Game Begins: Series 01

(Portfolio Showcase)

Background

"Game Begins Series 01" is a puzzle/riddle game developed with inspiration from the mysterious phenomenon of Cicada 3301, a series of real-world puzzles that challenge players to solve codes and enigmas. The main objective of the "Game Begins Series 01" game is to deliver an intellectual experience that challenges players to solve a variety of puzzles based on logic, cryptography, and lateral thinking patterns.

This game targets users with an interest in complex puzzles, especially among:

1. Fans of puzzles and brain-based games such as Escape Room and ARG (Alternate Reality Game).
2. Cryptography community and cyber enthusiasts, who are interested in code and cipher-based challenges.
3. Casual and hardcore gamers who like games with mystery elements and deep narratives.

The objectives of this game development are to:

1. Present challenges that hone the player's analytical and problem-solving skills.
2. Create a gaming experience that incorporates educational elements in the field of simple cryptography.
3. Build a community of players who are active in sharing solutions and discussing puzzles.
4. Explore the potential of Construct 2 as a game engine in indie puzzle game development.

Design Process

In the early stages of developing "Game Begins: Series 01", the main focus was on creating puzzles that could challenge and hone the player's analytical skills, with inspiration from real-world puzzles such as Cicada 3301. The puzzle design process was divided into several stages:

1. **Concept Sketch**

A. **Initial Concept**

The initial concept of "Game Begins: Series 01" had an illustrated story and characters (see link here https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1AYjrCtwswcVabnFhZ7iCU23Kpg5e0z3z ?usp=drive_link), but due to limited resources, the art and visualization process had to stop.

B. **Release Concept**

Before being titled "Game Begins: Series 01", the game had the title "Breaking The Code" when prototyping (see here https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Yc4H41qvj5NzcvOVa93_8Lv8XfHDygO4/view? usp=drive_link). In the end we chose the name "Game Begins: Series 01" which only contains puzzles without any more visual art (can be seen here https://drive.google.com/file/d/1nPAaQX3z12NB6da-1_WYCmimQprowWCE/view?usp=drive_link) until the game is released on the Play Store.

2. **Puzzle Concept and Theme Determination**

The puzzles in this game are designed with two main elements:

- **Cryptography and Cipher:** Players are required to decode, both in the form of hidden text and symbols that require a basic understanding of encryption.
- **Patterns and Logic:** Logic-based puzzles that involve lateral reasoning, such as solving grid-shaped puzzles, or finding relationships between different objects.

3. **Prototyping and Development**

For each puzzle, the development process began with prototyping using Construct 2, which allowed for quick experimentation with interactive elements. Each puzzle was designed with:

- **Interactivity:** Players should be able to interact directly with objects or symbols in the puzzle.
- **Gradual Difficulty Level:** The first puzzle is simpler and aims to introduce the player to the game mechanics, while later puzzles increase in difficulty to keep the player interested.

4. **Testing and Feedback**

Once the puzzle prototype was created, a series of internal tests were conducted to evaluate the difficulty and clarity of the instructions. These tests involved friends and players who were part of the puzzle community. Their feedback was used to:

- Refining the puzzle descriptions so that the instructions are clearer and do not confuse the player.
- Adjusting the difficulty level so that each puzzle provides a sense of accomplishment without leaving the player feeling frustrated.
- Adding variety in puzzle types so that players don't feel monotonous.

5. **External Testing and Refinement**

   After changes based on internal testing, the game was released in a limited beta to players from the gaming and puzzle community. From this external testing, I gained further insight into the elements of the game that needed improvement, such as:

   - Timing and indication that the player is on the right or wrong path.
   - Adding help elements such as visual clues or a clearer progression system so that players don't get stuck for too long on one puzzle.

6. **Finalization and Release**

   After making refinements based on extensive testing, puzzles are ensured to have a balance between challenge and excitement. This testing ensures that all puzzles function as intended without any bugs or inconveniences interfering with the play experience.

Obstacles & Challenges

The development of "Game Begins: Series 01" faced a number of challenges mostly related to limited resources and technical limitations at the time. Some of the major obstacles faced during development were:

1. **Limited Resources**

   As an indie project with a small team, one of the biggest constraints was limited resources, both in terms of time, funds, and manpower. This impacted several areas of game development, including:

   - Limited development and testing: Due to the small team, we were not able to conduct extensive testing or get much external feedback during development. This affected the quality of some puzzles and the overall functionality of the game.

- Limited visual design: In terms of art and visual design, we relied on limited tools and skills, which caused the game to look simpler in terms of graphics and visual effects, compared to the standard of other commercial puzzle games.

2. **Technical Issues and Bugs**

   Like many other indie developers, we face technical issues that affect gameplay, one of which is frequent bugs. Some of the issues we faced were:

   - Puzzles that don't respond properly: Some puzzles, especially those based on interacting with in-game object elements, suffered from technical bugs that caused the response to not happen as expected. For example, the player could not solve the puzzle despite entering the correct answer.

   - Platform compatibility issues: When the game was released on the Play Store, we encountered compatibility issues on various devices. Some devices with lower versions of Android experienced lag or crashes when loading certain elements in the game, which disrupted the player experience.

   - Lack of quality testing: Due to time and manpower constraints, not all bugs were identified and fixed before launch, leading to a sub-optimal user experience.

3. **Challenges in Refinement and Updates**

   Once the game was released, we faced difficulties in handling updates and bug fixes due to time and resource constraints. We didn't have the team or funds to continue developing or updating the game on an ongoing basis. This led to:

   - Limitations on updates: Since we couldn't focus resources on post-release maintenance, the game was left with several unsolved bugs.

   - Keeping the team motivated: When the game doesn't get enough attention from players, it's hard to keep the team motivated to keep improving and updating the game.

4. **Limitations in Marketing and Promotion**

   As an indie team with no marketing budget, we faced difficulties in reaching a wider audience. We rely on organic marketing and promotion through social channels, but without an adequate budget, our game is hard to find in a highly competitive market.

Results & Learning

The development of "Game Begins: Series 01" provided many valuable learnings that were not only useful for the development of this game, but also invaluable in my journey as a game

developer. Here are some of the results obtained as well as lessons learned that can be applied to future projects:

1. **The Importance of Extensive Testing**

   One of the biggest learnings from this project is the importance of more extensive testing before the game is released. Many bugs arose due to time and resource constraints that allowed us to only do limited internal testing. From this, I realized that more extensive testing with various devices and players with different backgrounds is essential to ensure the quality of the game.

   Application in Future Projects: I will allocate more time for external beta testing and work with testers who have different backgrounds to get richer feedback.

2. **Balanced Puzzle Design**

   My experience in designing puzzles taught me to pay more attention to balanced difficulty levels. Some puzzles in "Game Begins: Series 01" were either too difficult for new players or not clearly structured enough, leading to their confusion.

   Application in Future Projects: In future projects, I will make sure to construct puzzles with a more structured difficulty progression plan, as well as provide clearer hints or help systems for players who get stuck.

3. **Time and Resource Management**

   As a solo developer and with a small team, I learned how to manage time and resources more efficiently. "Game Begins: Series 01" faced difficulties in timely completion and maintenance due to the limited time that could be allocated for updates and bug fixes.

   Application in Future Projects: In future projects, I will be wiser in setting development priorities and consider working with more collaborators or outsourcing for areas that require specific expertise, such as visual arts or technical programming.

4. **Marketing and Audience Reach**

   We realized that marketing and distribution are big challenges in developing indie games. Our game struggled to be found on the Play Store due to lack of marketing and promotion budget.

   Application in Future Projects: In future projects, I will develop a better marketing plan, such as utilizing social media more strategically, as well as seeking cooperation with gaming influencers or distribution platforms that are more specific to indie games.

5. **Learning from Limitations**

Lastly, this game development taught me to accept limitations and make decisions based on what is available. Nothing is perfect in game development, and the important thing is to finish and release the game with the best possible quality within the limitations.

Application in Future Projects: I will focus more on achieving the main goal of the project and utilize the available resources more effectively, without getting caught up in perfectionism that hinders progress.