

What Went Wrong



Features

I was driving across Seattle's 520 bridge on a beautiful, sunny afternoon on the third day of our Kickstarter campaign, dazed and confused, and momentarily considered hitting the red "abort mission" button on our whole Kickstarter. Fifty-five hours into our campaign and we had only gathered 11 percent of our funding goal.

Even worse, I had just glanced at our backer list and recognized nearly half of the names: mostly friends and family. Over 95 percent of visitors aren't pledging. Our funding goal of \$500,000 didn't feel "aggressive" anymore, but impossible. We were getting hundreds of thousands of views on our Kickstarter and nobody was pledging, but I knew that they're definitely keeping an eye on us... And if we gave up, what would that say about my team, our game *République*, and me?

It was then that I recommitted myself to doing whatever it took to run a great Kickstarter campaign, even though I was certain we wouldn't achieve our aggressive \$500,000 funding goal unless by some kind of miracle. I decided that I would do this without distracting the team anymore, as we were running low on money and couldn't afford to spend a month running a Kickstarter instead of developing the game.

As the indigo toll bridge lights scanned my car and I unwillingly coughed up \$3 to the state of Washington, I thought, "How am I going to get 10,000 people to *willingly* pre-order our iPhone game on Kickstarter?"

1. Too Polished

It was on a typical rainy February 10th when we decided to do our very own campaign that would feature the proof-of-concept demo of *République* that we were already working late every night on.

While the [Kickstarter boom that Double Fine initiated](#) was inspiring, we knew that we wouldn't be able to lean on nostalgia, name value, or the latest resurgence in PC gaming to achieve big crowdfunding success. We were a new studio announcing a big budget, iOS-only game that overtly questions some of the biggest tropes in gaming today. We were abandoning our console upbringing to start a revolution on iOS, and we had to get people inspired by this vision.

We decided that we would communicate some of our studio's values (high quality, meaningful, honest) through our Kickstarter page and video. Maybe if people saw how beautiful our game was, how pro our trailer was, and how polished our pitch was, they'd get behind our ambitious aims for *République* -- or so we thought.

A week into our campaign, we were surprised to see dozens of comments online from people saying: "Look at that game, look at how expensive their video looks... They don't need our money." Meanwhile, our company bank account was getting dangerously low.

As I sought out reasons as to why our campaign wasn't resonating, I realized that people were put off by how polished everything looked. This was disappointing because, yes, in fact, we worked extremely hard to make everything as professional as possible. I called up my good friend Victor Lucas and asked if his company, Greedy Productions, wanted to produce all our Kickstarter videos. (We developed a great partnership with them working on the "Making of *Metal Gear Solid 4*" together.)

I spent a week in Los Angeles, driving back and forth between Logan, where we cut the trailer, and Soundelux DMG,

where the audio mix was being finalized. Alexei Tylevich and I were in constant communication with Petrol, who designed the iconic main visuals for the game and campaign, and I even had trusted friends Mark MacDonald and John Ricciardi of 8-4 Ltd. to copy-edit our page and gut check our pledge rewards.

Initially, I was frustrated at the "too polished" complaints, especially when I remembered the late nights and weekends Craig Cerhit put into our video content. I often thought about the rich guys on Kickstarter intentionally making rough-looking webcam videos to appeal to peoples' charitable instincts and subsequently pull in six or seven figures in pledges.

While aggravating, I understood the point. While I don't necessarily agree with the commonly used analogy that running a Kickstarter is a digital form of panhandling, if that were true, I was standing on a street corner in a freshly pressed suit holding an iPad with a typed out message "Need money. Anything helps."

2. It's a Marathon, Not a Sprint

Prepping our Kickstarter took exactly two months layered atop four months of perpetual crunch on our game. All said and done, the prep work involved dozens of people and many sleepless nights to make sure everything was perfect. This included copious amounts of research of other crowdfunding efforts to make sure we were learning from other successes and failures. We stress-tested the campaign with friends and family to get critical feedback, and made every effort we could to launch the most readable and best-looking Kickstarter page ever.

Busy tweaking every knob available, I didn't sleep the night before our Kickstarter went live, and by the time I clicked the launch button on the morning of April 10, I was physically and mentally exhausted. I was excited and optimistic, and confident that the incredible amount of prep work we did would quickly translate into a successful Kickstarter campaign. I was wrong, and tired.

On one of the biggest days of my career, I was too tired to stay awake. After six or seven hours of answering questions that came in and clicking the refresh button a few dozen times, I fell asleep for a few hours, curious to know how many tens of thousands of dollars in pledges would be counted while I recharged my batteries. To my disappointment, I woke up to an already anemic Kickstarter campaign.

Internally, we believed that we would need to gather at least \$100,000 on day one to keep the momentum going for the remaining 29 days of the campaign. By the time I went to bed on the first night, we were at \$36,607. It was then that I realized that the battle had just begun, and we didn't have an action plan.

I mistakenly assumed that we had done enough prep work to provide visitors with enough information and product vision to convince them to pledge. Instead, it was clear that I had 29 days to turn this campaign around, and had previously been too busy and confident to prep a contingency plan. We had already spent all our ammo, and the battle was just beginning...