

GDC[®]

Slime Rancher: A Preemptive Postmortem

Nick Popovich
CEO, Monomi Park

Slime Rancher: A Preemptive Postmortem

Who I am

- ★ Co-founder, CEO Monomi Park
- ★ Game Designer of Slime Rancher, Spiral Knights
- ★ @nickpopovich



What is Slime Rancher?



- ★ First-person farming/ranching slimes
- ★ Heavy physics simulation, chaotic
- ★ World emphasizes exploration and discovery, non-linear



Development Data



- ★ 2 yrs dev time before release into Early Access Jan 2016
- ★ 2 person dev team, now 5!
- ★ Made in Unity, uses UFPS, SECTR
- ★ Bootstrapped
- ★ No crunch.



Retail Rundown

- ★ PC, Mac, Linux, Xbox One
- ★ \$19.99 retail price
- ★ 96%+ aggregate review score
- ★ ~700k units sold so far
- ★ Top 100 Steam game of 2016



Creating Slime Rancher

Points to Cover



- ★ The original seed that grew into Slime Rancher
- ★ Our approach to development
- ★ Constraints



The Birth of an Idea.

You will not stop us. The Order of the Black
Worm will consume all in its path.







Development Reality



- ★ Unknown company, 2 people
- ★ Could not build a better mousetrap
- ★ Bigger companies will always win



Be Better Than Anyone

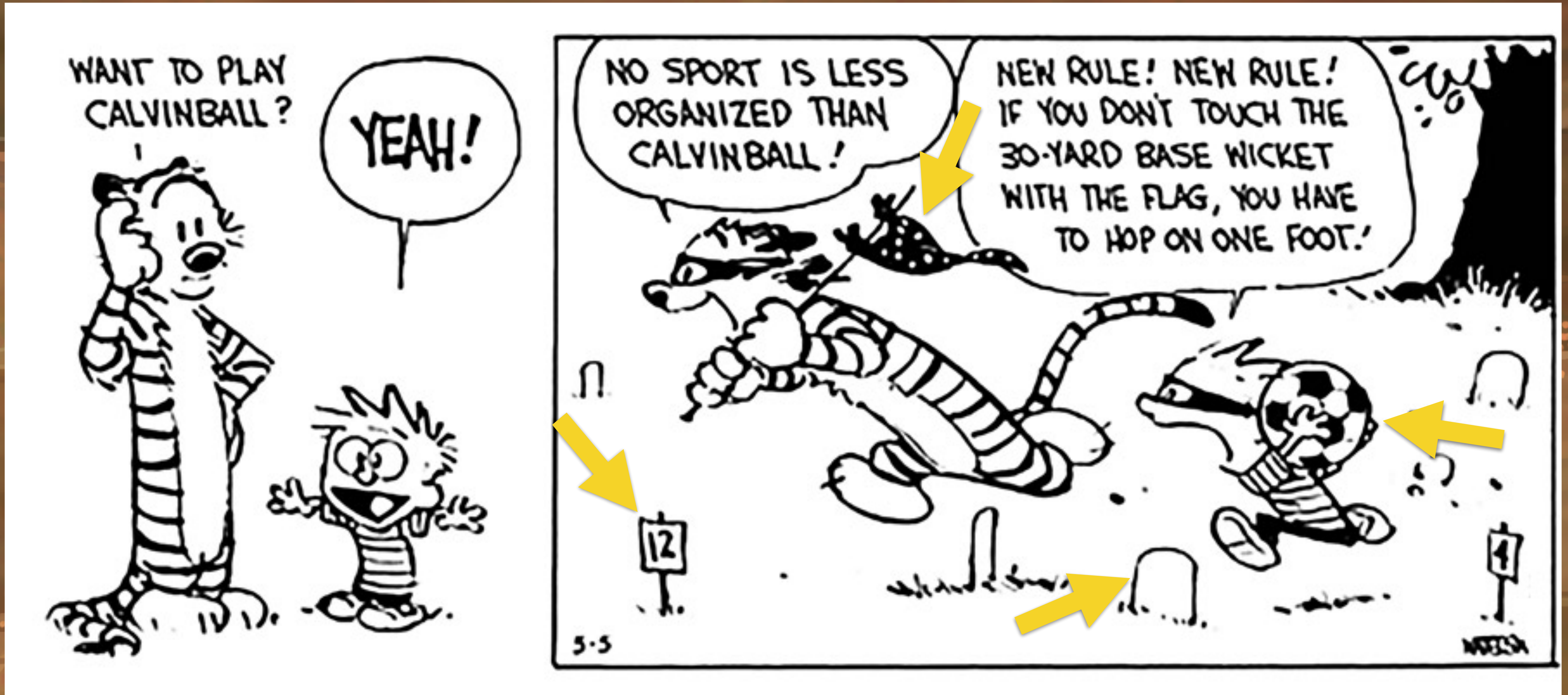


We decided to make a better SLIME RANCHING game than anyone ever. That was something that we COULD DO.

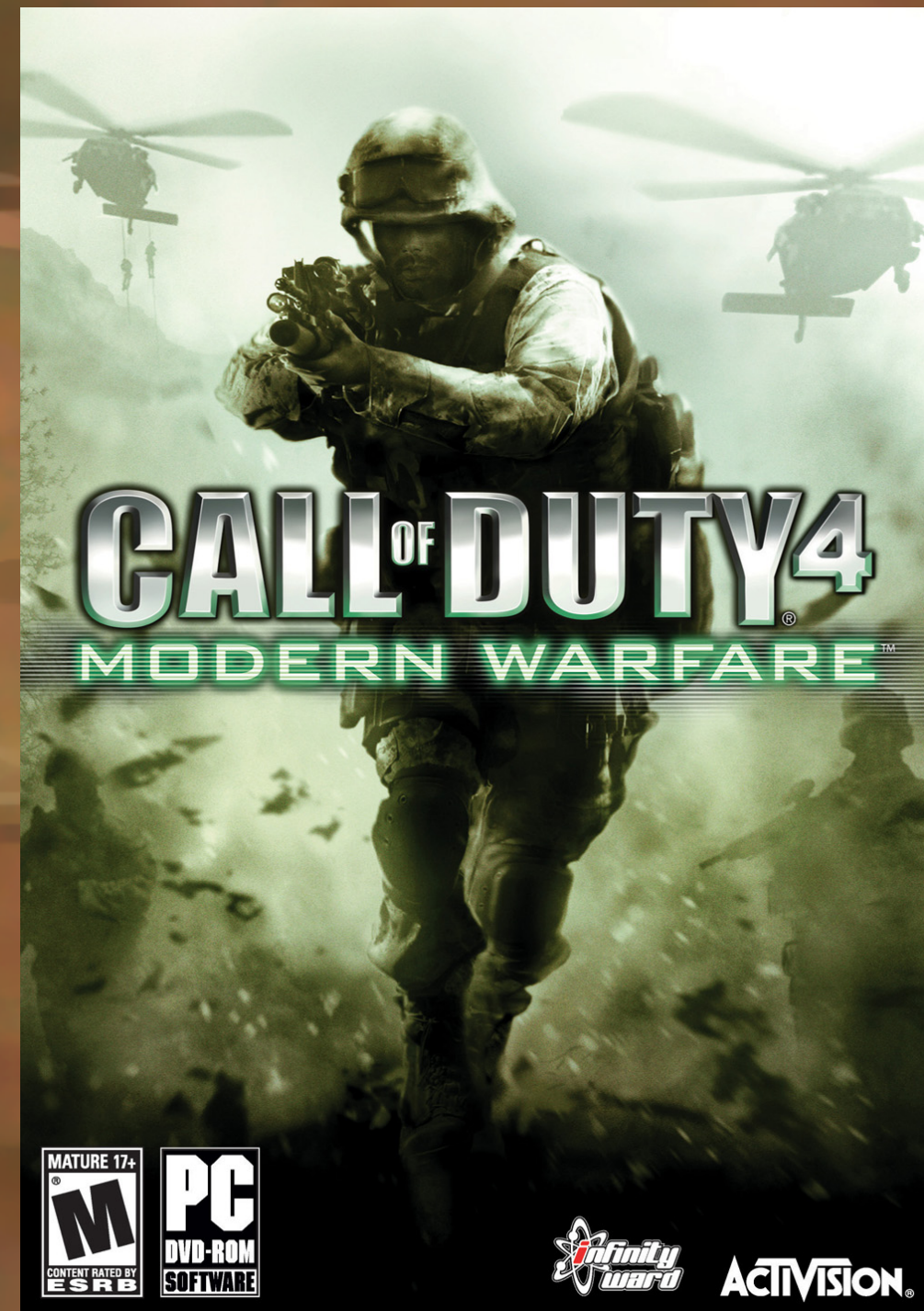
Make Your Own Calvinball



Make Your Own Calvinball



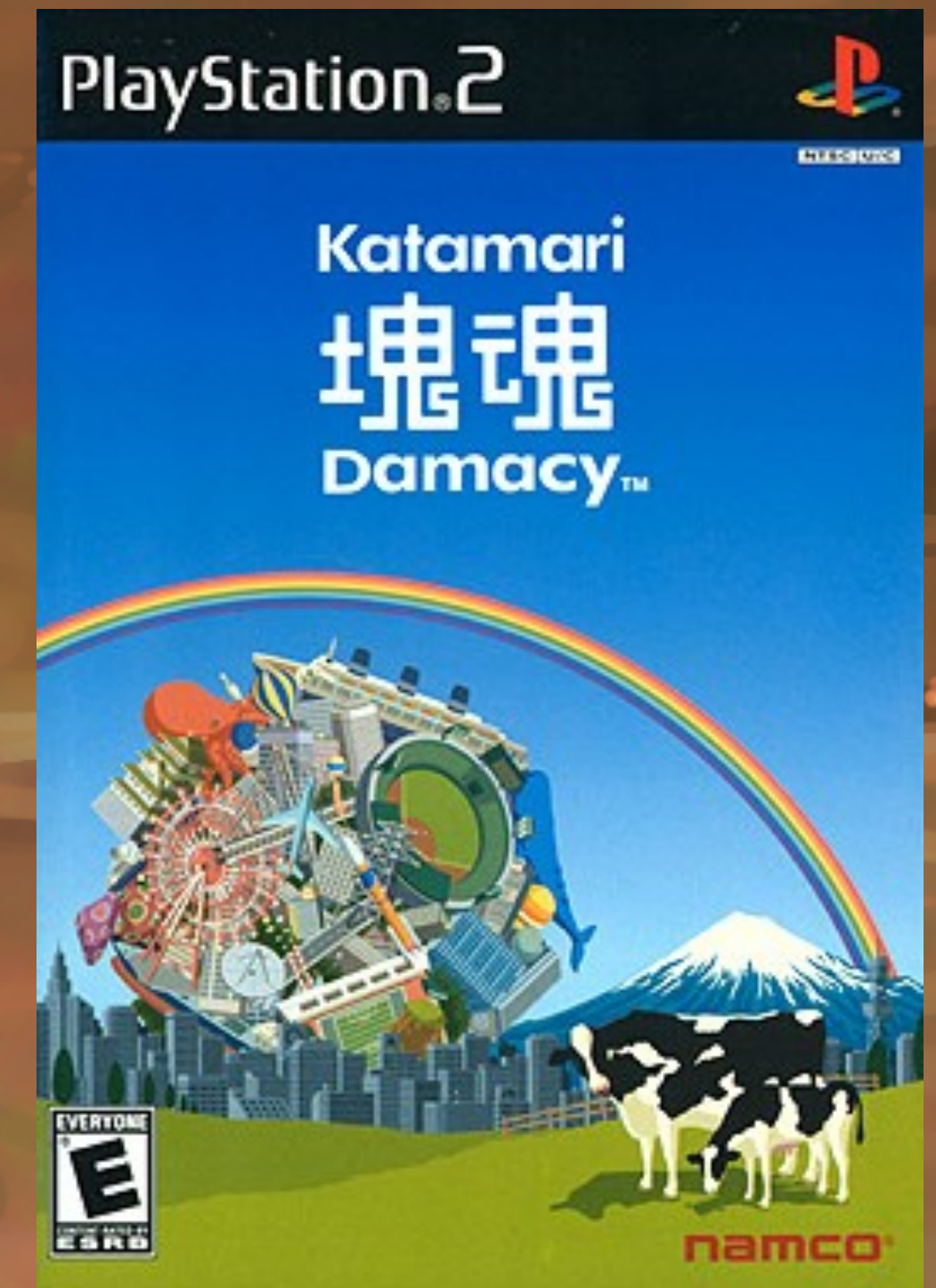
The Weirdness Spectrum



Familiar



Somewhat familiar



WTF is this magic?

Use Your Constraints

- ★ Can't animate, so limbless slimes
- ★ FPS = no character model
- ★ FPS = mainstream muscle memory
- ★ Open world because scripting is hard
- ★ Farming theme because it was relatable and the rest was weird as hell



Takeaway



Slime Rancher is a weird concept played in a familiar way, wrapped in a familiar theme. Two of three battles are already won.

And the last battle is a game of Calvinball.



Building Guarantees into Slime Rancher's Design

Points to Cover

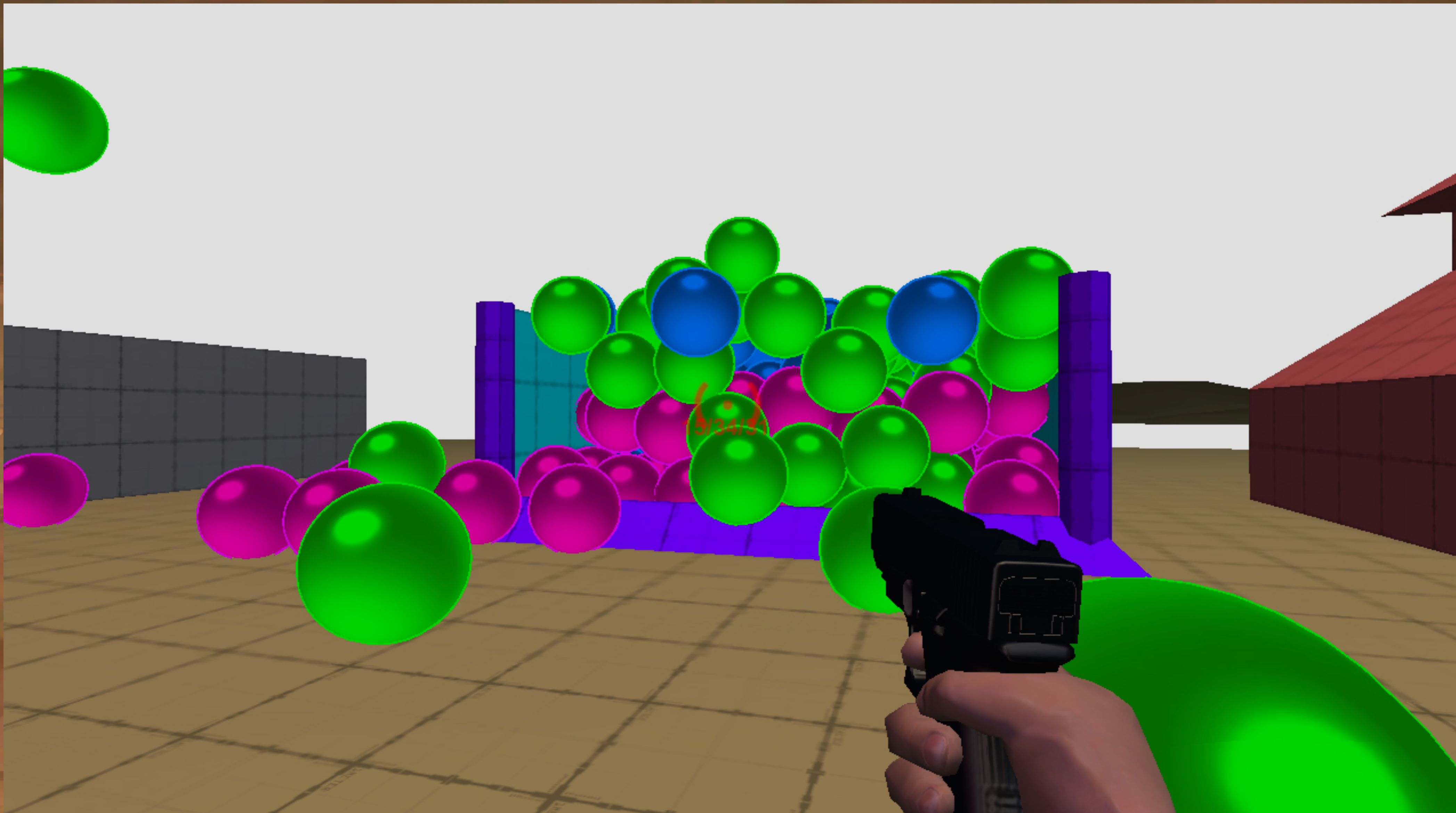


- ★ Our approach to prototyping a game and how we evaluate it
- ★ Building fun loops, the funnest of all known loops
- ★ How this all guarantees a strong foundation for a the final product

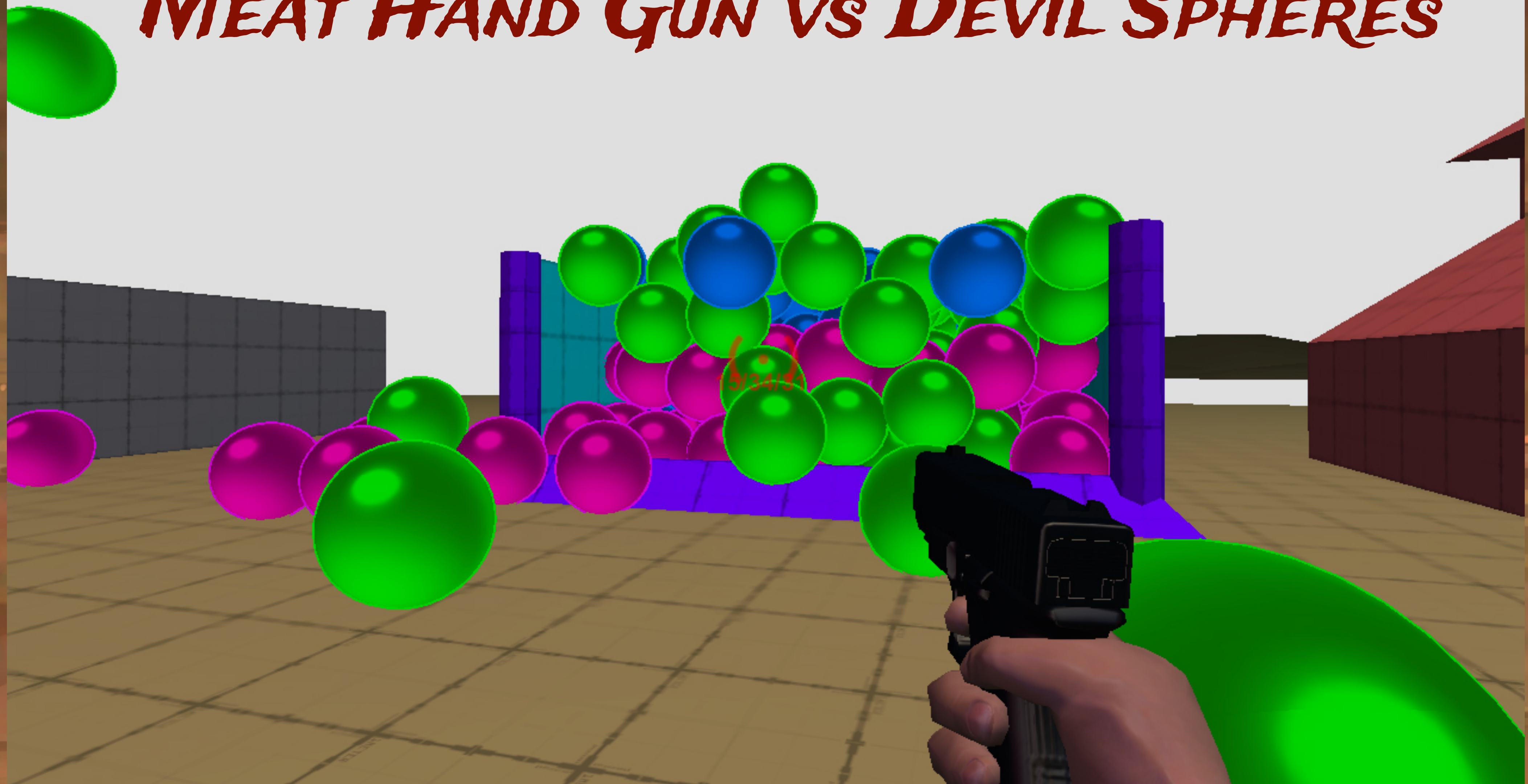




1	2	3	4
			
23	86	0	50



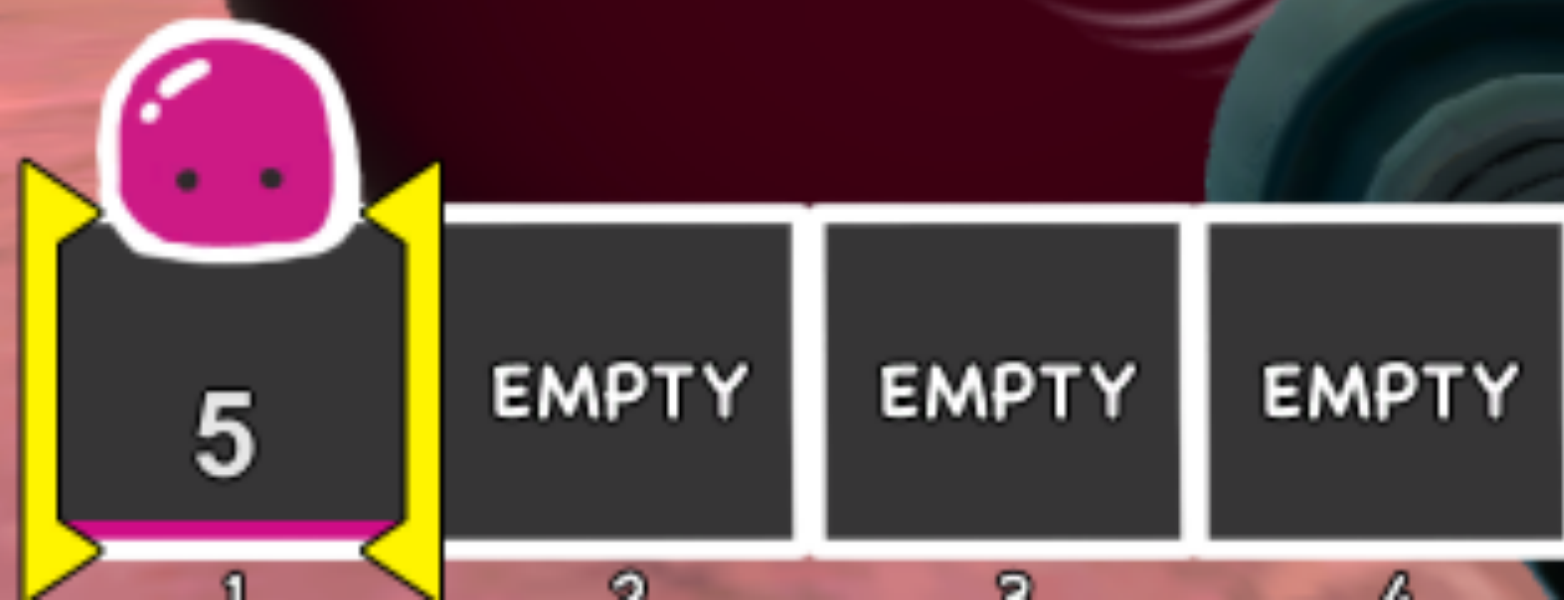
MEAT HAND GUN VS DEVIL SPHERES







Score: 0
14:41



Slime Rancher

Prototyping Approach

- ★ Our prototype focused entirely on the core game loop, not a 'vertical slice'
- ★ Prototype loop and final game's loop are almost exactly the same



Why This Approach?

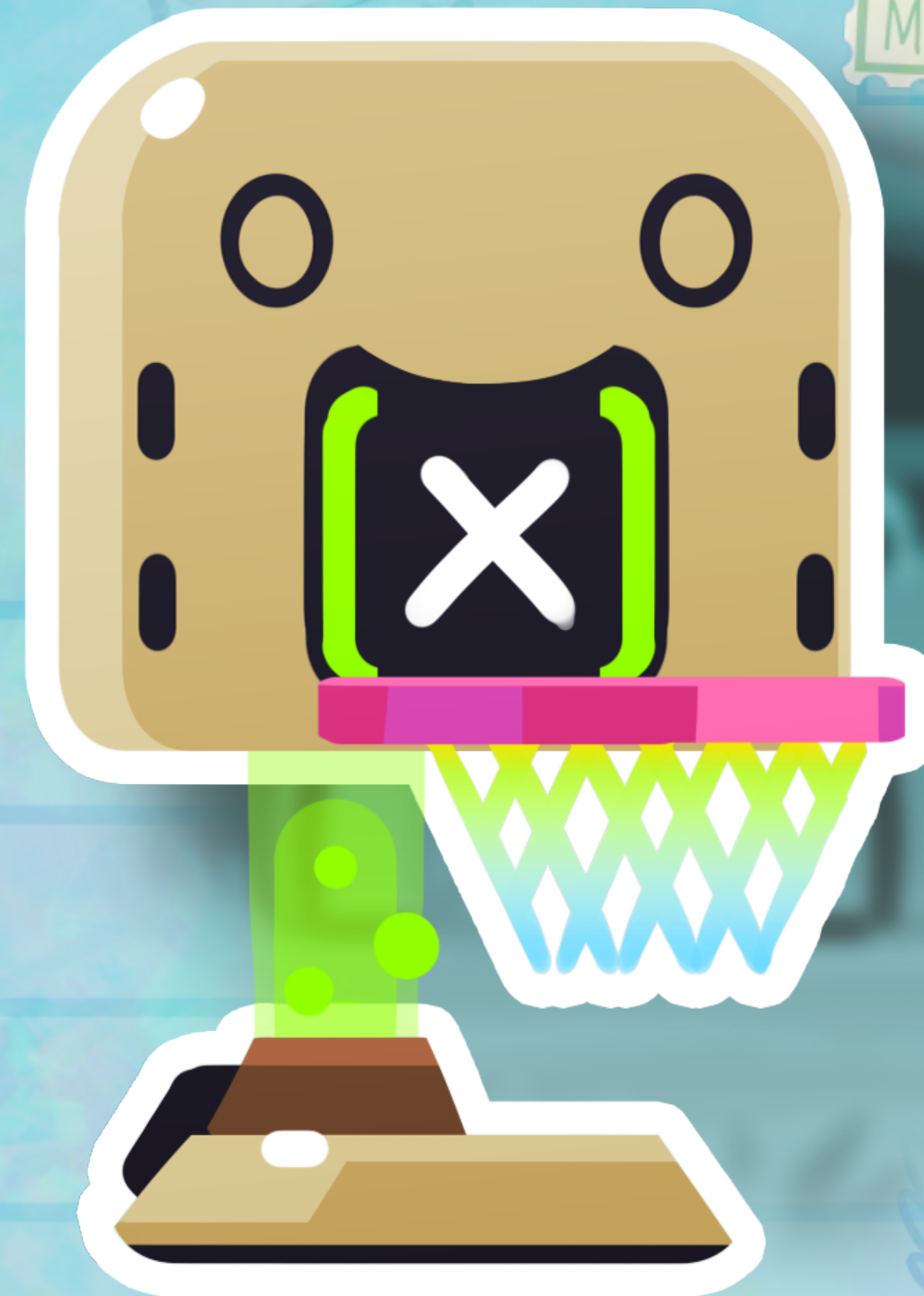
- ★ Almost every game has a 90% loop: the thing you do 90% of the time
- ★ This loop is the machine that makes players want to PLAY and REPLAY your game
- ★ It is not perceived as the experience as a whole, it is what drives the experience





It's in All Forms of Play

- ★ While choosing teams in basketball you bounce the ball
- ★ Between turns in a board game you can't wait to roll the die
- ★ All of these things are the parts of the game that FEEL GOOD



Testing Approach

- ★ Presented the prototype to testers as a mostly finished game (it wasn't)
- ★ Asked to evaluate only what they see
- ★ 'Would you buy it?'



Why This Approach?



- ★ You can't hide behind cool features that aren't yet implemented
- ★ You can't trust your friend's feedback (especially devs)
- ★ If a success, more cool features just makes it better because the foundation is solid



Takeaway



Build a prototype that proves whatever the player is doing 90% of the time is fun.

Prove this by testing it for what it is, not for what you hope it will become.

The fun loop should be fun on its own.

And Now A Quick Biology Lesson

(I promise this is relevant to Slime Rancher's development.)



This is a great white shark.

Cool Shark Facts:

- Rows of razor-sharp teeth, rad!
- Can detect 1 drop of blood in 1 million drops of water, whoa!
- Few evolutionary changes in like almost forever
- Even their dorsal fins are scary.





Summary: Every part of the shark's design makes it better at being a shark.



This is a pug.

Stupid Pug Facts:

- Has trouble breathing, rad!
- Can't give birth without human intervention, cool!
- Eyes can literally pop out of head. Srsly.
- Known to wear dumb costumes even in the 16th century.





Summary: Loaded with features that hinder its ability to be a successful dog.

Lean Game Design

- ★ Every aspect of SR's original design informed the core gameplay
- ★ It created a very focused, confident game right off the bat
- ★ Plus, it is way cheaper to develop



Pug Features We Ditched

- ★ Randomly generated world
- ★ Procedurally generated vegetation
- ★ Very open world, vehicle required
- ★ Dozens of unique tarr (enemies)
- ★ Even more enemies because why not



Takeaway



Make your game a shark: every feature informs the core experience and makes it a killing machine.

Cut your crafting systems, multiplayer, or whatever is nice-to-have until your game matures.



The Release and Our First Year

Points to Cover



- ★ Pre-release strategy
- ★ Early Access plans and how they got thrown out
- ★ How Early Access actually works



Pre-Release

- ★ Released v0.2.0 to friends, family, and some strangers (knew it would leak)
- ★ Small file size allowed people to share via email (shareware style)
- ★ Suddenly: Youtube
- ★ Moved right to Greenlight to utilize the momentum, used a YT video





Early Access Plans

- ★ Outlined release plans: small updates, and big ones worth coming back to play
- ★ Expected players would come and go from SR: told them to 'walk away'
- ★ Small team, updates would take time
- ★ All of this hinged on players understanding development: **HUGE MISTAKE**



Early Access Reality



- ★ Players complained if updates were too infrequent, or too small
- ★ Youtubers needed a clear signal
- ★ Realized that we needed a new strategy
- ★ Turned to our MMO dev experience



New Approach

- ★ Treated Early Access dev like running a released, live game
- ★ Big updates became like content updates/dlc, had big effect on sales, Youtube
- ★ This was all mostly a change in messaging, which is a lot of work
- ★ Changed 'waiting' into 'hype'



Provocative Takeaway!



Early Access doesn't work.

(at least, not as intended.)

EA: What You Might Expect

- ★ Players join devs on a magical journey in game development!
- ★ There are ups and downs, but that's ok, because it's a game **IN DEVELOPMENT**!
- ★ Devs can change their minds about stuff during development because it's normal!



EA: The Cold Reality



- ★ Players expect regular content updates, yesterday
- ★ Early Access means player wishlist features might still happen
- ★ 'I understand it's Early Access but...'
- ★ Players dislike changes, however small





Pink



Temp Puddle



New Puddle

Takeaway



Releasing into Early Access is releasing your game, period.

An Early Access game should be treated like a live game with content updates that drive excitement. This might mean changing dev style.

Excitement = more Youtube videos, more sales



Quick Review Roundup

Positive Reviews

- ★ Slime animations and personality
- ★ Exploration and discovery-based learning, no hand-holding
- ★ It's happy. Most games aren't happy.
- ★ 'Chill' or 'zen' game



Negative Reviews

- ★ \$20 price tag, 'should be \$15'
- ★ Lack of content (avg play time is about 12 hrs)
- ★ Can't run on their system
- ★ No multiplayer



One More Thing on EA Reviews



If you made a good game, most of your negative reviews and criticisms will be a result of your being in Early Access.

Those reviews will likely not go away after leaving EA.

Youtube! What? How?



Points to Cover



- ★ Slime Rancher's Youtube success
- ★ Why Slime Rancher works on Youtube
- ★ What else works on Youtube



You Tube

twitch

+



= Free Marketing



Slime Rancher on Youtube



- ★ Hit on YT: over 1mil views per week
- ★ YT is our marketing: no shows, no PR
- ★ We don't buy YT video coverage



Why SR Works on Youtube



- ★ Charisma: slimes have personalities, fun to watch
- ★ Action happens toward the camera
- ★ Discovery-based learning: audience observations feel rewarding
- ★ Lots of unpredictable events keeps it fresh
- ★ Customization features make videos unique



What Else Works on Youtube

- ★ Games that allow you to start 'projects'
- ★ Games that leave the audience with a 'question' to answer: survival, exploring the unknown, etc
- ★ Anything that prompts interaction w/audience
- ★ Games that leave something for the audience to try on their own



Additional Youtube Thoughts



- ★ I would not consider developing a game that's not YT-friendly. It's that important!
- ★ Make it easy for people to request keys: keymailer.co, promotor app, distribute ()
- ★ Games move up the YT food chain: start small
- ★ Videos get about 10% views to subs in 3 days



Takeaway



Youtube and streaming is the best way to market your game.

Being Youtube-friendly will give your game a much higher chance of success.



In Summary...

Be Better Than Anyone

- ★ Don't be limited by your constraints, embrace them
- ★ Don't compete with established games/genres, but use their muscle memory
- ★ Invent your own Calvinball



Prototyped for Success



- ★ Focused entirely on the 90% loop
- ★ Tested SR as a 'complete game'
- ★ Allowed us to be very confident in our design early on



Make Your Game a Shark



- ★ Shark features inform the core design
- ★ Pug features aren't nice-to-have but not essential and bloat your game
- ★ Shark design is more focused and cheaper to develop!



Early Access = Live Game

- ★ Players expect your game to update regularly and not change too much
- ★ Build updates around exciting stuff that generates hype and Youtube videos
- ★ This may require restructuring how you would otherwise develop your game



Youtube and Twitch

- ★ There are qualities and game designs that are Youtube-friendly
- ★ Audiences want to feel engaged, not just a spectator
- ★ Make it easy to request keys, but just give them away to start



Thank You!

(now time for some Q & A)



www.monomipark.com

@monomipark

@nickpopovich

