

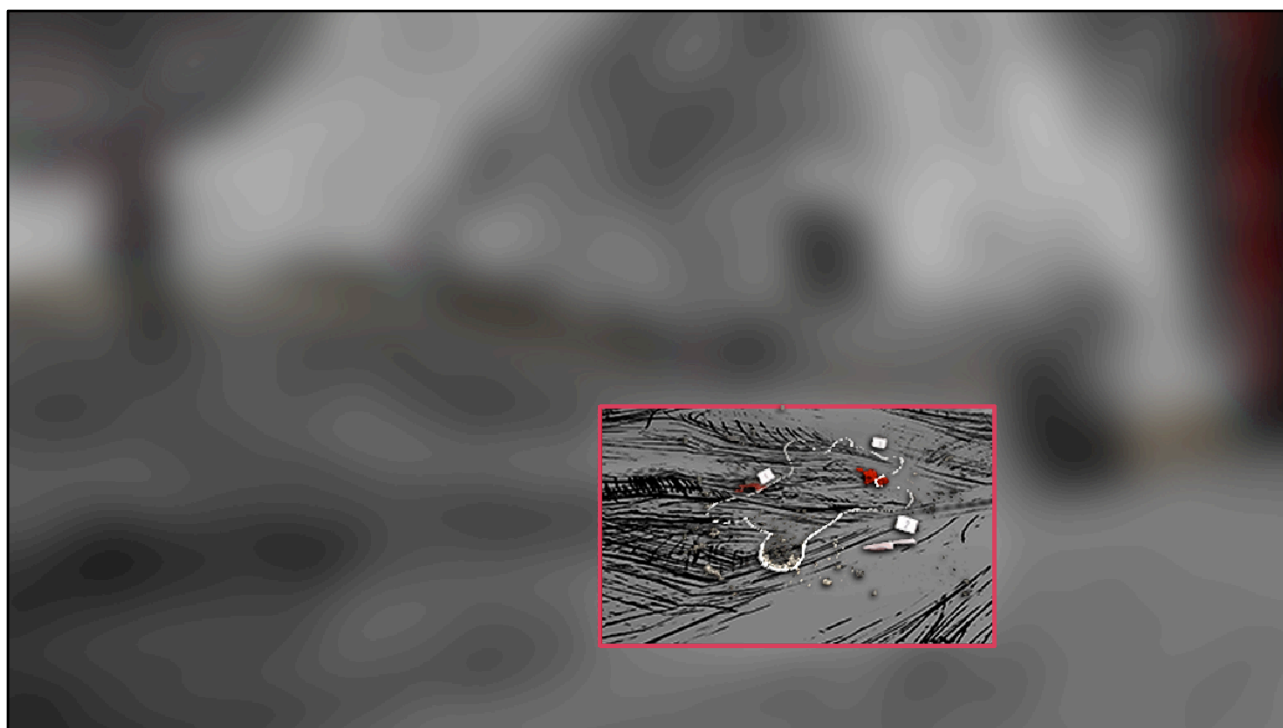
Hey I'm Jordan. This here's a picture of the game we released in March of last year, The Magic Circle. Indiepocalypse, if it exists, has a body count that is too big to parse, my esteemed colleagues started sooner & have a curve to analyze, I have one point on a line

This shit is pretty raw for me, AND YET SOMEHOW ultra-dry, so I need to find a way to talk about it without weeping or sleeping.

So, enhance

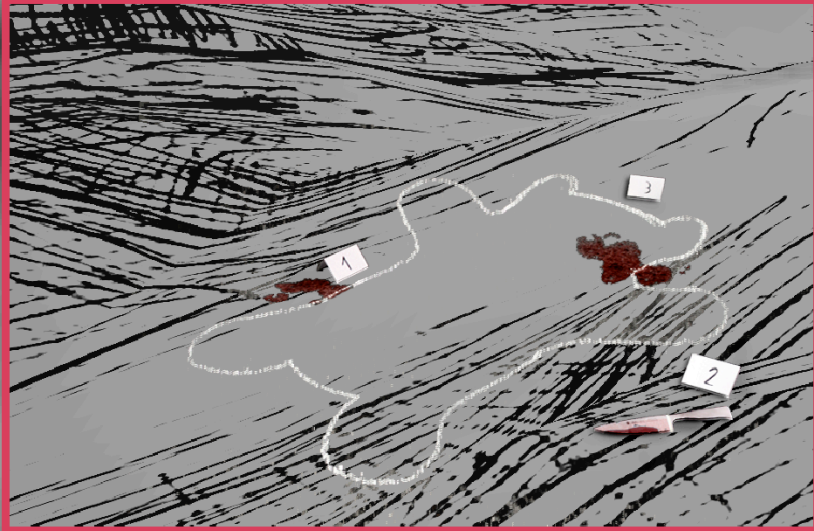


enhance



enhance

**What if we treat “Indiepocalypse” like the
cheesy nickname for a smalltime killer?**



Do we fit the victim profile?

And, there we go. Yes, any value I add comes from treating the Indiepocalypse more like a pulp serial killer who may have it out for certain types. In some ways it flatters the ego to imagine that we got a raw deal, although it goes against my bias that in fact, we made a lot of choices that led to less of a payoff than average. So I'm going to come at this like an unsolved case in a cheap beach-read, true crime thriller. And like true crime, it's probably mostly lies.



So who was The Magic Circle, and what happened to her down that dark, Steamy alley?

Who Was She?

THE MAGIC CIRCLE – FACTS OF IDENTITY AND RECEPTION

➤ Physical Description

Narrative puzzler (PC, Mac, Linux) with a satirical sense of humor, poking fun at the way unfinished games fall apart (\$19.99 USD)

In TMC you play the hero of a legendary piece of vaporware, who gets sick of waiting for your world to be finished, so you set out to do it yourself by solving open ended puzzles, and dodging the incompetent fictional dev team. Strong voice cast, Ashly Burch, James Urbaniak, and a pretty interesting central mechanic about, sort of, redesigning puzzles instead of solving them.

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➤ Subject Came From Privilege

3 devs from Bioshock, Dishonored, etc. Many years in AAA. Spent ~100k, not counting 2 years opportunity cost

So if you listen to Steamspy, 16 and a half thousand people own our game, and 44 thousand put us on a wish list. We didn't spend a lot more than 100 grand on it, mostly software and our voice cast, so technically we broke even a while ago. But 2+ years of opportunity cost, if you were to add it up and add that to the dev budget, bottom line is that it is not sustainable for us to go on making games like it. So commercially it seems to have underperformed relative to its on-paper potential, I'll get to that in a sec.

Who Was She?

THE MAGIC CIRCLE – FACTS OF IDENTITY AND RECEPTION

- Small-town Celebrity...But Very Small
Preview coverage better than average, Polygon, Wired, RPS,
release trailer saw strong social media reach

- Press Coverage pre-release was better than many enjoy (Polygon, Wired, RPS)
- Our release trailer got RTs from people with looooots of followers

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- Seemed Healthy... And Full Of Hope
Veteran indie devs saw our sales target & said: no sweat.
Metacritic: 80%, User Reviews: 90% Nominated by IGF

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- Our release trailer got RTs from people with looooots of followers
- - Indie veterans who heard our survival sales target & saw the game said we'd be fine, probably based on stuff like this (Hack N Slash, The Stanley Parable)

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THE MAGIC CIRCLE – FACTS OF IDENTITY AND RECEPTION

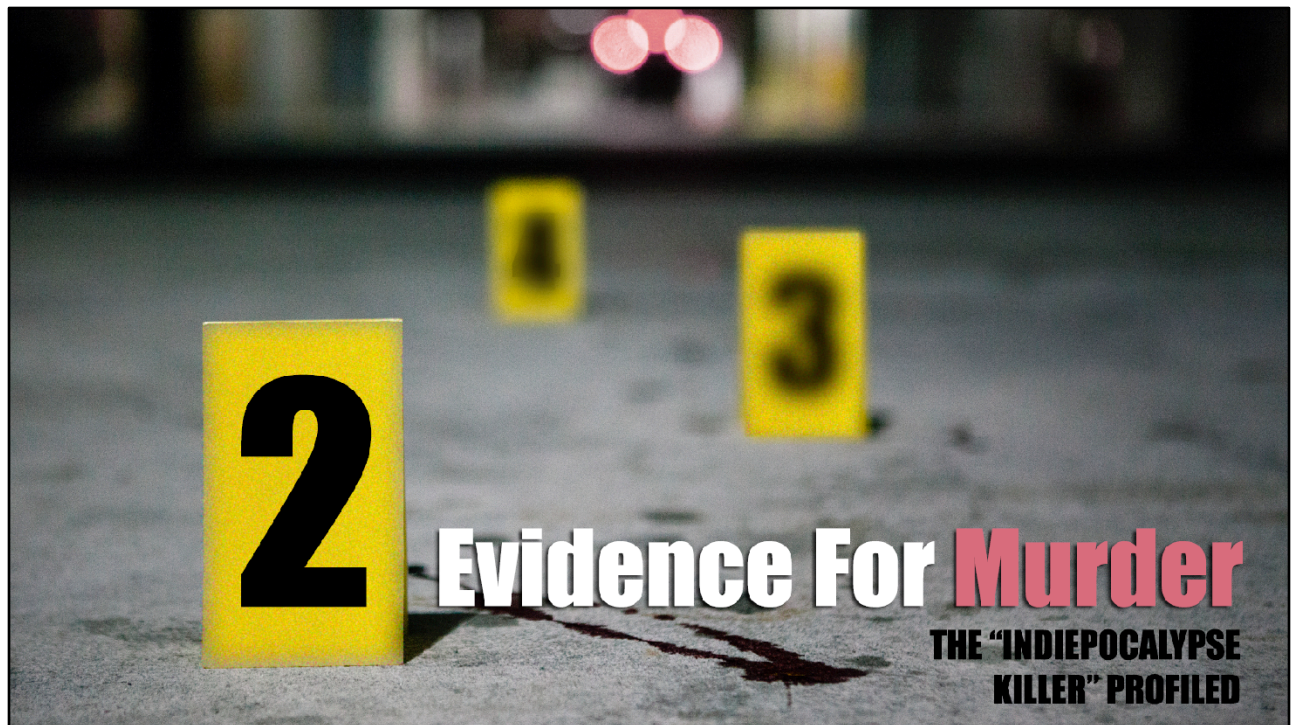
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Metacritic: 80%, User Reviews: 90% Nominated by IGF
- Dead At The Scene
SteamSpy Owners since 7/9/15: **16,541**
Wishlists: **44,131** Bottom line – Not sustainable for us

- Indie veterans who heard our survival sales target & saw the game said we'd be fine, probably based on stuff like this (Hack N Slash, The Stanley Parable)

- Seemed Healthy (Metacritic / User Score (IGF Nom)) Yeah, that teddy bear in the chalkout line was pregnant, because I'm a horrible monster and I want you to feel my pain.



Murder or suicide



So I'll resist my temptation to take a flattering amount of the blame for our woe onto myself, and try to pick out some of the seeming external factors that affected us, and that may or may not be useful to you in planning your own game's release.

Murder

DID EXTERNAL FACTORS DAMAGE OUR SALES PERFORMANCE?

- Petite Frame, Easy Mark
Of Our Negative Steam Reviews, over 50% mention length.

So, the first laceration we didn't expect was the near-violent response to short games on Steam. We cost 20 bucks, and our game is in the realm of 3-6 hours. We're definitely not the first, but of our negative reviews, well over 50 percent mention length, even reviews that otherwise read like ads for us. They picked their polarity on that one issue.

Murder

DID EXTERNAL FACTORS DAMAGE OUR SALES PERFORMANCE?

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- Life's Cheap, Everyone's For Sale
Steam players expect a price will fall, steeply. They crave a reason not to buy **now**. Add that to the above? Wish-listed.

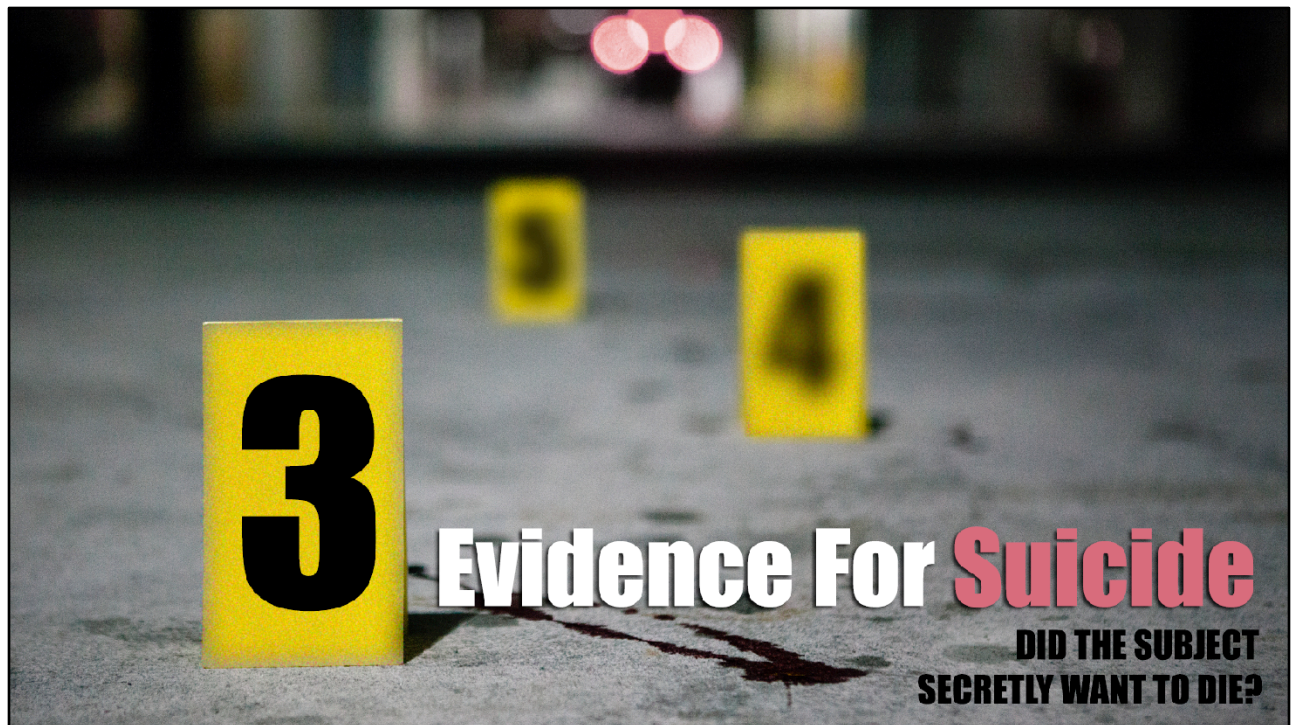
Which dovetails spectacularly with the culture of bargain hunting. At this point, as my colleagues have & will touch on, players' time is worth more than their money, and they are actively looking for a reason not to buy at full price. A short game is a good reason to wishlist, and wait for a sale, because the price WILL plummet. Reviews actively encouraging piracy are not technically against the terms of service.

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- Vanished In The Crowd
Visibility is ultra-limited for a full price game. When we can be seen on Steam, we still sell fairly well. Which is rarely.

And of course there's the issue of sheer noise in the bazaar. It's very easy for a little game like ours to simply vanish and no one makes a peep because there are dozens of other just as deserving games launching all the time. Visibility, particularly at full price, does not happen – people need to arrive already looking for your game. And we...well, I'll get into how much marketing we didn't do.



Mmmm the tasty stuff, this is a series of choices we made with our game, mostly out of creative restlessness, that may have contributed to our fate. More painful, but also implies that we have any control whatsoever over the improvement of our future station.

Suicide

ARE THE SUBJECTIVE CHOICES WE MADE TO BLAME?

➤ Strolled Downtown Stark Naked

No marketing or eye-catching crowdfunding campaign, cryptic promo materials, focused on “making a great game”

We really, really bought into the idea that if we made something noteworthy, sales would follow. We were averse to crowdfunding for a variety of reasons, our game is best experienced with very little briefing. We had no money for marketing which is an old saw among indies, but still a key factor. We were so far out of our comfort zone building a narrative puzzler and a comedy that the idea of devoting time or money to pure promotion always got the backseat. We also saw so many titles shouting for attention that they were the second coming to the dopamine cycle, so we went way way way too cryptic with our website, twitter, and so on, staying in-character in a way that was cute, I guess, but probably just generated more confusion among actual people.

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➤ Weird Kid, smart @\$%!? Mouth

Game about games, which polarizes. Art is stark. Billed as a comedy, kind of isn’t. IGN said: “So Angry!” Extreme contrast w/ past work was our goal, perhaps to fault

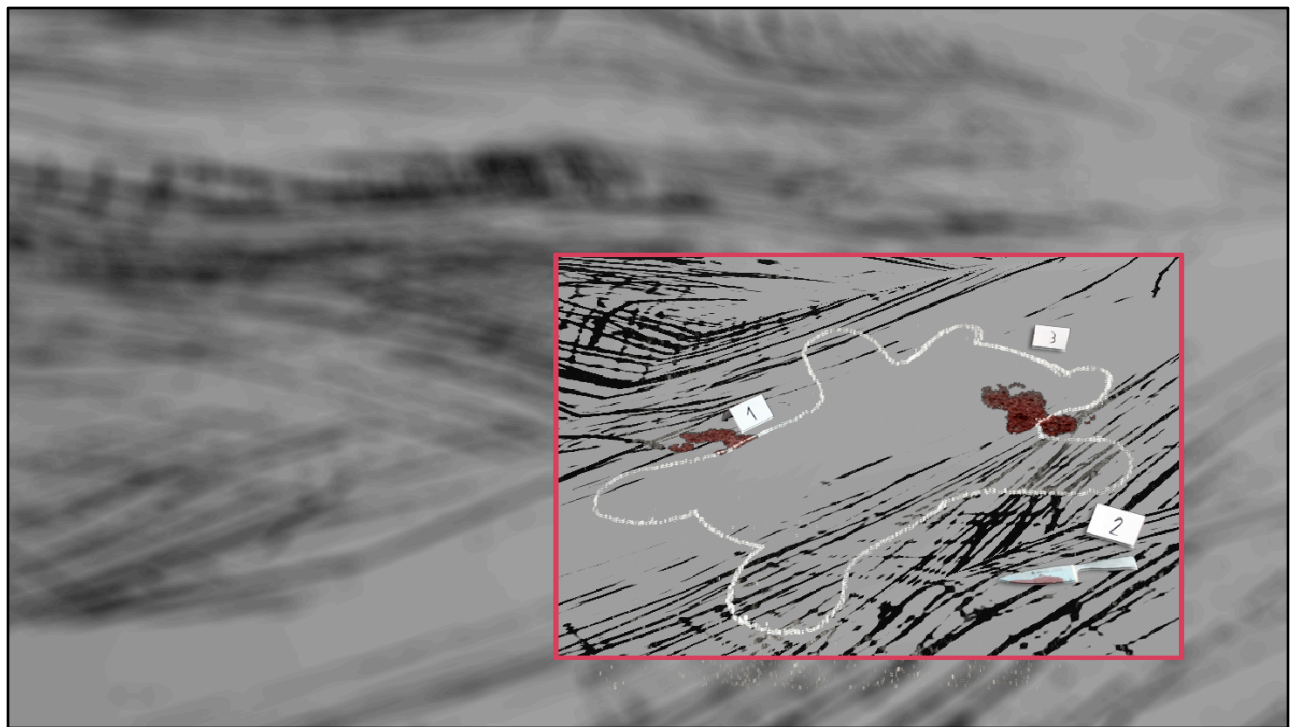
This is the big bad. The Magic Circle is billed as as comedy because it pokes fun, but for a lot of 2014-related reasons, suffice it to say, it gets dark. I remember IGN basically just said “so angry!” Self-aware storytelling also tends to polarize on a good day. And we were warned that this was like a niche within a niche, but we had spent so many years creatively compromising that we plunged ahead, a little pigheadedly, and made something we could be proud of, come what may. And we’ve paid a price for it.

Suicide

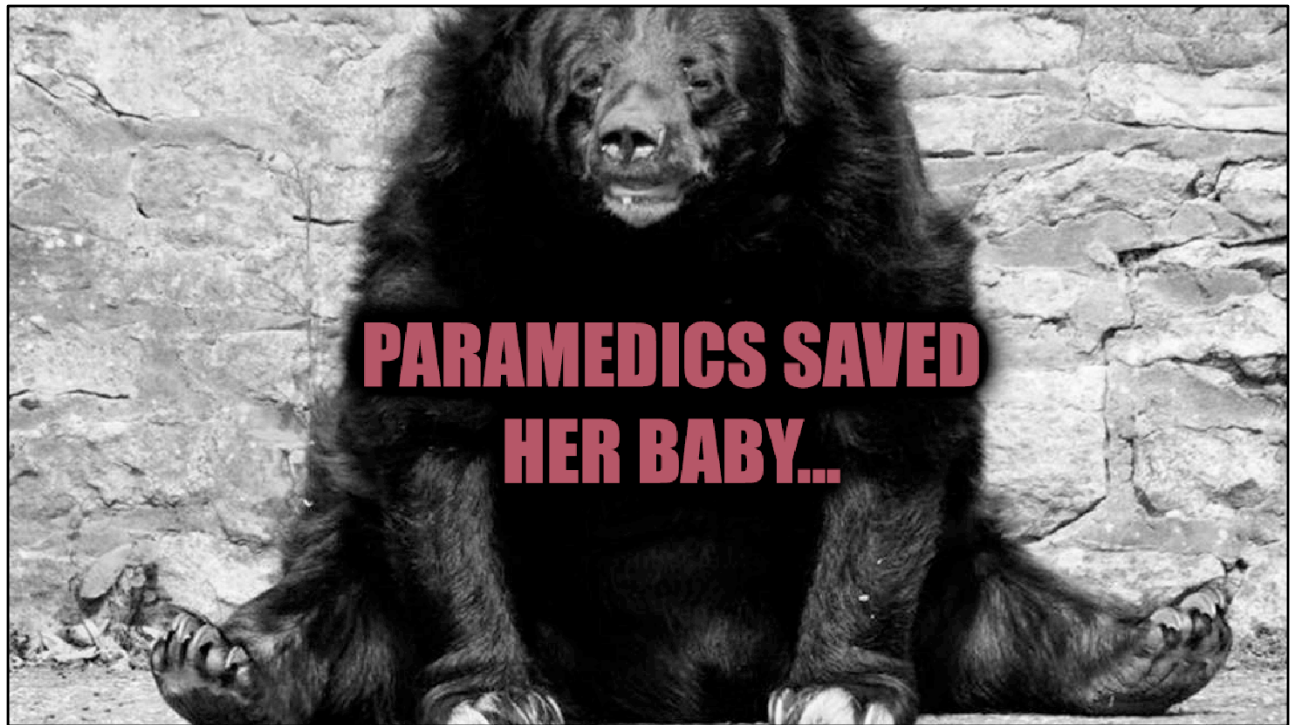
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- Took Pride in Risky Behavior
Game is very ambitious for 3 devs and has no clear genre. Others go mainstream for debut, then niche / arthouse.

And finally, to tell the story of even an unfinished magnum opus still has to have some kind of reach in the physical experience. The feature set, the amount of story stuffed into a few hours, and so on – would have been overscoped for 3 people even if we had a very strong genre with a template to follow. Which may actually have been more important than any of the rest of this – we weren’t easy enough for the walking simulator crowd, but we had neither the length nor the pure nosebleeding cognitive challenge for the puzzler people. We were a wacky hybrid, and there are a few people who loved us for it, but not quite enough to make more.



Murder or suicide



So, there's kind of a happy ending here though, right? I have time to come talk to you at GDC which means that we're scraping by. The paramedics saved the baby.



But... yeah, we're not the same. What we make next will be risky in new ways, but will probably draw on the baser impulses that made our careers, one way or another.

The Baby Lived

CHANGES TO OUR STRATEGY IN 2016 AND BEYOND

➤ Question, LLC survives, wee bit traumatized
Curated sales. Console release imminent. Up to **~30k** PS4,
~20k Xbox One, from Mike Rose's 2015 talk found here:
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- Next Project is "Safer"
More mainstream premise, and requires external money
Also has a very strong incentive to buy & play **now** coupled
with multiplayer model, players as renewable content.

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More mainstream premise, and requires external money
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- Sounds familiar though, right?
Publishers! Consoles! Multiplayer! We lived all this.