


Post Mortem: Renowned Explorers

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Blogs

by [Adriaan Jansen](#) on 09/05/16 02:58:00 pm

Featured Post



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Renowned Explorers has been crazy. After the huge success of our straight-not-even-out-of-school debut title Reus, Abbey Games had the freedom, experience and budget to continue on the path of becoming a great Dutch indie studio.

Little did we know that the real trials and tribulations were yet to come. There would be extreme downs, creative struggles, tears and even ambulances. The journey of RE:IS has changed us all, not only as developers, but also as people. Let me tell, and warn, you of the life after the hit.

A few facts

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Renowned Explorers:International Society, launched on September 2nd on Steam, GoG and the Humble Store. It's the second title of Abbey Games, right after our debut title of Reus. Development started in October 2013. The budget of Renowned Explorers was ~600K + ~200K for the production of our own engine. Base price is \$20 or your local equivalent.

The game received diverging scores from critics, ranging from a perfect score to abit more of half that. Players universally like the game, having 93% rating on Steam and 4.2 stars on GoG. Renowned Explorers sold about 10K units in it's first month of release. By now, after 12 months, it has about 145K game owners. We estimate between the 80K and 90K of those are actual players. The game has a bit less than 115K outstanding wishlists.

Renowned Explorers released an expansion: More to Explore on May 30th for a base price of \$7,50 or your local equivalent. After a bit more than a month, it has sold about 17,5K units, making for something of 20% conversion rate from player to expansion after 3 months.

A passionate mistake

Reus, our previous god game, launched in May 2013. It was a huge financial success from

launch. The monks at Abbey Games were all ecstatic. We started out as 4 nobodies that grew a strong circle of freelancers around us to complete the game. That we could get this far was nothing short of a miracle. Some of those freelancers bought a house with their share of the profits. I can honestly say that wiring them their first cut gave me one of the most amazing feelings I've ever experienced.

But after the successful launch, we were stunned by our success.

To start off, we barely supported the game after launch. Most of us went back to university to get their degree (spoiler alert: no one actually gets it), and there was no pressure, strategy, motivation or organization in place to make the best of Reus. We were already cashing in, and we were, quite frankly and arrogantly, not very interested in messing around with old stuff. Now that wasn't completely unreasonable. Aside from doing very well, the game was built to be consumed with limited replayability. We also just wanted to move forwards with Abbey Games after a few months of standstill. So we followed our passion in September: we went on to create an inhouse engine (AbbeyCore) and scheduled to start creating a new game a month later. Reus was, more or less, abandoned in October after we did some localization and outsourced Mac and Linux ports.

In conclusion, we didn't take the chances Reus offered us. We didn't create Reus with that much longevity in mind either. The processes we started after release (one content patch, translations and ports) were painfully slow or even unfinished. All not very good. However, we did learn from this mistake. From this point on, we would design our games with longevity in mind. As you will see later, we really did something with this. Without it, things could've been a lot worse.

Dark times

When we moved on from Reus, we were very charmed by the idea of a flat company structure. There were some disagreements on the core of such a structure. On one hand, mutual trust was seen as the core. On the other hand, expertise and ego-less organisation were seen as core. We went for trust. That meant that we would let everyone contribute to the next project (and the company as a whole) the way they thought was best.

On top of that, we went on to hire people to make a game and form a company culture. Not because we needed them directly, but because we thought it would help to promote ownership if everyone was a full member of the team from the beginning. For most of them, we didn't have any specific task to do right from the bat. This is quite obviously a financial mistake, since those people are being paid for doing nothing or for trying to find work.

This also meant we had 9+ brainstorm members. Plenty of those felt ownership, but also the accompanying authority to steer the project to one side or another. This of course is recipe for creating a project that is a compromise from the start.

That's exactly what happened.

Renowned Explorers turned out to be the idea for which most people were game. If someone had his or her doubts, we would fix it by making even more compromises. Renowned Explorers started out as a strategy exploration game with a lot of character that would play on both the smallest and largest scale over multiple expeditions. On top of that, we would start making the game in our own engine, of which development started only one month before we started concepting Renowned Explorers. (ã½ _ ã½)

Spirits were pretty high since the whole process was inclusive and fun for most, but some were very upset with the lack of progress and all-round chaos. I took it especially hard at the time. I didn't really agree with the philosophy or the way the projects were handled, had a lot of money on the line, and I had just overcome my minor impostor syndrome as a designer and director, just to be pushed back. It went as far that the combination of emotional stress and a lack of sunshine provoked a stress attack, requiring an ambulance to check up on me.

Needless to say, those weren't fun times for me. A lot of the problems we would have in the future can be traced back to some decisions we made in the start. It would take up to 8 months to get the game on track. A good start is half the battle.

A big gamble

One of the projects we started following the above philosophy, was the creation of an own game engine. With our academic technical background, we were confident we could create better tech that was well suited for our own development process. Even though I believe we were both right and wrong at the time, what we most certainly did not do was plan ahead.

As mentioned before we started to create AbbeyCore, our own engine, a month before we started development on Renowned Explorers. Let's just stop there, because explaining why this is not a good idea is an insult to your intelligence. I don't know why we did it, I don't know why no one objected, (we even had folks who already created engines before!) so let's just say we were collectively drunk for 2 months.

Once we started producing the game, AbbeyCore was far from ready for it. Add in the costs of learning new tech, and you got yourself set-up for months of delay. We paid a heavy short-time price in both time and money, with the hope that it would all pay out in the long-term. But there was a question we didn't ask ourselves: Isn't the price so high that we might not make it to long-term?

Stay tuned to find out...

The price of innovation

Another big risk we took with Renowned Explorers was the sheer amount of new things we wanted to try out. Not having a good game to found your new innovations on is already risky business, but we kept going further. How do we incorporate diplomacy and violence in one single system? How can we make characters shine through in every aspect of the game? How can we improve the events system from a game like FTL?

This is a whole topic on it's own, and I wrote another blog about it [here](#)! The big cons of invention and innovation are all explained in more detail there, but the takeaways are:

1. Innovation is more expensive to make it work, and it will fail. (production cost)
2. With innovation, you step off the shoulders of giants, and it disrupts vision. (vision cost)
3. Innovation makes judging your game harder. (reference cost)
4. Innovation makes it harder to communicate and sell your game. (communication cost)

Another mistake I personally made was trying to evade common design principles because I thought they were the devil. For example, I avoided Skinner Boxes like the plague... in a Rogue-lite, which is basically one big skinner box. Yeah.

In short: we were very happy with the result (it became a good, deep game with plenty of interesting choices), but the costs were huge (most importantly, reliance on authority, and customers not knowing what to expect). While the development of the engine hampered development, the innovative ways of Renowned Explorers hampered both development and later on the launch of the game. Little did we know then: we, and I in particular, were pretty convinced that finding new ways of having fun and cut back on old-and-trusted incentive based mechanics like skinner-boxes was the way to go.

If it wasn't for a miraculous future event, these values might have caused the end of Abbey Games. Nowadays I'm a bit more skeptical in my approach.

Saving grace

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There is one thing that we always gave high priority and might have saved the game: character.

With Reus in the backs of our minds, we wanted to continue to push forward Abbey Games with a colorful and charming style. We soon found out that the character designs were also pretty rad. We even went as far to radically adjust the design of the game to give the characters more spotlight. The whole tactical layer of the game, including the emotion and mood system, is a result of following the strength of our characters. If we wanted them to shine, we had to give them more zoomed in animations and interesting ways to show their character!

A second aspect of the charm is the distinctive writing we adapted. Renowned Explorers has well over 150K words in it, which is absolute madness to write for two Dutch game designers with a degree in computer sciences. But we did it anyway, because it was one of the few things that was working well 1 year into development. We didn't have much choice, and followed the fun.

Crimes against the English language aside, it worked out pretty great. The game turned out to be witty and light-hearted, just like I am (Í¡° Í¡¿½Ê¿½ Í¡°). After release, we had plenty of players pointing out some moments that put a smile on their face. It's something close to my heart, and I'm happy we succeeded in making the world a little happier.

While making so many characters, stories and animations is quite pricey, I can safely say it was worth the cost. Good characters are likable and easy to identify with: two things the game would desperately need. I'm very proud of the art, writing and designs that lead up to the unique charm of Renowned Explorers.

The Release and Tumble

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After almost two years of development, the game was finally ready. The second year was much more effective, with the engine largely release-ready, the design more solidified and the organization more... organized. Since we were doing so well recently and we genuinely thought the game good, spirits were high.

But then we released the game for PC on September the 2nd of 2015. Oh man, it was horrible. Sales were seriously lagging. You can read on our thoughts on "why?" in the blog about the price of innovation. It was clear within a few days that we would have to seriously downsize Abbey Games. Within a month we generated about 10K sales: not even close to the numbers of Reus (which was more like 100K) and certainly not the revenue to keep a 10 man studio. We had to let people go and cut back on other expenses. Many of them were our friends we have happily worked with for years.

To add, critical reception was very inconsistent. I covered this in the blog about the price of innovation, but having the press unable to frame the game turned out to badly hurt our score. The score range was much larger than that of Reus. Because of the quite unsellable nature of the game, we really needed that authority to push for sales. despair was in the air.

But we did not fall into despair. Remember how we learned from Reus to continue support the game and it's community? Well, we had one point of light. The game was actually good and fresh. The steam ratings were high. Median and average time played were pretty good too. We also attracted a really cool and kind community that would both motivate us and do their best to push the game into the wide world. Without them, I think we would've given up.

If we could support the game, show that we believed in it and the communicate that to the players, then maybe we could still make something of Abbey Games. We acknowledged our mistakes, and changed our strategy on getting more seals of approval.

We took another big risk to promise support for the game for another half year. Every 2 weeks we would release an update to the game with extra content. Besides these free updates, there would also be a free DLC in the form of a new expedition. This was literally our last shot. And then...

A Saviour enters the fray



TotalBiscuit happened. Almost 2 months after launch and after a few updates to the game, the Cynical Brit releases a "WTF is..." on Renowned Explorers. Not only is it amazing exposure but he also highly recommends it.

We were on the brink of accepting our fate, where we would either have to wrap things up or look for loans and funding. Maybe we would never make another game again, despite our love, dedication and capabilities. But this one video changed everything.

TotalBiscuit's recommendation backed by his well-earned authority as a game critic with outstanding integrity was exactly what Renowned Explorers needed. The video by itself doubled the units sold and revenue. The long-tail we would receive from there on would be of a much higher quality and I believe it also boosted all numbers during sales. We were saved from tragic future of Abbey Games. It's humbling to realize how big of an impact one man had

on a hand full of developers. Everything Abbey Games does from that point on was only possible because of his tireless effort in highlighting good games. It has given all of us another chance to make great games together after all those previous, passionate, mistakes.

I speak for us all when I say that we're determined to make the absolute best of it.

The Expansion

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Fueled by the possibilities given to us by the renewed interest in Renowned Explorers, we went on to go a step further. After finishing our promised update schedule, we went on to create an expansion on Renowned Explorers. The goal of the expansion was three-fold: add more content and character, make an attempt to tackle some of Renowned Explorers' perceived weaknesses and increase the value of the game in general. In the meantime, we also joined the Humble Monthly, adding more credibility to the game.

After a few months of intense development, the expansion was released on May 30th. Besides some very minor feedback on some added unlock mechanics (me crawling back on limiting traditional incentive-based design), the expansion was a big success. We welcomed a lot of new players and all existing players really enjoy the new mechanics and content. We might have done even a little better if we'd made more content instead of "fixing" those issues of the base game, but I think in general people are glad we did what we did. The expansions-conversion-rate is currently around 20%, which is also pretty good. We are developing a true Stegosaurus tail.

It seems our choice for an own engine now also starts to reap it's rewards. With the nice boost of the expansion behind us, we're now at the point where we are considering our future plans.

After a year of struggling, we finally managed to get break even and even make a small profit! The future is looking bright again, with new opportunities on the horizon. We will continue to develop Renowned Explorers in the direction the community and us think is the best for the game.

Conclusion

We've learned so much:

- * Don't apply democracy to your concept phase: it hurts just about everything.
- * don't hire people you don't need in short term. (Seriously Abbey Games...)
- * Be careful on how much innovation or invention you can afford both budget and marketing-wise.
- * Don't choke in the short-term on your long-term goals, like an inhouse engine
- * Supporting a good game can pay out if you got the strategy and luck.

I think these lessons are more valuable for small to mid sized indie studios. Single dev or starting studios might learn from our mistakes, although they have plenty other challenges to tackle.

Renowned Explorers: International Society was a messed up and crazy ride. From great success to a chaotic start. From the chaotic start to a good game. From a good game to a disastrous release, and from there to a phoenix rise over the course of a year. All in all it was a costly victory. Another one of these victories and we're probably done for. Our strategies need to be solidified, our risks more smartly spread and mitigated. Hopefully these experiences help us avoiding more of them in the future!

We are grateful for the chances that have been given to us. As such, we will continue our mission to blow a fresh wind through your game library. You will definitely hear more from us in the future!

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