BLURST

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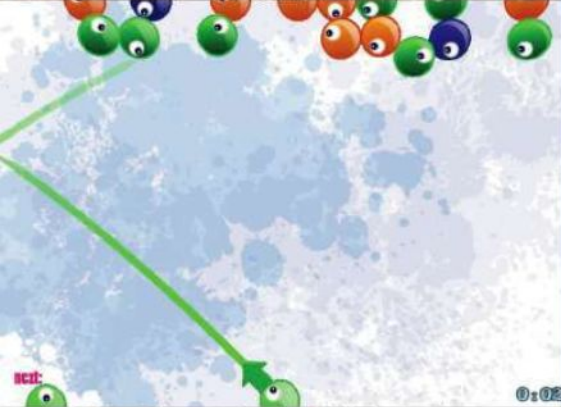
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We talk to Matthew Wegner of Flashbang Studios. Did I mention we also play and rank their games?

Flashbang STUDIOS, LLC

About our Reviews

We rate all of our games based on their graphics, gameplay, sound, and lasting appeal. Each category is given a score on a scale of 1-10 (10 being perfect and 1 being horrendous). The average of these scores is tallied to give each game a percentage score and grade (A thru F). Games are more than the sum of their parts, so we do adjust our average scores based on our final assessment of the game, its appeal, creativity, uniqueness, and overall value.

A: 90-100%   D: 60-69%
B: 80-89%   F: 0-59%
C: 70-79%

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Beginners Guide to Indie Game Development Part 5 of 6
The Big Indie Release

Your game is done and now it's time to make some money (hopefully). Instead of walking you through every possible combination of release scenarios, I am just going to outline some of the key release avenues that most indies utilize:

Self-Publish

If you've successfully been marketing your game throughout the development period, Self-Publishing and releasing your game on your website is a no-brainer. The advantage of selling downloads through your website is that you, the developer, collect the majority of each sale and have control over the website itself so that you can adequately support, feature, and sell your product. The disadvantage is that most indies have measly traffic and will not be able to reach their customers as effectively.

Portals

Before you release your game on your own site, it's probably a good idea to contact some portals and see if they would be interested in selling your game. What's a game portal? Well, it's a site that collects a bunch of games and sells them through a unified website. Some prime examples of portals are: Valve's Steam, Big Fish Games, Impulse, Reflexive/Amazon, Real Arcade and Direct2Drive. Every portal is different with different audiences and some even act as publishers. There are exclusive

and non-exclusive deals and tons of other particulars that I won't get into. Generally, getting on portals is a good thing since your game will be in front of new eyes. However, since a developer has less and less control over their game's price on a portal, it is usually best to sell your game at a premium on your own site initially and then boosting your game's sales by releasing on several portals over the next year. Some deals may be too good to turn down though.

Publisher

If you want to go Retail, you'll almost definitely need a publisher. Publishers can also help get your game on a whole bunch of other distribution channels and portals. Publishers certainly help give a game the backing power of a larger company but it comes at a price. Publishers are often going to take a cut of sales. That's the cost of using them and harnessing their marketing power. There are some horror stories out there of publishers who don't pay royalties or don't support your game at all. Generally, it's good to request a marketing action plan and an upfront payment to make sure they mean business.

During the final stages of your game's development, you should start putting together a release schedule, contact portals, distributors, and publishers and plan out your game's release. Remember to use press releases and

solicit reviews. Send a press release announcing your game's release date about a month out and then send out review copies. Send out another press release announcing your game's release on your website (or portal) and be sure to keep sending out releases when your game is available on new websites or distribution channels. Scream about your game's release from a mountain top and be consistent and persistent. Dedication will result in press coverage which will help get your website visitors and your game demo downloaded.

Keep in mind that it's a task in and of itself to get people to visit your website and actually download, install and play your game demo. Don't get frustrated when you don't sell thousands of units on Day 1. Remember that your game is not the next Halo and people haven't been talking about it for months on end. Work to create excitement prior to release. Use player and reviewer quotes, put gameplay footage up on YouTube, and try to create excitement and inform people about your big indie game release.

More importantly, keep it up after the release. In the final lesson of this guide, we'll touch on how important it is to continually market your game and push sales.

- Mike Gnade

Originality and the Zombie Apocalypse

Have gun, will shoot zombies. It's a concept as rudimentary as 2+2=4, but nonetheless it often seems to be one sorely disconnected from mainstream video games. I know, I know, how can I say that? This is in many ways the best time ever to be a fan of the undead. Dead Rising, Left4Dead, the Nazi zombies of Call of Duty: World at War; there are more zombies to blast in games these days than all the zombies in the first four Resident Evil games combined. But then that right there is the problem. Considering all the various and diverse genres available to developers, their creative scope is often shallower than a storm trooper's dialogue in Star Wars. "Blast 'Me!"

This isn't to say the indie scene is lacking in the mindless violence department, in fact I had the pleasure of reviewing Zombie Driver which, for all intents and purposes, is just a long afternoon's worth of gore and destruction. The fact that you're driving a car does little to distinguish it from the myriad of other games with a similar focus on smearing the undead. This isn't a bad thing necessarily. The only reason there are so many zombie games like this is because they're great fun. The Last Stand, Zombie Horde, their respective sequels and the tons of games like them are all at their core just about shooting stuff: blood, gore, yadda, yadda.

There are a few games out there though that do manage to be a bit creative with the denizens of Zombieland. Infectionator for instance, takes the core idea of the various infection simulators floating around the web and makes them fun. Rather then trying to stop the zombie plague, you're tasked with spreading it. Initially, this plays out relatively simply. You select a city, wait for an opportune moment to strike and then unleash your virus. Watching your little 8-bit zombies maul the living is strangely cathartic and as the game progresses it adds layers of complexity turning it eventually into a game of strategy and resource management.

Similarly, Cottage of Doom takes the whole defense game schtick and turns the focus away from frantically blasting charging opponents and toward barricading the titular cottage as you're assailed by an endless legion of living corpses. The goal isn't to win, it's just to hold off as long as possible and

with your ammo limited and the enemy numbers vastly overwhelming, a well placed bureau to block off a door is often more valuable than a dual gauge shotgun. It's a really interesting take for a zombie game that is unfortunately dragged down a bit by shoddy controls.

There's a reason zombies are popular across so many mediums nowadays. Their basic nature and core mindlessness makes them a blank slate. Developers can paint almost any sort of picture upon their horrific faces. They can be straightforward scary, they can be a canvas for social commentary, or they can be funny (Plants vs. Zombies anyone?). When it comes to video games they are the perfect fodder for trigger happy teenagers looking for their next shot of gore. The thing is they can be more than that. It would be nice to see more games that take advantage of the multiple uses for the undead.

- Stew Shearer

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In the midst of the booth babes, the pumping 'Poker Face' from the Dance Central demo at Harmonix, and all-out gaming promo swag of E3 is a section devoted to IndieCade, an independent games showcase.

IndieCade will host the third annual International Festival of Independent Games this October 8-10 in Culver City, California. This showcase displays of some of the best indie games from around the world. The exhibit in October will feature the winners of IndieCade's competition, as decided by voters and players, but for a bit of a sneak preview, IndieCade organizers have selected twelve submitted games for display at E3.
The selected games show some amazing creativity, truly engaging storytelling and interesting new ways to interact with a game and with other players.
I was lucky enough to try out Taiyoung Ryu's MFA thesis Maum at E3 -- lucky because there was consistently a wait to experience this game. Although indie games tend to focus on the minimum system requirements to tell the story or to make the point, Maum uses a sci-fi brainwave-reading headset as an input device.

As your avatar moves through a field of enemies (I'm not sure if they were vaguely-defined predators or if I was just so overwhelmed by a game that can read my thoughts that I blanked on the storyline), the game responds to your emotions. If you stay calm, you can walk relatively unencumbered, but as you get nervous, the NPCs sense your fear and come towards you. Think Shaun Of The Dead, any horror movie where the protagonists try to act natural in the hopes of fooling predators, or a creepy anxiety dream.

We've all tried to keep our fears off our faces, but keeping them out of your thoughts? With the sensory overload of E3, it was hard to calm my spinning thoughts enough to walk unobtrusively.
Sure, we won't be playing this at game

night anytime soon, but Maum absolutely blew my mind as an immersive experience.

On the opposite end of the spectrum is one-button party game B.U.T.T.O.N., an acronym for Brutally Unfair Tactics Totally Okay Now. B.U.T.T.O.N., by the Copenhagen Game Collective, is a demonic Mother May I?-ish game for a PC with 4 XBox controllers. The object of the game is, well, to beat the other players. Four players each sign in, using one button to check in, and then do exactly as the game tells them, whether that's moonwalking away from the game, turning around, making chicken noises, or rushing back to push the button! Feel free to be mean to your friends – that's where the "brutally unfair tactics" bit comes in – since your winning strategy may require you to get in front of them, distract them or push their buttons. And the game itself is evil, too. Sometimes the win condition is to hit your button first, but it may also be coming in second, third or last, so merely moving faster than your slothful gamer friends isn't enough.

Since the game is running on a garden variety PC, not the Kinect/Natal tech on display a few booths down, the computer has no way of knowing if you've really moonwalked away from the controllers or if your five backwards steps were really big enough to be counted, so the players must determine and enforce their own rules. This sets up an interesting arrangement where the game is in charge of the win condition, both by announcing the win condition and by announcing the winner, but the players are in charge of the rules.

Or perhaps I'm overanalyzing a ridiculous party game that the devs say was written for drunk gamers, by drunk gamers.
I was still at the airport when I was first told that I must check out Hazard at E3, and for the next three days, as soon as the words 'indie journalist' were out of my mouth, someone else was telling me about Hazard.

I've been trained since I first played Roger Wilco and Zork that there's a right way to accomplish in-game tasks, and a wrong way, and woe to the gamer who chooses wrong. (Think I'm still bitter about throwing that stupid shoe at that stupid dog in King's Quest) Hazard promises to be not a story, but an an extended metaphor for life, so what seems like the correct way to solve a problem may or may not be right. But after a few moments, I started to wonder what was "right" anyway.

If you choose to, say, go up instead of down, there's no guarantee that you'll end up higher than if you'd gone down. And there's no guarantee that you can get back down. It's a fine throwback to killing the Adventure dragon with my bare hands. Visually, I wasn't particularly impressed, but if a game brings on questions of the meaning of "right" and the implications of all of your choices, pretty pictures don't seem to matter too much.

Other games on display at E3 included the bizarre (and slightly disturbing) Vision By Proxy, a PC short where players take on the role of a cute little lost alien… who steals people's eyes in order to see what they see, by Georgia Tech's Team Rose; SmartKobold, a simple ASCII game where the NPCs are, well, smart kobolds, by Jeff Lait; and Farbs' Playpen, a user-designed, constantly evolving game. I enjoyed the theory of this one much more than the actual playtime, which seemed to blend ChatRoulette with Microsoft Paint. Wadjet Eye's Puzzle Bots and GLPeas' BlndGrl were also on display.

Presence at the E3 showcase has no relationship to how these games will do in the October competition, but if this is just a sample of the games to be shown, this year's IndieCade is very promising.

- Meg Stivison

Contributors +

Nate Edwards
Nathaniel Edwards is a freelance writer and journalism student at Northwestern University. He contributes articles and reviews for Blogcritics Magazine and serves as gaming writer for Kidzworld.com. His own blog at LegalArcade.com covers news and opinions on controversial video games and video game research.

Bryan Silva
Bryan is a 21 year old college student at Palm Beach State College. Having been playing games ever since he was a little kid, Bryan hopes to take his knowledge of video games and a Public Relations/Journalism degree and work in the game industry one day in the near future. Bryan is an editor for Frag Crunch (www.thefragcrunch.com), were he mainly covers the indie game industry.

Ashley King
Ashley King is a freelance writer, gamer, and host of the indie games podcast 2 Girls 1 Game which hascarved out a niche for itself as a premier source for indie related news and reviews.

Stew Shearer
Stew Shearer works as a freelance writer and has worked with GamesRadar, UGO and IGN. He currently writers a gaming column at Orson Scott Card's Intergalactic Medicine Show and when he's not working spends time with his wife in their home in Vermont.

Peter Rambo
Peter plays stringed instruments, wrangles headlines for a newspaper and writes & talks for gameosaurus.com

Meg Stivison
Meg Stivison has been a computer gamer since discovering text-based PC games as a little girl. She is a freelance writer and English teacher, currently based in Raleigh. She blogs at www.SimpsonsParadox.com

Jonathan Wolf
Jonathan is the executive producer of the Indie group Rogue Pirate Ninja Interactive (http://www.roguepirateninja.com) and has a B.S. & M.S. in Computer Science. Reach him at johannes.von.luck@roguepirateninja.com

Mike Gnade
Mike is incredibly jealous of everyone who got to attend E3 2010. Watching E3 online and on TV has not quenched his thirst for Booth Babes. He also just got an iPad and is into it.

HOW INDIE ARE YOU?
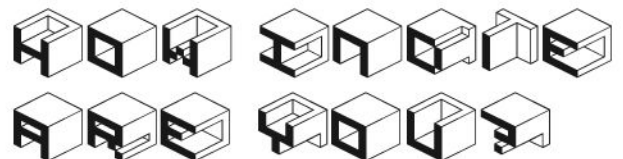
Quiz Answer Key

Matching:
1-D 2-A 3-I 4-H 5-E 6-G 7-J 8-C 9-B 10-F
SATs:
1-B 2-D 3-A 4-C 5-E 6-A 7-C 8-E
Creator:
1. Jason Rohrer-Passage
2. Petri Purho-Crayon Physics
3. Daniel Tabar-Cortex Command
4. Nifflas-Knytt Stories

#11

Jetpack Brontosaurus

Jetpack Brontosaurus can best be described as Dinosaur PilotWings. As the name implies, you play a brontosaurus with a jet pack and you navigate and fly around a world completing objectives such as flying through stone rings. I really like the visuals in JB, but the clunky and awkward controls make this title a real labor to play. I actually remember Matthew Wegner of Flashbang mentioning that Jetpack Brontosaurus was not their finest work at GDC Austin last year. I have to emphatically agree. While it's nice to listen to and look at, it's just not fun to play...at all.

Score: 2/10

+10 Air Hit

Pies: 24 Points: 10/30

#10: I Hate Clowns

I Hate Clowns is one of the most simplistic games on Blurst. It was made in only 2 weeks (as opposed to most of the others which were given 8 weeks of attention) and it shows. The goal of the game is to score points by hitting clown with metal pies. Score enough points and you can move onto the next level. The game tries to mix it up with varying the number of clowns and pies that you are given, but ultimately the game is a pretty straightforward aim and shoot game. After 47 Levels, I too hated clowns and the annoying sounds that they make. This is not Flashbang's best work, but isnt' bad considering it was made in 1/4 the time of a lot of Blurst's other games.

Score: 3/10

Blush suffers from two things: simplicity and exploitation. In Blush, you control an underwater squid entirely with your mouse. The goal of the game is to attack enemies with your tentacles, collect their eggs (they stick to your tentacles) and return the eggs to glowing spheres to upgrade your squid and extend your tentacles. Basically, it's all about the tentacles. The game simplicity is exacerbated by the fact that you can camp by a collection sphere and just whip around your tentacles to kill enemies and rack up points. The visuals in Blush are really cool. The neon colors and glowing underwater critters all meld together with great sound and music to create a great atmosphere. As great as Blush's presentation is, the gameplay was just too rudimentary to last beyond the few minutes that you're given in Blush. Bottom line was that when my time was up, I didn't really care to play Blush again when there were other Blurst titles that left me wanting more.

#9: Blush

Score: 5/10

#8: Beesley's Buzzwords

Beesley's Buzzwords is a pretty decent game considering it's 7 years old. Flashbang's first title came out right after Popcap's Bookworm in 2003. It took Bookworm's word matching concept and innovated it by creating a hexagonal board. Beesley's is very similar to bookworm. You click the hexagonal honeycombed letters to create words and collect honey. Once you collect enough honey, the game progresses. Beesley went on to be a Finalist at the Independent Games Festival in 2004, but it's 2010 now and Beesley is showing its age. Unlike Popcap, Flashbang has not reiterated upon the Beesley concept with sequels and while the game's word gameplay is still great, the graphics, sounds and overall polish of the game are lacking. I am a huge fan of word games both digital and classics such as Scrabble so Beesley's gameplay makes up for a lot of it's technical shortcomings.

Score: 6/10

BUZZ WORDS

9210

BOA=570

L   P   A
R A G   I U P
K E E O B I D
O L N A I C U

SUBMIT
spring yr. 1
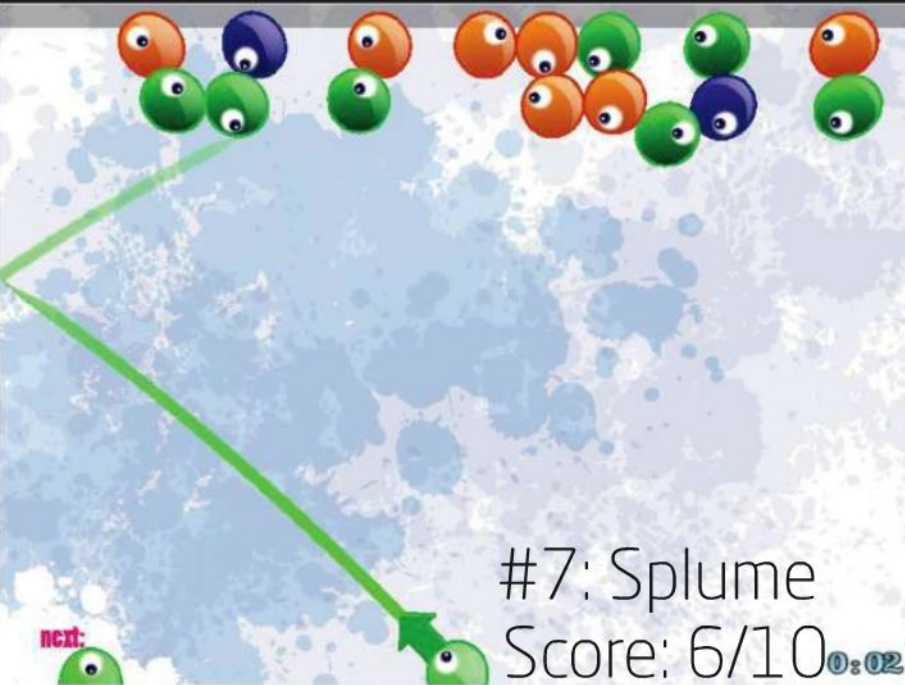
Splume is a physics-based match-3 game. If you've played Bust-a-Move or Snood, you'll quickly pick up the game. There's a bunch of colored balls hanging from the top of (or side of) the screen and you shoot other balls at them in order to get 3 of the same color together. When there's a bunch of like colored spheres together, they explode. Splume adds in some physics to the mix, so things break and react a little differently and more interestingly. The game has different levels that really start to show off the physics and how it evolves the match 3 gameplay. It's nice to have some level progression in a Blurst title. The art style of Splume is a little too simplistic for my liking. A Splume sphere is just a paintball with an eyeball and the backgrounds are flat vector drawings. I like where Blurst was going with the paint effects, but when you're looking at their whole portfolio, Splume's visuals are definitely sub par. The game's core concept is simple and very familiar which makes the game easy to pickup and play, but also makes Splume a little forgettable.

#7: Splume
Score: 6/10

#6: Crane Wars

In Crane Wars, you work for the loyal, but expensive Construction Union and compete with the good-for-nothing scabs that are building adjacent to you. The goal of the game is to stack building blocks on top of one another to build skyscrapers while chucking excess debris and cars into the scabs buildings to damage them. You're money is constantly depleting and when you hit $0, the game is over. The simple arcade setup works well for this Blurst title and the banter between the two factions is a definite standout. While I like the overall concept, I found the controls to be a little difficult and frustrating. Unfortunately, Crane Wars' controls and gameplay don't quite reach the same high quality as the writing, graphics, presentation and concept.

Score: 7/10

#5: Glow Worm

Glow Worm really stands the test of time. Flashbang made it back in 2005 but the graphics, sound and overall production are still above average for most casual titles today. Glow Worm is a pretty innovative spin on the Match 3 Genre. I would describe it as a 'strategic' match 3 (actually it takes 4 to match in this game) since you have a lot more control over your combos than in most games. In Glow Worm, you place caterpillars onto a level grid. The spots on the caterpillars indicate which color butterfly they will turn into allowing you to setup combos to your liking. Casual Matching games are a dime a dozen and it's pretty remarkable to see such an innovative spin on match 3 that hasn't been cloned over and over again in the past 5 years. Glow Worm was not a success in the casual market or a moneymaker for Flashbang. I guess that's why there haven't been a lot of imitators.

Score: 8/10

#4: OFF-ROAD VELOCIRAPTOR SAFARI

TIME: 1.0
SCORE: 142,550

ON HILL

RAPTOR PICKUP!
300 POINTS!

CLEAN HIT!
12,550 POINTS!

#3: Time Donkey

Time Donkey is another one of Flashbang's humorous concepts. The game is a 3D platformer where you play a Donkey with a Flava-Flav Clock around its neck that allows it to time travel and create recorded copies of itself. The goal of the Time Donkey is to collect as many Tacos as possible within the allotted time frame. The game's time travel concept takes what would be a boring game and infuses it with a really enjoyable challenge that allows you to strategically plan taco collection routes. Nothing beats watching 10 Donkeys burst out of a checkpoint and scatter in different directions. Like most of Blurst's best games, Time Donkey is over too quickly and leaves the player yearning for more levels and objects to interact with and enjoy. Time Donkey is definitely a title Blurst should look at developing into a full title...if they were still doing that sort of thing.

Score: 8.5/10

Off-Road Velociraptor Safari is by far Blurst's most popular title. It was so popular that the team at Flashbang was working on a full HD version of the game that would have included enhanced graphics, more features, more levels, level objectives and much more. After playing Raptor Safari, it's easy to see that the core gameplay mechanic is fun and would benefit from expanding the core idea and giving the player more direction and goals. In Raptor Safari, you play a monocled Velociraptor with a Jeep tasked with mowing down and dragging other raptors to corporate delivery pads. Like nearly all of Blurst's games, you are only limited by time and are dropped in an open world full of Raptors to run over. The game's physics, jumps, stunts and slow-mo effects work together to create memorable moments every time that you play. There's also an incredible sense of satisfaction that comes from hitting a raptor in an explosion of feathers. My only problem with Raptor Safari (beside the fact that the HD version was canceled) is that the game could use some music. The hum of the jeeps engine gets repetitive and the sparse sound FX make the world itself feel a little sparse. This may be the most popular Blurst title, but it's not the best.

Score: 8/10

aren't very many outlets for Unity-made projects on the web today (although I'm sure this will change soon). We'd like to spend the time required to set up Blurst to accomodate 3rd-party projects. It would be rad to see more games go live on the site.

Unfortunately, the latest news for Flashbang is the suspended development of Raptor Safari 64, the HD update to what is probably your most popular Blurst title so far. What are your plans for the Raptor Safari project in the future?

We expect the "proper" HD/64 version to stay on ice for some time. At some point we may return to it, but in the near future--2010, at minimum--we don't plan to spend any more time on it. Other versions or platforms are tempting. An iPhone version would be fun, if we can find some way to boil the core experience down to simpler controls and bare-bones graphics. Of course, iPhone/Android devices are getting more powerful all the time. It's probably only a few years until the current content will port over in a single click.

So what are the new plans for Flashbang Studios and Blurst? Any 8 week-style games coming up?

We did a call for submissions on Blurst awhile ago, which has turned up some really cool developers and projects. There

At the moment everyone from Flashbang is kind of doing their own thing. At our peak we were 6 people full-time. Since then, the Mechtley brothers have gone on to pursue PhDs, Steve Swink formed Enemy Airship to pursue Shadow Physics development full-time, and Shawn White was recently hired by Unity Technologies to work on Unity full-time in Copenhagen. The office is still around, but it's morphed into a bit of a shared workspace. On any given day you might find three different projects with three different teams being worked on.

That said, we may do some Flashbang limited-schedule games later this year. A fixed schedule makes a lot of sense, since it forces you to quickly answer some questions about what the core of your game is and what's really fun about it. We'll mix up the schedules, though. It's easy to see how 8 weeks can hurt a project that could use more time, but it also cuts the other direction; we never would have made a Canabalt-scoped game, for instance.
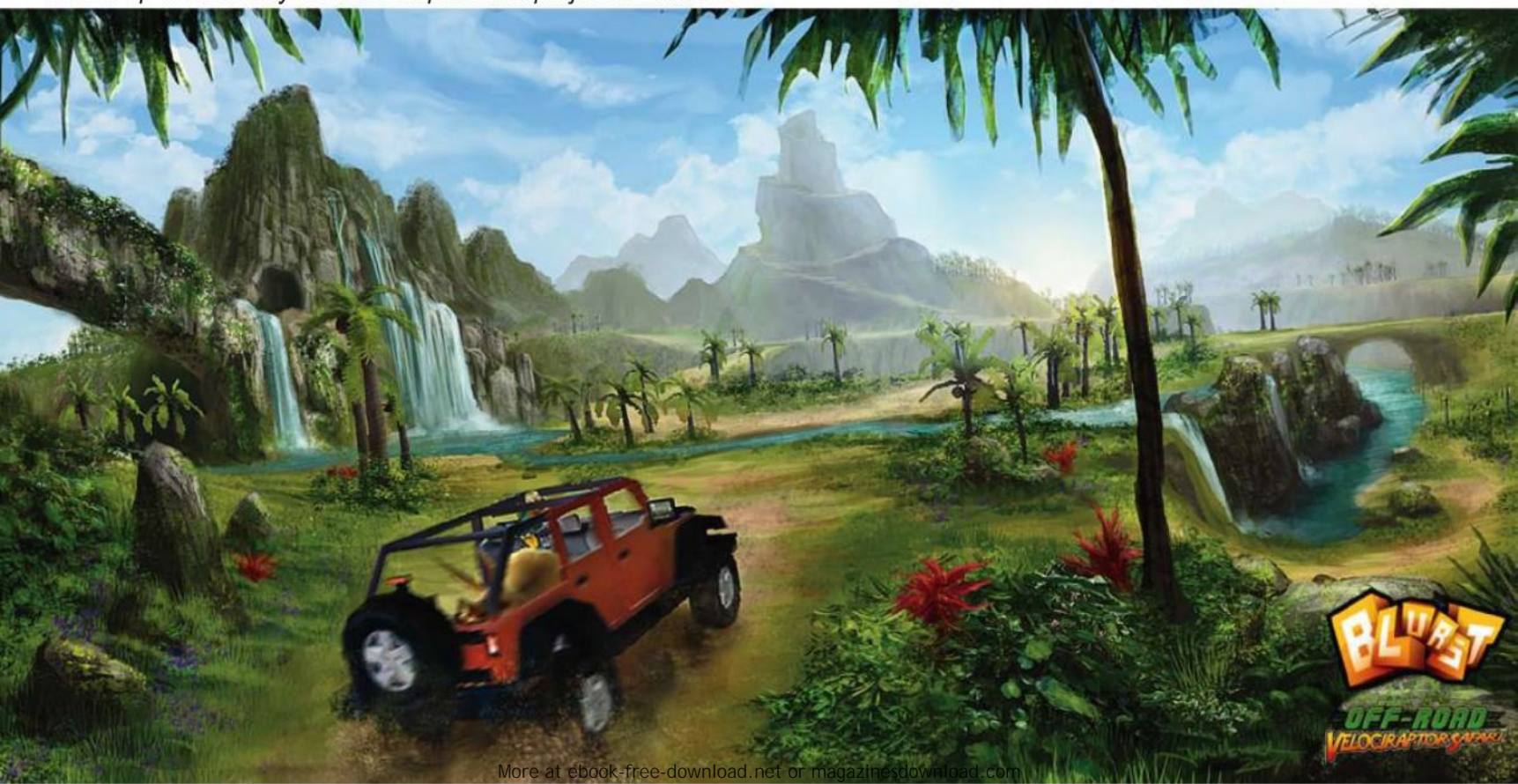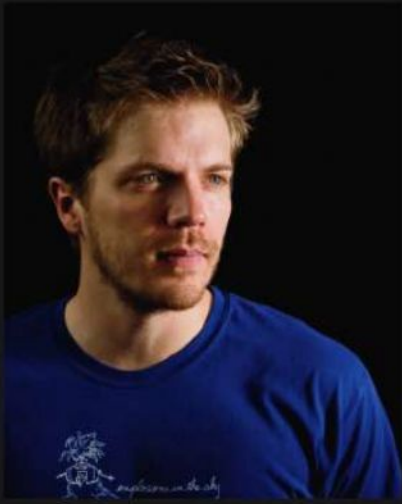
Matthew Wegner has lead Flashbang's development for the past 7 years. He also co-chairs the Independent Games Festival, advises the Independent Games Summit, hosts TIGRadio, edits Fun-Motion, and enjoys such things as unicycling 300 miles through Africa. Matthew was kind enough to answer some questions from IGM's Nate Edwards about Raptor Safari's Cancellation, Blurst's Future, and Indie Game Development.

Before Raptor's Cancellation a new graphic style was revealed

Flashbang is probably the most prominent developer working entirely on the Unity development platform. What makes Unity your preferred tool for game development?

Thanks! We doubt we'll retain our "most prominent" status very long--there are a lot of teams adopting Unity! There are a lot of reasons why we like Unity. They've solved a lot of hard problems in ways that make them simpler. Primarily, the workflow supports amazing iteration speeds. The Unity editor has one of those setups where the game itself plays in the IDE--at any moment you can pause, inspect your objects, move things around, re-balance numbers, and then simply hit resume. We always forget how much we've taken for granted with Unity until we do some contract work on another platform.

You are setting up a program to host other top-notch Unity games on Blurst from other developers. How have submissions for that been going thus far, and what stage are you at in this process?

Ah ha! Seems we jumped the gun on answering this. It went pretty well! The call for submissions had the same kind of percents you see across the Internet--we've had maybe 20 submissions, of which 75% were too simple/hobbyist/poor quality to really put on the site. The other 25% are super interesting, though, and we'd like to find some way to support them. There are two big issues we need to answer internally:

- How much effort do we want to put into preserving the Blurst "brand"? Should we push for a level of quality in games we host, and a certain quirkiness, or just let anything on the site?

- Technically, we've made a lot of decisions on the assumption that all of the games would be ours. Adding a new game to Blurst meant a lot of manually-inserted rows in databases and IDs to be set. We need to simplify and expose our API for Blurst profiles, save game information, achievements, and leaderboards.

How would you define "independent" video game development? I can remember some groaning when Q-Games of the Pixeljunk series was nominated for several awards at last year's IGF, so the definition can cause conflict at times. Why do you think that is?

This question is contentious, for a lot of strange reasons. Personally, we think the important metric is the quality of your output, not the manner and means in which you created it. Independence as an identity is dangerous garb to don.

What's Everybody's Favorite Blurst game so far?

What's great about Blurst is that we all like different games, for different reasons (some of them production-related, like this or that feature was really fun to work on, and some for player experience reasons, like this or that game is really fun to play). The Mechtley brothers really liked our iPhone game Rebolt, because they got to design every detail, Matthew likes Minotaur China Shop for the clumsy physics-ness of it, Shawn likes anything with amazing shader work, and the nightmarish laughter in I Hate Clowns haunts Ben's every sleep.

-Interviewed by Nate Edwards

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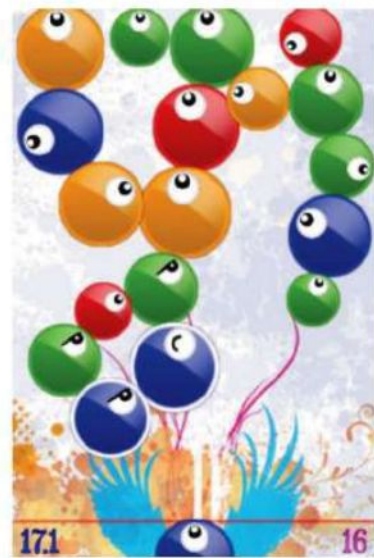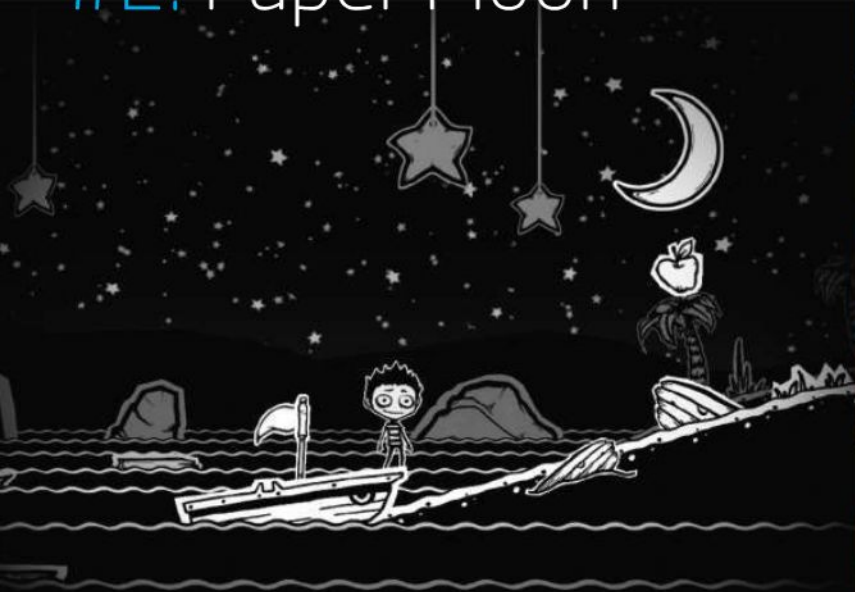
#2: Paper Moon

Paper Moon is beyond a Blurst project and was done in collaboration with Adam Atomic and Infinite Ammo (Alec Holowka). As a result, the game feels a lot more innovative and 'indie' than any of Flashbang's other projects. The game is a platformer but with a twist; the graphics are an extremely unique blend of black and white noir with a flat paper aesthetic which creates a charming pop-up book world. The pop-up world mechanic is the main twist and innovation in this platformer. Tapping the spacebar will instantly transform and move pieces of the environment in Paper Moon's world. Popping an object into an enemy (or yourself) will kill it and the mechanic along with the visuals make Paper Moon an extremely memorable game. In fact, my only complaint about Paper Moon is that the game ends to quickly. Luckily, there are some branching level paths that allow you to explore different levels on repeat plays. The time limit is also challenging and motivates you to keep replaying levels to get faster and farther in the whimsical story and land of Paper Moon.

Score: 9/10

#1: Minotaur China Shop

Minotaur China Shop is an absolute scream. As the name implies, you play as a Minotaur that owns a China Shop in ancient times - you're big, move awkwardly and become enraged if you break too much stuff. The game takes the popular Time-Management genre and infuses it with some much needed physics and violence. As the owner of a China Shop, you must fetch the correct item for each customer. The quicker you deliver the item, the more cash you make. Of course knocking over and breaking china costs you money and angers you. Break too much and your get enraged. Lucky for you, the Minotaur's shop has Rage Insurance so everything that you break during this period earns you positive cash. What makes Minotaur China Shop great, is that it's like 2 games in 1. There is a legitimate time-management game here; there just also happens to be an equally fun violent destruction game as well. Personally, my strategy in the game is to play 1-2 rounds of time-management to build up my cash so that I can maximize my inventory, moves, and insurance for some great destructive payouts. The Minotaur's angry noises are pretty funny and build to the real payoff of this game which is the enraged bashing, stomping, and charging of the Minotaur. The game is quick, simple and easy fun and while the Minotaur moves a little clunky - it serves the game well by creating accidents. For me, Minotaur China Shop shines as Blurst's best title.

Score: 9.5/10

Zombie Driver - www.zombiedriver.com - PC

From the get-go, Zombie Driver makes no qualms about the simplicity of its concept. It's title alone gets the gist across more than well enough. You drive a car and there are zombies. Granted, the zombies come in different varieties, and the cars you eventually accumulate can be equipped with a whole slew of carnage inducing weapons, but overall the gameplay never really evolves beyond "see zombie, run it down."

What Zombie Driver lacks in layers though, it makes up for in fun. As great as a multifaceted epic of a video game can be, sometimes it's just nice to kick back with some silly, over-the-top violence. For the most part, all of Zombie Driver's seventeen missions unfold in the same way. Yet another zombie apocalypse has broken out and some people need rescuing. The military, unable to help asks you -and your taxi- for assistance. You then venture from objective to objective, racing against time to save those hapless civilians. Standing in your way, of course, are thousands of the living dead.

It should go without saying that killing the undead never gets old and Zombie Driver gives you plenty of ways to go about doing it. The most basic method of course, is running them over, which works just fine for the random ghoul here or there. That said, flesh munchers like to travel in packs and all those walking corpses can overwhelm you, making some additional weaponry necessary. Your arsenal starts off small with machine guns and quickly but soon expands

to include flamethrowers, rockets and eventually rail guns. The sheer destructive power of many later weapons is a real joy. In short, you're never lacking for ways to smear the road red.

There are some flaws to be had. Visually, the game is fine for the most part. It plays from a top-down perspective, much like the old Grand Theft Auto games. Because of this the zombies lack a lot of detail. This is rarely a problem; the different types are relatively easy to distinguish from each other. That said, when they're not bunched in groups, they tend to blend in with their surroundings. This can be a bit of a problem in some of the more difficult missions when time is of the essence and you don't have seconds to spare while you search for a lone ghoul. Also, when you rescue survivors a massive text block pops up, offering more story information. Bravo to the game for at least trying to include a plot, but the blocks tend to obscure a huge part of the screen, limiting your visibility. The occasional spike in difficulty also makes some levels aggravatingly hard. Some might also complain about the game's relative briefness but honestly it's probably a good thing. Zombie Driver is unabashedly a one trick pony, and while it's great for an afternoon or two of gory fun, were it drag on any longer then that it could easily grow repetitive.

If you're a fan of zombies or are just in the mood for a bit of mindless fun, you could do much worse then Zombie Driver. Its no frills gameplay may seem a bit sparse to those looking for something a bit meatier,

but for cheap, fast entertainment Zombie Driver is a great alternative to bigger, more expensive titles.

- Stew Shearer
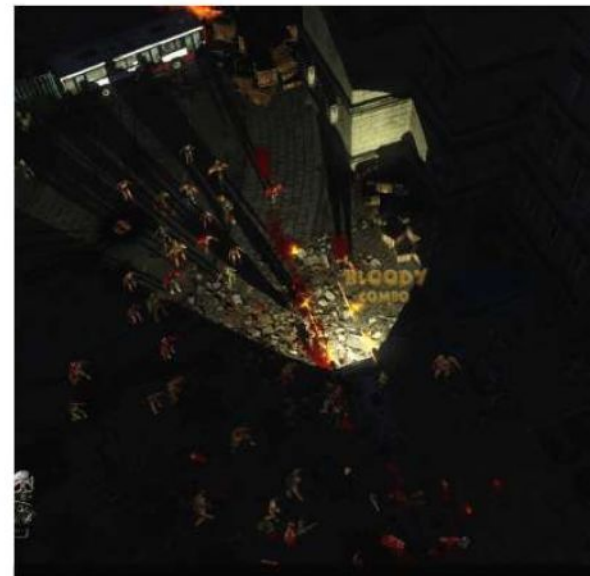
REVIEW

Gameplay: 7
Graphics: 9
Sound/Music: 9
Lasting Appeal: 7

Score: 80%
Grade   B

Tobe's Vertical Adventure - tobesadventure.squarespace.com - Xbox Live

Rayteoactive have put together a cute platformer that feels a decade too late, playing and looking just like an old school 16 bit game, and really offering nothing innovative to the genre, Tobe's Vertical Adventure doesn't seem to strive to make any type of impact.

Graphics:
Presented in retro-style 8 bit graphics, anyone who has experienced 8 bit as a child will be instantly surging with a sense of nostalgia. Crisp colors and cute, simplistic animations really add to the retro feel. The art style does a good job in differentiating between platforms and walls, letting the player know which are hollow, solid, collapsible, or hiding unexpected straps. Each level holds it own color scheme that correlates with the location, giving you more of an atmospheric feel for the environments rather than just relying on ascetics. The game is cute and colorful-which makes it fun to look at.

Gameplay:
Using either the D-pad or analog thumb stick to move Tobe, and using face buttons to perform various actions, the game controls were a little tricky to get use to. The majority of the controls were good and the only main concern came in with the jumping. Rather than just jumping from plat form to platform, you are able to run up walls and jump off them to reach more difficult areas. When running you will push the analog stick (or D-pad) in the direction you want to jump in. When you want to jump off a wall, however, you need to push the analog stick in the direction of the wall and not the direction you want to jump in. This feels a little awkward as you are enticed to aim the character in the direction you want him to jump in.

This finds you falling and having to start the climb over again. Controls could use a bight more polish sometimes they felt a little unresponsive or awkward.

Sound:
The soundtrack stays true to the retro feel with 'bleeps' and 'bloops' being the main element and with the mix of percussions to give a modern touch. The songs seem to take influences from some modern electronic music, but keep an 8 bit generation feel to them. Each world contains its own song with each song being great to listen to as they are well produced and put together. If there is anything to note about this game it's the fantastic soundtrack.

Lasting Appeal:
With four worlds made up of four stages, the game can be completed on single player in around 3 to 5 hours at most. On multiplayer co-op, that time could either be extended or cut down, depending if you and your partner are goofing off or not. Levels become repetitive very quickly with only once or twice offering anything new to the game, other than that it become hard to tell the difference between stages. Little frustrations, such as certain items not being able to be picked up that regularly should, and crashing issues, puts it at the lower end of the list of games to re-play. Lack of online leader boards gives you no incentive to play the game more than once, and most disappointing are that there are no difficulty options or un-lockable content after completing the game. The game becomes incredibly simple once you figure out the levels, and with no way to increase the difficulty the game will become boring and dull very quickly. With minor frustrations here and there, awkward controls, lack

of stat tracking, no difficulty settings, and repetitive levels. Tobe's Vertical Adventure is enjoyable the first time through and perhaps once again with someone who has yet to experience it.
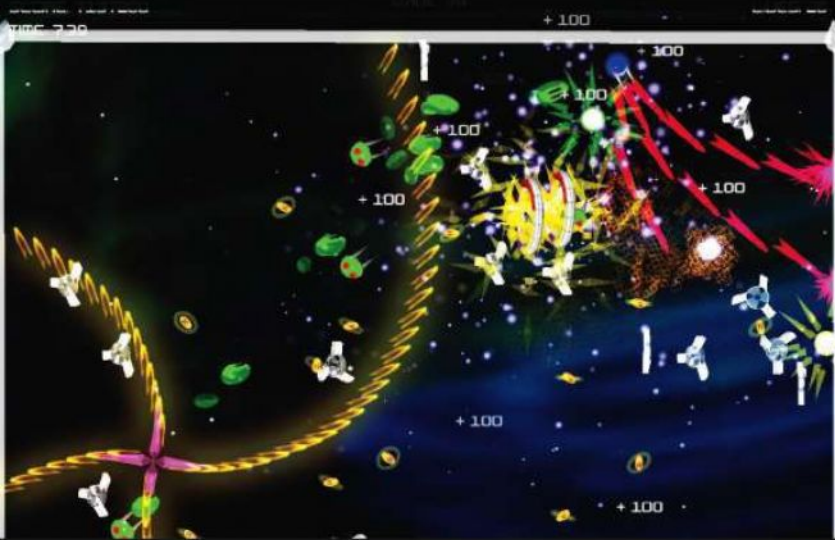
- Bryan Silva

REVIEW

Gameplay:	6
Graphics:	8
Sound/Music:	9
Lasting Appeal:	4

Score: 71%

Grade   C

16

Bullet Candy: Perfect - www.charliesgames.com - PC - Mac - Linux

The Original Bullet Candy was an arena shooter from Charlie's Games. Perfect is the "enhanced version," with tweaked levels and updated sound and graphics. I haven't played the perfectless version of Bullet Candy, so I can't weigh in on the updates, but the game looks polished and performs without any hiccups.

The term bullet-hell comes to mind. The game starts off easy enough. It's just you and a couple slow, weaponless enemies trapped in a square of two-dimensional space. But the easy targets only last for the first few waves. While your enemies never get much faster, they start shooting lots of yellow bullets pretty quickly. If you don't clear a wave in under a minute, it's probably because you're so worried about avoiding projectiles that you can't take your eye off the ship long enough to target anything. Eventually you run out of lives and have to start over. But the next time you get a little farther, and not just because you've gotten accustomed to the controls.

Yes, your ability to avoid projectiles and gun down the enemy is the most important part of any shooter, and that's no less true of Bullet Candy Perfect. But a little bit of strategy and a little bit of knowledge goes pretty far here. There are a few moments at the beginning of each wave when the screen is empty of everything but the enemy ships and you. Taking out the right ships in those few moments can be the difference between a screen full of yellow and an easy stroll to the next wave. So you have to pay attention to which ships are the most dangerous and take them out early.

Power ups are key to the later stages, but they come in few forms. The first is a laser upgrade. Each wave is littered with col-

lectibles. If you collect all of them, you get a score bonus and everything on the screen dies, which is useful but hard to pull off. But if you get half of them, your lasers become more powerful, doing more damage and even passing through weaker enemies. The other power ups come from stars. Enemies drop four colored stars: Red, Green, Purple and Yellow. Yellow is just a score bonus, and a red star gives you an extra life. The purple star gives you the three-way shot, and the green star gives you the three-way shot, upgrades your lasers and makes you invincible for the rest of the wave.

Lasers and invincibility reset every wave, but you keep the three-way shot until you die. If you have the three-way shot and you're stuck in a corner with nowhere to go, you do have one option. You can kill yourself. Suicide takes up two lives but preserves your powerups, giving you a second chance to clear the wave. Obviously that's a last resort, but sometimes it's worth two lives to keep the extra firepower.

You can play with either a joypad or a keyboard and mouse, whichever you're more comfortable with. I chose my 360 controller, which probably wasn't the best choice. I think the keyboard would have provided tighter control, but the 360 controller had its own benefits. The right analog stick makes the ship fire in any direction, while the buttons left, right, up and down, which was something I often turned to when I had to pay close attention to my ship's movements.

Bullet Candy Perfect is bright neon colors on a darker, spacey background. The art is pretty well executed, with ships in aesthetically pleasing geometric shapes and interesting, intricate bullet patterns.

But the color choice is compromised in one area; the color and shape of most bullets is very close to that of the Saturn-shaped collectibles, making distracted collection a risky endeavor. But other than that, everything ran smooth and looked pretty.

The soundtrack is an appropriate mix of blippy and glitchy. It's a bit repetitive and forgettable, but not too distracting. The sound effects are spot on though. Each type of enemy fire has its own static type of blip-blip-blip, while your gun emits a low hum, which stands out without being loud.

An online score board does increase Bullet Candy Perfect's replayability, but the biggest thing that gives Bullet Candy Perfect lasting appeal, at least for me, is it's cross-platform availability. This game wouldn't stay in my rotation if it were only on the PC, but since it's one of the few (but growing, thanks largely to indie developers) games that runs on my iBook, I'll probably keep it on there for when I'm out of the house. It may even take the place of Jets'n'Guns, which has been my go-to shooter on the laptop for the past year or two.

- Peter Rambo

REVIEW

Gameplay:	9.5
Graphics:	10
Sound/Music:	9
Lasting Appeal:	9
Score:	93%
Grade	**A**

puzzle bots

WADJET EYE GAMES

2 Girls 1 Game

http://2g1g.thepodkast.com/

Most everyone at some point in their life has wanted to own a robot, from the days of the Jetson's gracing our television sets with their numerous robotic contraptions to those weird yapping robot dogs that seem to drift across the ocean from Japanland every year. Robots hold a unique fascination within our society and Erin Robinson has only served to further that fascination with her latest game, Puzzle Bots.

Puzzle Bots is an adventure game that features five curious robots on a mission to find out what's up with Dr. Hugo, the boss himself. There are five different robots to control, each created by a different employee at Dr. Hugo's factory and each with a different purpose in mind, from the ability to swim to lighting objects on fire with a flamethrower. Each robot has its own personality and abilities and utilizing all five of them in order to complete the devious puzzles is absolutely necessary.

It looks like lots of these wires are broken. Maybe we should try to fix them.

HERO

IBI

Puzzle Bots - www.wadjeteyegames.com - PC

After escaping from their enclosure, the robots decide early on that something is wrong at Dr. Hugo's factory and decide to investigate the cause of his strange behavior. Soon a massive plot threatening the existence of the entire company is uncovered and the robots bring you along for the ride as they attempt to make things right in the world of robot inventors. The game's sense of humor is decidedly unique and contains geeky but endearing dialogue with moments that will have you laughing as well as smacking your forehead as the story progresses.

While the humor is decidedly refreshing if not geeky, it's not the only thing Puzzle Bots has up its sleeve. The point and click adventure scheme seems obvious at first as you have a single robot under your control, but as you progress and gain access to the other robots, you quickly see the value in having all of them available to solve the puzzles throughout the game. Each robot has a unique ability and only one ability, so utilizing all five in order to progress becomes essential and the search for the right robot can result in interesting dialogue between all robots involved.

The puzzles are not extremely challenging and they fit in with the theme of being extremely approachable by anyone, from kids to adults. However, you will need to pay close attention to everything that goes on around you so you can act accordingly. Though the puzzles are not hard and there is a hints system, Puzzle Bots nevertheless still manages to have a few moments of frustration since figuring out the puzzle is not immediately obvious and many times your pride doesn't let you press the hint button.

Since the game is played entirely from the robots perspective, you will find yourself using small objects like cups and batteries to make things happen on a larger scale that eventually attracts the attention of the humans in the game. The robots share some interesting dialogue amongst themselves as they watch the humans and the trading of speculation as to what the humans are doing is one reason the game is so enjoyable. Ordinary every day objects become spectacular to the robots, with a toaster making an appearance as a giant robot, while spools of tape can be used to bridge gaps in a work bench.

The cartoon style graphics hold a unique charm of their own and it is almost as if you are playing your favorite Saturday morning cartoon as you watch the story unfold between puzzles. There is also a unique collection system incorporated into the game that lets you take the initiative to find new pieces of furniture for your robot abode. With 8 pieces to collect, hunting around the various screens for these new pieces of furniture can be a challenge in and of itself. Aside from the graphics, the voice acting is pretty solid, though the lines and interactions between several of the characters tend to be pretty geeky with just a sprinkling of charm. Even the robots have their own voices, though they communicate through a series of beeps and noises.

The controls of Puzzle Bots could stand to use some improvement, as working in close quarters with five robots on the screen can lead to you switching several times between the robots without meaning to do so. Other than the control problems, the animation during the human interaction scenes can be a little coarse, but given the cartoony style of the game, these animation glitches hardly take much away from the experience. My biggest problem with the game was the fact that there was no option to play in windowed mode, which means the game stretched across my rather huge monitor, making everything extremely pixelated.

If you enjoy light-hearted humor with a bit of a brain twist thrown in every now and then, by all means give Puzzle Bots a try. You're sure to get a few laughs out of the robot's various interactions and the puzzling gameplay will satisfy anyone who enjoys adventure puzzle games.

- Ashley King

REVIEW

Gameplay: 9
Graphics: 8.5
Sound/Music: 7
Lasting Appeal: 8

Score: 83%
Grade   B

19

Infectionator - www.addictinggames.com - Flash

I suppose I owe my wife a solid for discovering Infectionator. There I was, plugging my day away at my DS when she called me over to show me her latest find at Addicting Games. The screen initially just showed a mob of aimless, 8-bit sprites. Then, with the click of a button, hell erupted. Almost immediately a score of the sprites were converted into zombies who then scurried about the screen attacking and infecting the remaining population. The icing one the cake was when, sensing that she needed reinforcements, my wife deployed a zombified Michael Jackson who performed an abbreviated version of Thriller and then proceeded to maul a nearby crowd.

Infectionator is one of the most unique zombie games I've played in years. Rather then sitting you in the tried and tested role of an undead exterminator, you're the brains behind the zombie-pocalypse. You play a scientist bent on taking over the world. The game follows you as you work from city to country to continent, transforming the living into the walking undead.

When the game begins, your resources are limited. You can deploy your virus only once and your zombies will expire mere seconds after you deploy them. Even bringing down one of the small hut villages that serve as one of the earliest stages is a challenge. That said, it doesn't take long to upgrade your virus so that your zombies last longer, can do and take more damage, and so that the virus itself can be deployed several times in a single level.

While initially, Infectionator may resemble a prettier version of the many zombie simulators floating about the web, it's far more interactive. The humans that serve as fodder for your plague don't just sit back and take it. They're going to fight back, and true to their slow and stupid form your zombies don't stand much of a chance if left to their

own devices. So you need to supervise; reintroduce your virus when the infection starts to wane, drop grenades on clustered groups of defenders and deploy special characters that you can infect and collect as the game progresses.

Through all of this you also need to work in some cash collection. Everything you kill or destroy drops some form of currency which can be used to buy upgrades. Gathering this is a simple process of holding your cursor over the money for a second or two. That said, when things get really hectic Infectionator often becomes a balancing act between keeping your virus going in your current level and saving up money so that you can grow more powerful and advance. Infectionator never leaves you doing nothing. Your attention is always engaged, and while the mechanics are simple to grasp on their own, they add up to a deep and often strategic experience.

Always fun, and endowed with some slick retro visuals that demonstrate some real effort on the part of the developer, Infectionator is well worth playing several times. It's overall just a slick title, endowed with tons of kooky characters and a ton of fun.

- Stew Shearer

Halogen - www.rockethands.com - iPad

Halogen is a slick retro app that is incredibly addictive. The game is an amalgamation of Geometry Wars, Pong, Air Hockey, and Space Invaders - all your retro favorites wrapped up into a sweet package. The gameplay is simple, you control and move a circle with your finger and use it to hit a puck around the arena. The puck destroys baddies by colliding with it and you lose lives by colliding the player into enemies or letting the puck 'score' on you by falling through the gap at the bottom of the screen.

The game has a 'Hacker' type storyline that is displayed between levels via text. The story is completely forgettable but it works with the whole retro motif and gets you into that 80s feel. The music is catchy and the soundFX are reminiscent of 80s arcade games. While the game has this cool retro feel, it's gameplay could only work on the iPad and feels innovative.

Halogen is challenging, but you'll find yourself getting 1 or 2 stages farther (unlocking practice mode levels) every time you play, so it never gets frustrating. There's some boss fights mixed in there for good measure and the local multiplayer is a pong/air hockey game. Rockethands has a real winner with Halogen that is worth the $4.99.

- Mike Gnade

REVIEW

Gameplay:	9
Graphics:	8
Sound/Music:	8
Lasting Appeal:	10

Score: **90%**

Grade **A-**

Blazing the Fires of Hiring Help

In today's high tech gaming industry, it is very difficult to make a high quality polished product without help. Here are a few pro tips that you that should help you along the way. Having gone through the process several times in the past two years, there are some finer points that we've learned that I wish we knew about ahead of time.

Don't expect me to cover every facet of the process, especially hiring and interviewing. Instead expect me to share some experience based knowledge that has been gained from having done this before. Perhaps that knowledge can help you brave the flames better.

Everybody wants to make games... sorta...

In my last Developer Corner article I briefly touched upon the notion of game development being maximum input for minimal output (the opposite of playing games) and this point holds very true when you observe a contributor's work ethic beyond the first week of hire.

Pro Tip 1: Everybody wants to make games – you will not find any shortage of people more than willing to help out, especially those with no prior experience – but you can't escape the fact that making games is work. Don't be surprised when a lot of so called interested parties, especially those who are on an unpaid or delayed paid basis, suddenly fizzle out and stop contributing after the first few days of euphoria.

Once these folks find out that games are a lot of work, it becomes incredibly hard to find people who are understanding and willing to stick it out to the end. My experience has been fraught with several people who were ecstatic to have been hired, but bail after meeting "actual work." Luckily there are a few tricks that you can use.

If it takes time and effort, it has value.

The reality of the world and something that indies have a hard time realizing is that people are more reliable if they are being paid. I've seen a lot of so called "open & democratic" projects come and go over the years, but the reality is that a project with a healthy amount of authoritative rule paired with rewards and punishments, especially monetarily, receive major boosts in work ethic and efficiency.

Now, please don't think I'm saying that these "open & democratic" projects

don't work; I am just saying "money talks, bullshit walks."

The thing that Indies must wrap their minds around, and this is equally the case in game design itself, is that value is defined by time and effort.

Pro Tip 2: Employing realistic reward and consequence procedures helps keep people on track and working. Money is a great start, but it isn't the only thing that has value. If you employ help for no value return (with value being defined by them, not you) don't expect them to stay around very long.

Why would I want to work for you... for free?

One of the hardest parts of hiring in the Indie Community is that there is a wide array of opinion on why a person should or should not help you – some will be very vocal about it. One common faced constraint of many Indie studios is that they operate on a "shoe-string budget." Finding help that understands that you aren't busting with cash and simply can't pay the same as professional wages ($30+/hr) is a hard task, especially when these same contributors can turn to an established studio with a proven track record instead.

Some studios are blessed with prior entrepreneurial experience and are properly funded. Having funding is fantastic, but too often I find Indies that are eating into their savings because they can't generate the revenue that established studios can.

The Indie scene is also blessed with many people looking to "bust their chops" for experience. The reality is that Indie is Indie because the industry is heavily saturated with heavy competition.

Pro Tip 3: Be sure that you are very explicit in what you're looking for; you're not going to be able to afford experienced talent on a "shoe string budget."

Some think highly of themselves for a reason.

As a corollary to the tip above, I should mention that you should not insult professionals.

The worst thing you can do is treat a heavily technical or natural skill based job function as though it "just happens out of thin air" (a common norm being "well just change X and/or add in Y over there; product Z does it oh so easily so why can't we?"). This goes double for programming, writing, designing, drawing, etc. You simply can't avoid the fact that these core job functions are difficult to perform.

Pro Tip 4: Get into the habit of respecting people's skills, especially the time and effort it requires to do them and do them well.

Splitting profits can imply taking out a loan.

In the last Developer's Corner article, I briefly touched upon the sense of risk investment and ownership that comes with profit sharing based compensation. I wanted to expand on this and say that not only is it a matter of risk, but I've seen some even go so far as calling it an unsecured loan.

The idea of so-called "loaned talent" isn't too far off from what we're really doing when hiring on people to help on solely a profit sharing basis. While there seems to be a good deal of people who will help and want payment "only if it goes somewhere," some want to minimize the risk of securities on their "loaned talent."

Pro Tip 5: Interim compensation payments can be seen as "securities retainers" rather than an actual direct payment for services rendered. These payments can ease contributors and keep them focused on the project.

Be aware of your priorities.

While at university, I worked as a teacher's assistant and was consistently late on returning graded work. What was funny is that the teachers were vocal about the tardy attitude that even they themselves exhibited from time to time. Regardless, the idea that people just "do work" because they have the time is a misnomer; people do work because there is a reward and punishment system in place.

One good way to keep people on track and productive is of course to set deadlines (I recommend the free "Trac" project management system by Edgewall Software). There is of course a certain amount of skill dealing with setting realistic deadlines. It can be hard for inexperienced teams to give good estimates. One way around this is to of course explicitly differentiate between soft and hard deadlines.

Pro Tip 6: Sort work into different buckets (such as "minimal", "optimal", and "best case") to help organize production items into dependency chains that work with milestone goal setting and helps people focus on items of increasing importance.

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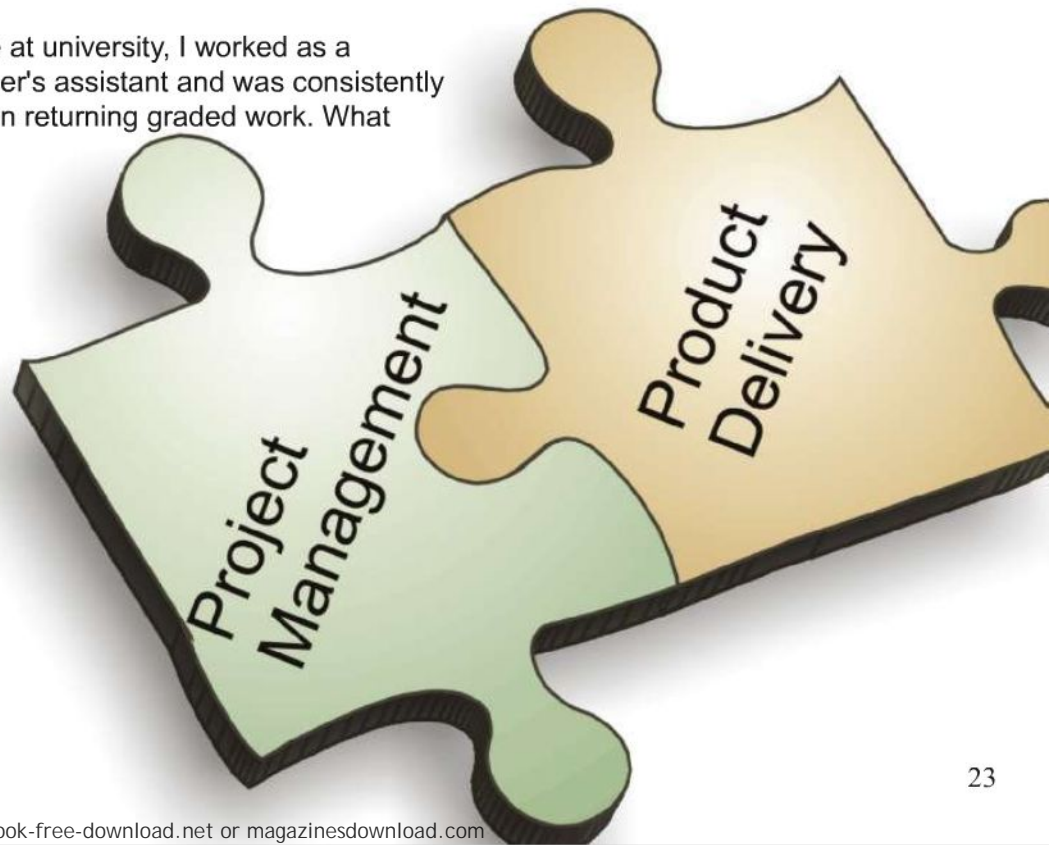
Next Issue

Plants vs. Zombies (iPad)

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Carcophony

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