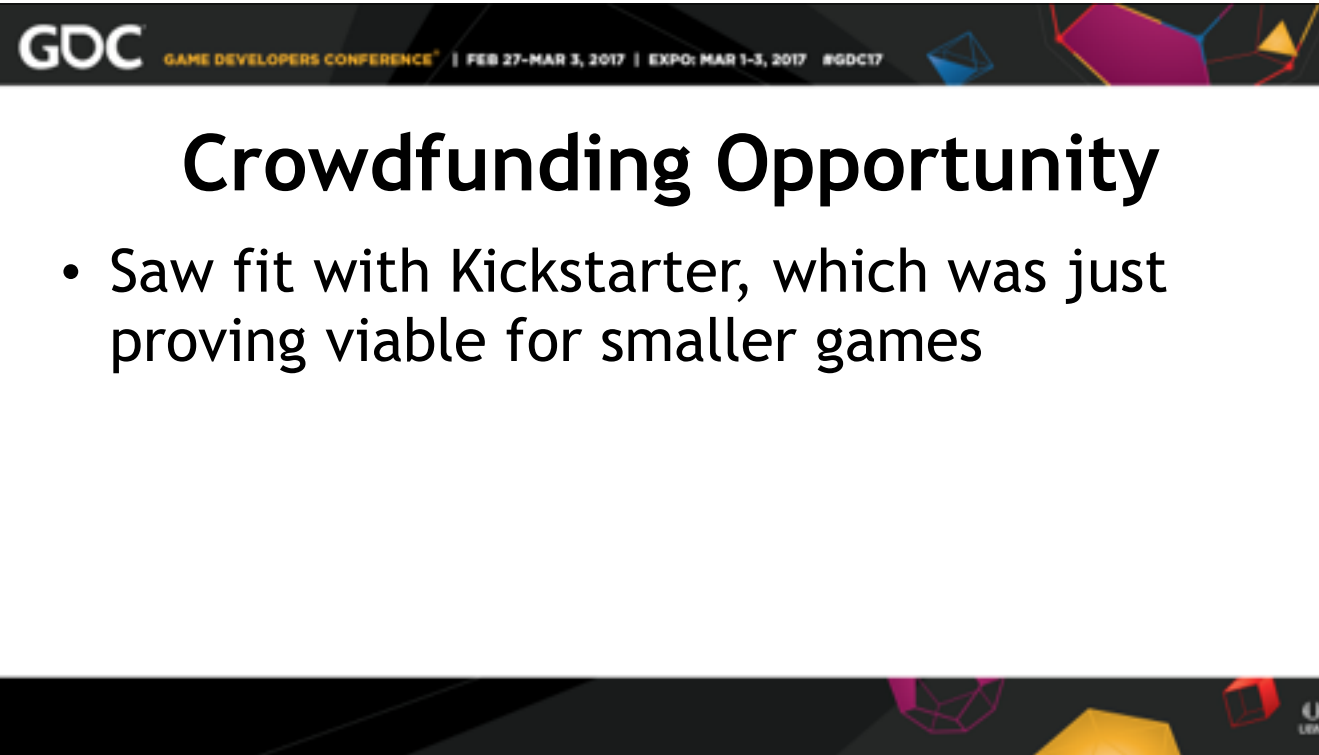
So, fast forwarding to 2 years later, I was looking for what would come next after winding down a paying project.

Time Heals

- Took time to look at HG with fresh eyes



Over those 2 years, I continued to log ideas for how to fix Hero Generations. And I found it really beneficial to have some time away while working on another project. Just to think through the issues with the design.



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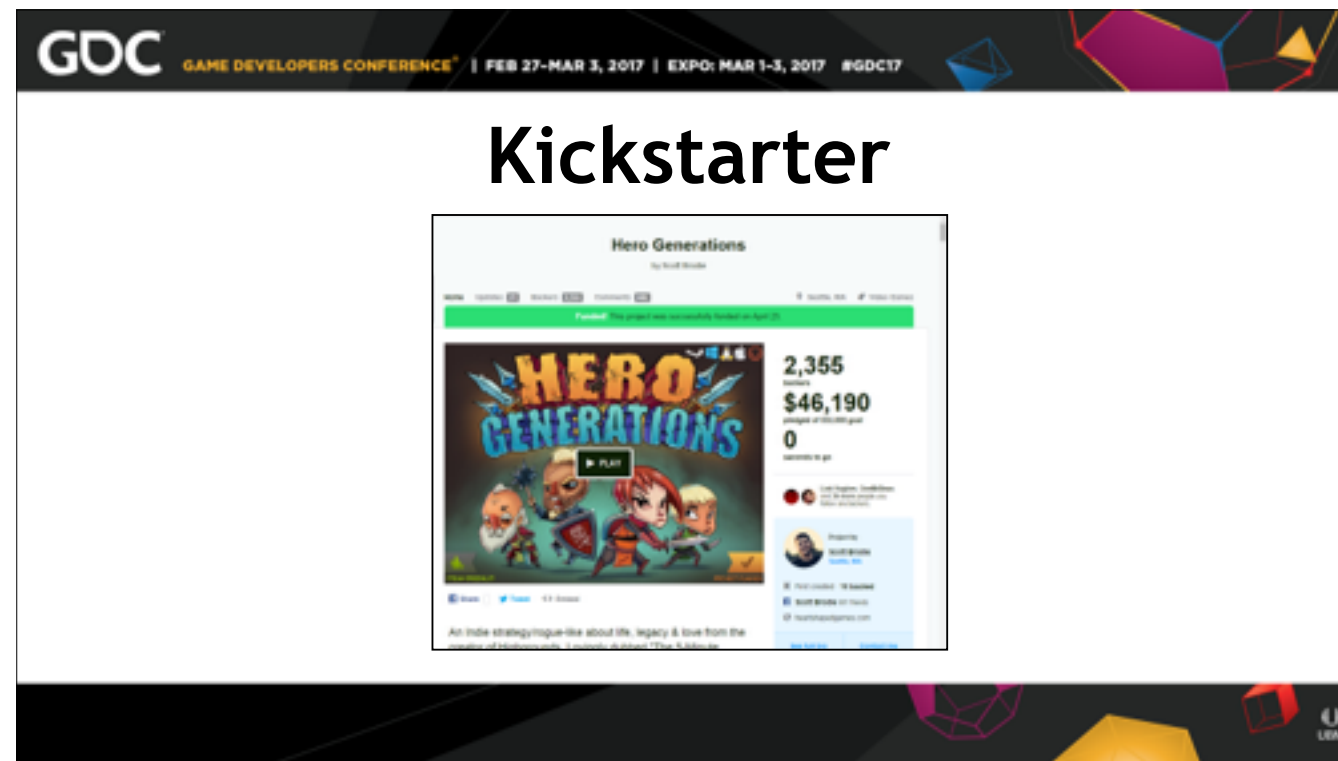
Crowdfunding Opportunity

- Saw fit with Kickstarter, which was just proving viable for smaller games

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The image is a presentation slide from the Game Developers Conference (GDC) 2017. It features a dark header with the GDC logo and event dates. The main content area is white with a large title and a single bullet point. The footer is dark with the UBM logo.

I was hesitant to put anymore effort into the game, but what really convinced me to come back was the fit I saw on Kickstarter. A few small indie games were getting funded, and they shared a lot in common with the style and scope of Hero Generations.



Honestly, crowdfunding Hero Generations was a saving throw for me as an indie. But thankfully, it worked out.

A PC version was successfully funded for 46 thousand, and let me finally hire a tiny team to complete it.

What Changed?

- Refined pitch to what players actually responded to



So what changed? Well there are a lot of tactical things about running a Kickstarter that I don't have time to get into. But from a design perspective, the key was retargeting the design and pitch towards the indie strategy game fans that were actually our customers.

New Pitch for New Audience

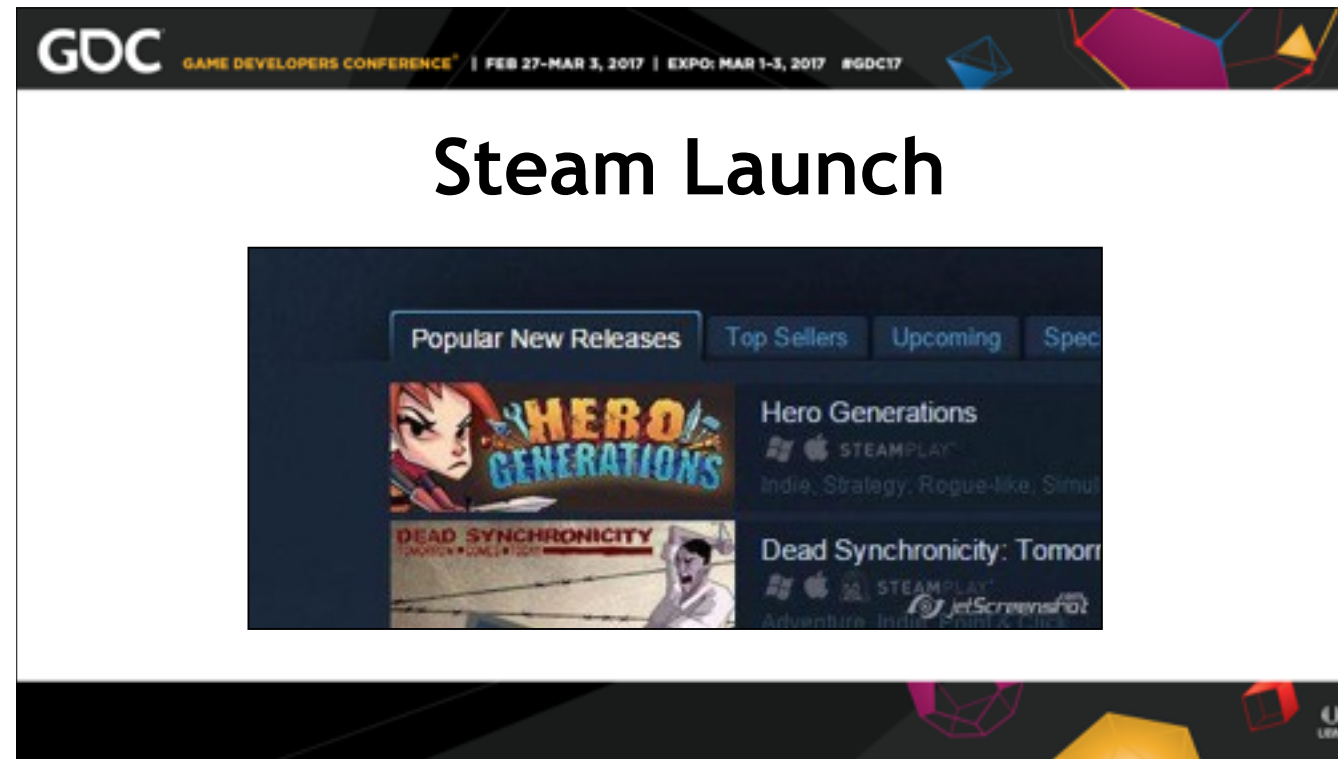
- **Emphasized:** 4X, Roguelike, Survival, Indie, Open World.
- **Deemphasized:** Casual, lite, Cute, Art Game, RPG.



For example, we adjusted the pitch and design to emphasize the more hardcore inspirations from 4X strategy games, Roguelikes, Survival games, and open world games.

And I deemphasized the references to previous bullet points like casual, lite, social, cute, art game, etc. Even though the game still had those inspirations, they were no longer used as the key selling points.

Effectively, my previous efforts to try and broaden the game to appeal to Facebook players ended up making it appeal to no one. By owning the niche nature of the design, I discovered the identity of the game.



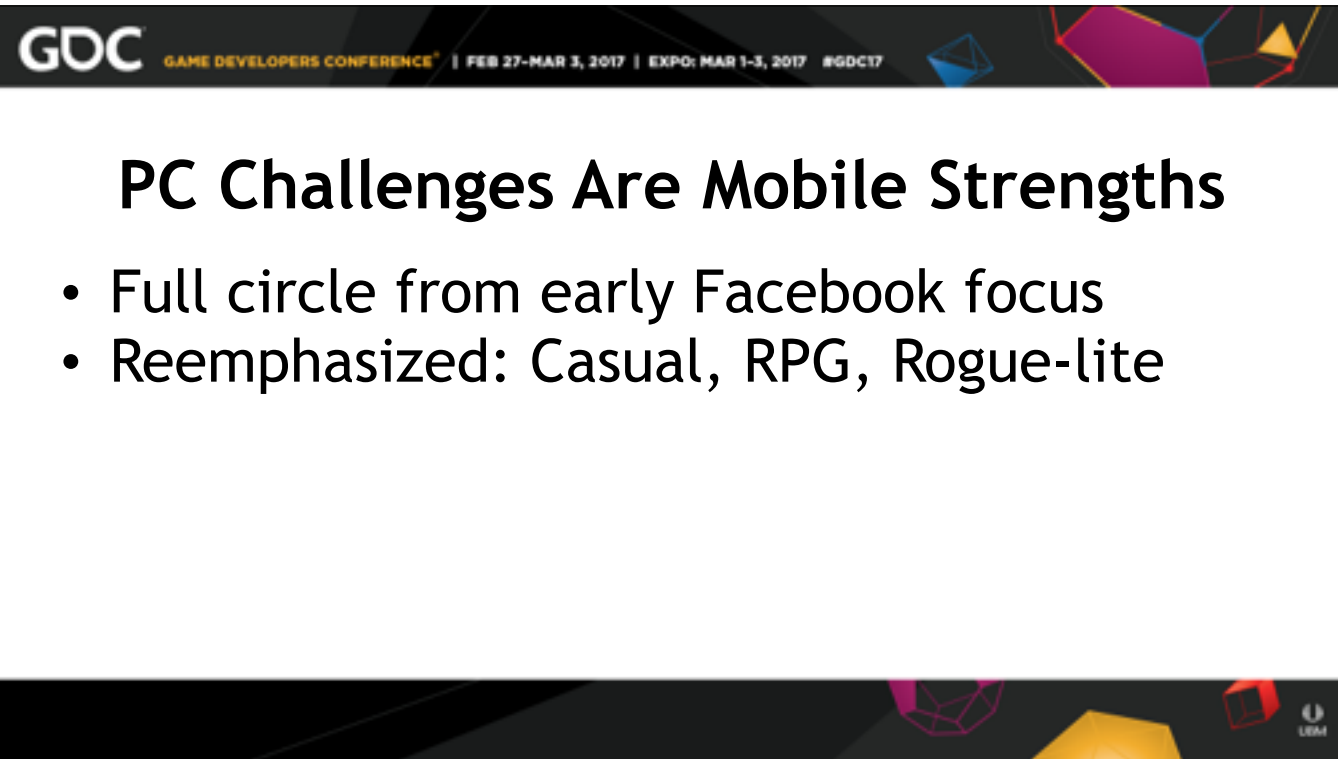
Based upon the response on Kickstarter, we knew that OUR audience was the Steam audience.

And a year later, we were pleasantly surprised by the result. At launch we stayed in the popular new releases list for 4 days. Our Kickstarter backers really rallied to spread the word, and we even got some big Youtubers like Total Biscuit and Jesse Cox to play the game, thanks to some luck.

2016 — Mobile Design

Now despite how well our launch went on Steam, it still gnawed at us that we were never able to bring the game to mobile. We had a mobile Kickstarter stretch goal, but never reached it. And despite our efforts to evolve into a more hardcore indie strategy game, we continued to hear from our players that they would play even more if it was on mobile.

So finally in 2016, we completely remade the game in Unity, so that we could make mobile happen. We learned a lot, but our biggest lesson was that there are some unique advantages and disadvantages to starting with PC, before releasing on mobile.



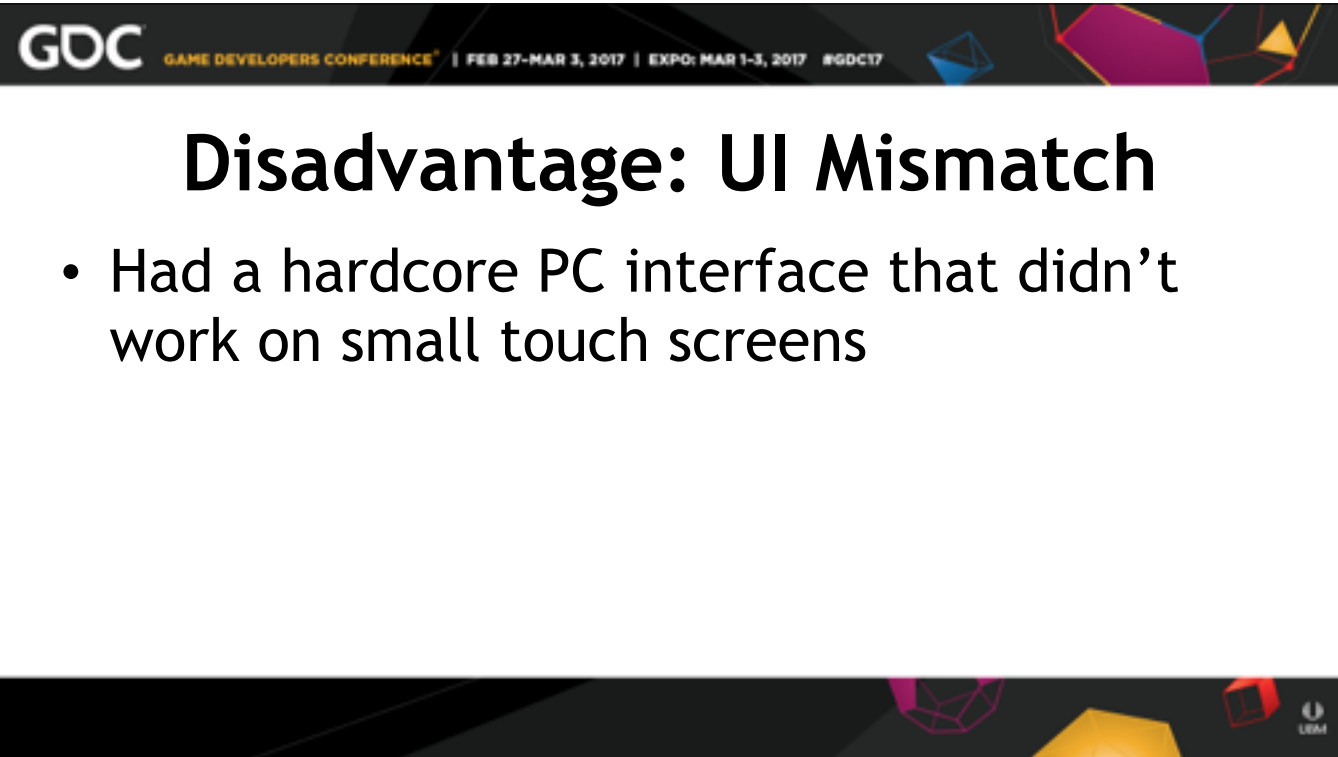
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PC Challenges Are Mobile Strengths

- Full circle from early Facebook focus
- Reemphasized: Casual, RPG, Rogue-lite

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The biggest advantage we had, was that we already dealt with designing for more casual players. All of the perceived weaknesses from the early web version became our strengths on mobile. We reemphasized the casual, RPG, and rogue-lite nature of the game, and didn't need much iteration to adapt the design for mobile.



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Disadvantage: UI Mismatch

- Had a hardcore PC interface that didn't work on small touch screens

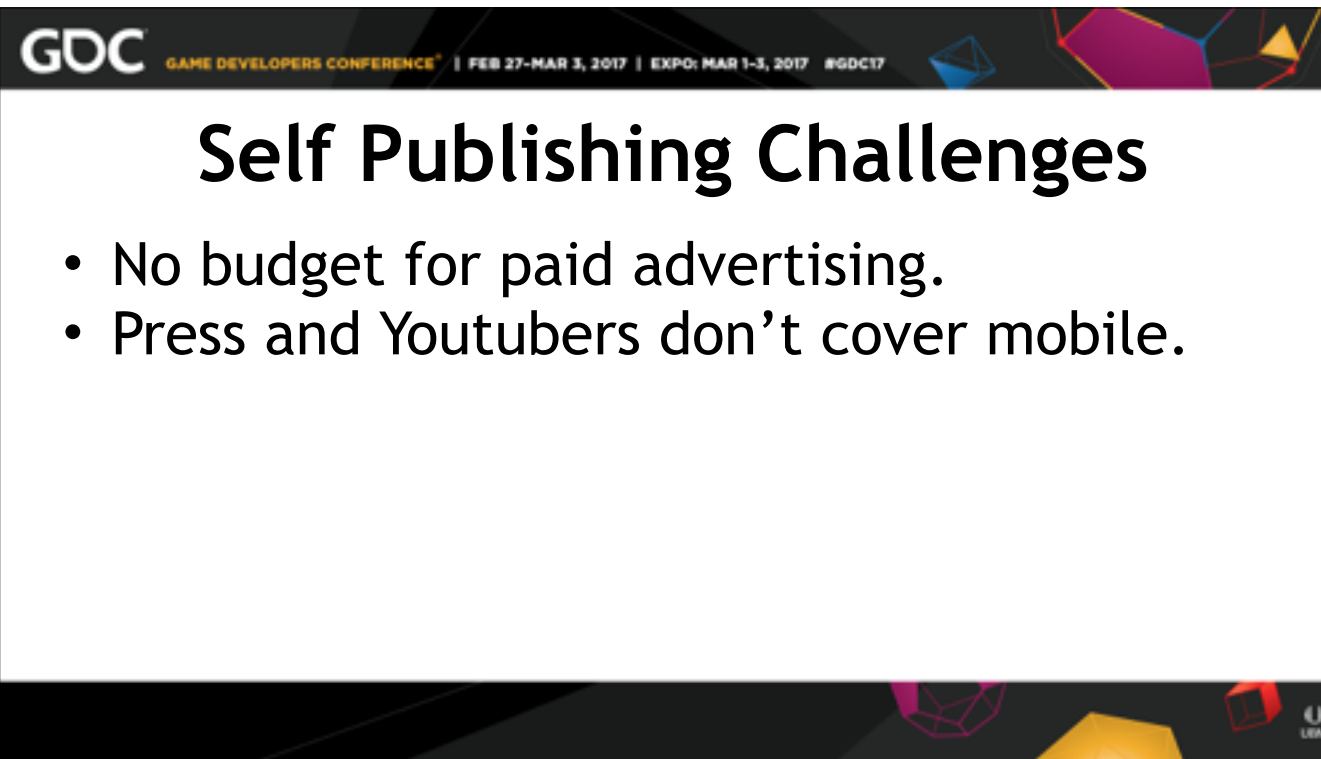
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Our biggest disadvantage was that we had already optimized our UI for a different, more hardcore player. Our mobile reps rightly called out that our UI didn't fit the touchscreen experience. We ended up delaying our mobile release by about 3 months to rework everything in the UI from the ground up.

Sidebar UI: Before & After



What I figured out is that we needed to present information more contextually. We predicted the most critical information, and moved anything less important to tabs. This also had the added benefit of letting us make the important information larger on screen.



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Self Publishing Challenges

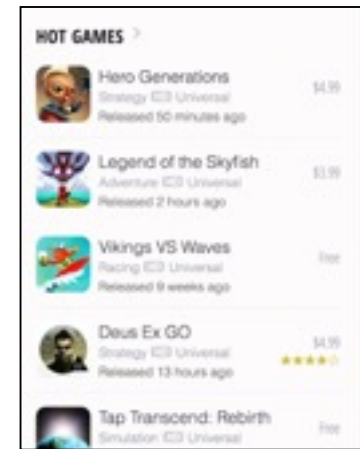
- No budget for paid advertising.
- Press and Youtubers don't cover mobile.

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And then lastly, we found it far more challenging to get visibility for a mobile game compared to on PC. We didn't have a budget for paid ads, and Press and Youtubers were less interested in covering mobile games.

Community

- Long burn community building
- Crowd-Sourced Localization
- Started early in mobile communities. Touch Arcade Forums!



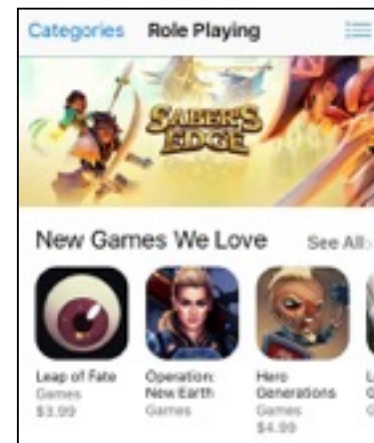
The way we really solved this was through the community we built over a long period of time.

They helped us crowd source translations for 10 languages, that really help us reach some new players.

Also, the most important thing I think we did was interacting early in the Touch Arcade forums. That community helped raise awareness to the site's editors, and in-turn the app store editors. Thanks to that, we received 4 separate points of coverage on the site. So shout out to everyone on Touch Arcade.

Mobile Results

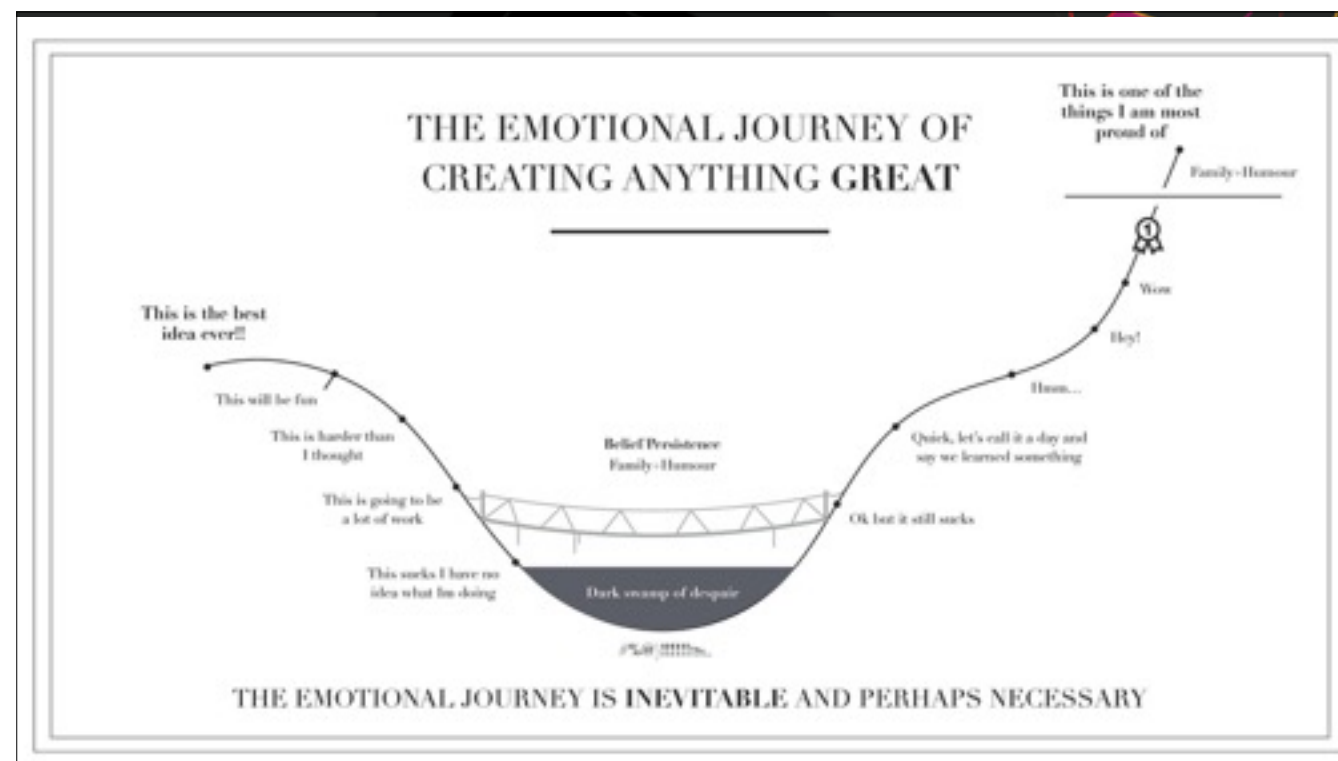
- Featured in iOS App Categories for 4 weeks.
- Surprising featuring in China.
- 4.5/5 Rating.



All of this culminated in a launch on iOS in August, and a few months later on Android. We were featured in New Games We Love in our App Store Categories for 4 weeks straight, plus a number of regional features we would have missed if not for our translations. And we have a great 4.5 out of 5 rating as well. Honestly, again I attribute almost all of this to our long process of community building and refining the gameplay over many years prior on PC.

Conclusion

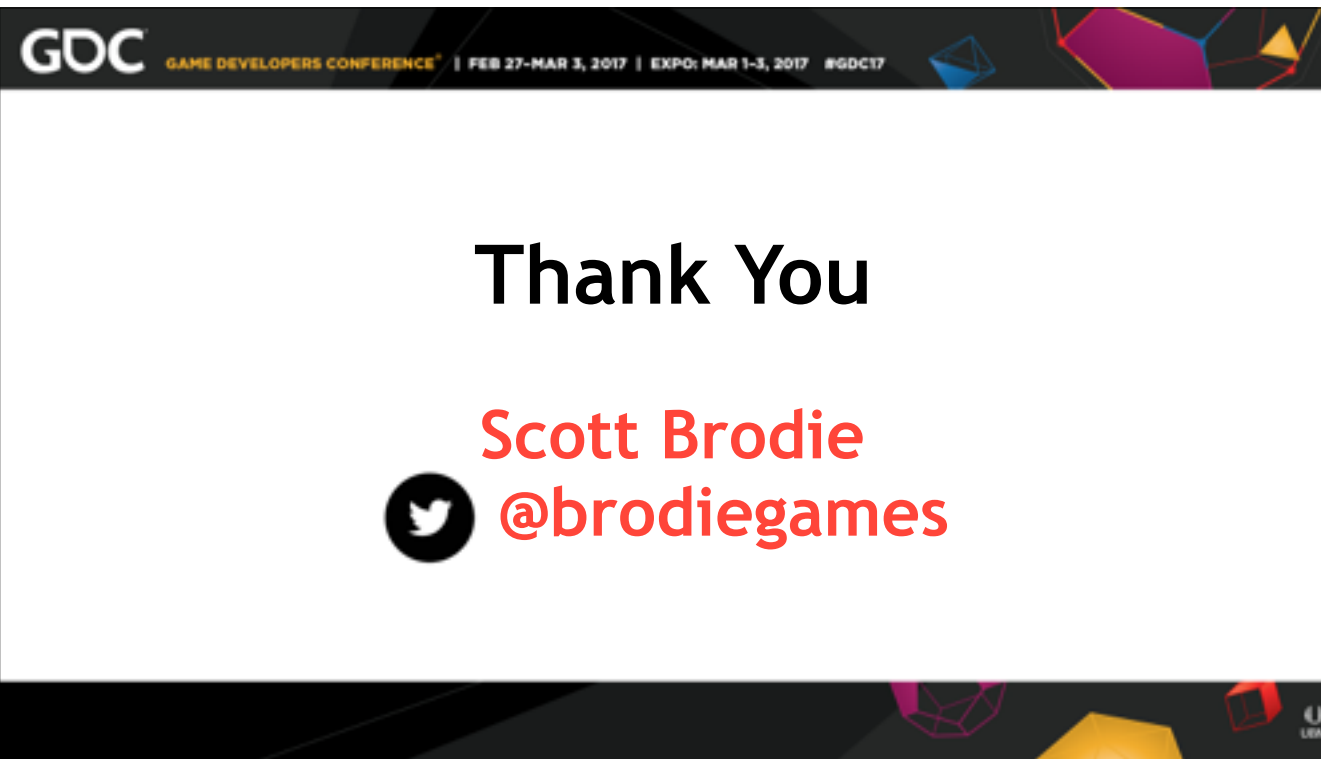
And so I think what I really want you to take away from our journey, is that process.



Creating something original requires time, iteration, patience, and perhaps a bit of luck. With Hero Generations, I didn't start with great design skill or a lot of money in the bank. Instead I slowly worked through iterations, in a tight feedback loop with players, working to improve the game, and find the game's audience and identity.

I also feel I learned that sometimes a game doesn't work because it is in the wrong place and time. Sometimes you simply don't have the skill yet to execute, or other times, the platform and audience that best fits the design doesn't exist yet.

I know that taking the long view like this may not be the most actionable advice. Often we simply don't have the luxury of time. But like nurturing a new character in Hero Generations, if you are able to take the long view, and give it time to grow, your game can survive and even thrive in the end.



Thank you.



Scott Brodie is the Founder & Lead Designer at Heart Shaped Games, creators of Hero Generations, Highgrounds, and the upcoming 8 Stacks.

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<http://www.herogenerations.com>

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