Another One Bites the Dust: Dynasty Feud Postmortem

SEARCH
GO

GAME JOBS
SEARCH
GO

Latest Jobs
RSS

June 23, 2018

Latest Blogs
View All   **Post**   **RSS**

June 23, 2018

- E3 2018 Media Coverage Analysis_ aka E3 Battle Royale results
- True First Person Camera in Unreal Engine 4 [5]
- Game Design Beyond Screens & Joysticks - Conclusion (5/5)
- A Prefab Primer [1]
- Why Dunbar's Number Means Shards are a Good Idea [2]

Press Releases
About
Gama Network

If you enjoy reading this site, you might also want to check out these UBM Tech sites:

Game Career Guide

Indie Games

Blogs

by [Jon Sanchez](#) on 06/23/17 09:48:00 am Featured Post

I am Jon Sanchez, one of the five developers who created Kaia Studios. We created the studios right after we finished our degrees, so [Dynasty Feud](#) is our first commercial game and we wanted to share our mistakes hoping that it will help someone not to commit them.

The game

Since most of you will not know what Dynasty Feud is about (otherwise this text would probably be completely different), I will first start describing what the game is:

Dynasty Feud is a brawler where you select a dynasty of 5 characters to beat other dynasties. That is the pitch (we will go back to that), a fighting game with characters that die in a single hit, like Towerfall or Duck Game.

Our Goal

We did the research and set our expectations pretty low, since we knew things were getting harder on Steam with the amount of games released and soever, so we set our goal at around 3.000 copies during the first month after release.

We always thought that was kind of a realistic number for a game that we think has value. But reality is always waiting to smash you back.

The results

As you would have imagined, we did not manage to achieve our expectations. Let's get right to it: we sold **300 copies** during the first month. Sounds like a disaster? That is how we feel… more than a year and a half of work… tons of enthusiasm completely lost… I am starting to sound melodramatic probably, so let's cheer up by talking about what we think did right 🙂 .

What we did right

FUN!

Dynasty Feud is reaaaally fun. Maybe we shouldn´t be the ones saying this because we cannot be objective, but we truly believe it is. We had the opportunity to showcase the game in multiple fairs and the response from the players was great. The rhythm of the battles is frantic

and it engages people. Lots of the players that tried it, repeated after a while and told their friends to give it a chance.

Development

The part we are all most proud of is the game itself and how the production of it went. We know it's hard to plan a development and it's even harder to achieve the goals of that plan. Since the very beginning of the game development we had a clear idea of the game we were making and measured the time it took to create each dynasty. The process has been fluid (although we had to discard some features during development) and we were able to solve the biggest challenge we faced since the original prototype was conceived, the **online multiplayer**.

Implementing online for a fast brawler like Dynasty Feud was indeed a challenge for us, since we had never worked on the networking area. Hopefully we will write a blog post about how we solved this specific problem at some point, so we can share what we learnt during the process. Just to give you a quick idea of how online mode is implemented, we based our approach on an existing implementation called GGPO, which hides the latency by rewinding to the moment the input happened and fast forwarding to the actual moment with that new input (really interesting stuff for the ones interested in the technical aspect).

Marketing

Nah, just kidding. We will talk about our marketing in general later, but there is one specific aspect in our marketing that we put effort on and it turned out pretty well (at least we are proud of it), the **trailer**.

We wanted it to be short and straight to the point, so we divided it in 4 different parts:

- Context: shows some art of different dynasties about to fight (builds tension).

- Sneak peek the game: shows gameplay really fast (the viewer understands how the game looks) and stop to build more tension.

- Show the game: longer cuts of the game so the viewer can start to grasp how the game is played.

- Final chaos: show the variety the game offers and transmit the feeling you get while playing it.

Since its better to watch it than to explain it, here you have it:

What we did wrong

The following section is going to be a bit longer, because we think self-criticism is healthy and helpful for us and hopefully with it we can show other developers who are in the same situation what led us to where we are.

The Pitch

When I introduced the game at the very beginning of this text, how many of you thought "I need to give this game a try!"? Probably very few… It may sound contradictory with me saying that our game is really fun to play, but sadly having a good game does not mean you have a good product.

You need to be able to attract the interest of your audience in a single sentence and hope for their interest. Once you have the interest, show them the incredible game you have. That can be reduced to having an **AWESOME PITCH!** You need to nail that sentence, you have to be able to <u>sell your game</u> on a <u>single tweet</u>.

In our case, we ended up talking about Smash Bros as a reference most of the time (many media did the same too), which leads to confusion, because Dynasty Feud has actually very little in common with Nintendo's brawler. We tried to find that awesome pitch for too long without results, so we got to a simple conclusion: probably not every game can have an awesome pitch.

Not the best game to start with

Dynasty Feud is a brawler, but an only multiplayer brawler. You can play the game on local or online, but you always need someone else to play. That can be a huge problem if the sales are low, because if you don't have an active community that wants to play your game, the game will inevitably die. New potential players will buy the game, wait for someone to play online, get frustrated because they found none, exit the game and refund.

This problem has a simple solution, add an AI to the game! It is as "simple" as that, but implementing it can be more complex than it may seem. Actually the initial plan of the development included an AI to battle against and we even started working on it. Until we realized that with 40 different characters, each one of them with different abilities and strategies, the tweaking was going to take forever, so we decided to discard it. In the end Dynasty Feud was always meant to be played with more people and adding some kind of small single player felt cheap. We wanted to focus our efforts on the online aspect of the game. We had our own deadlines and we wanted to meet them to maintain the development time more or less as planned.

Those efforts we did to be able to deliver on the online side were also more than we initially expected. Since this was the first time we were doing an online game, we did not know what it involved. The testing process for an online game scales exponentially, because factors like latency or connection loss can show up anytime. That is why for a small team like ours, you need to have a testing plan. We did have a plan for this, but since we were newbies in this area, we made lots of mistakes, or at least we could say we underestimated the amount of work just the testing would be.

Our approach for the testing was mainly going through a **free beta**, closed first and open later, so that anyone would be able to try the game and test it. One of the problems whenever you

do a beta, if you want people to play it, even if it's free, you need to do some marketing just for the beta in order to have a decent amount of players. We did not know the amount of players we would need to be able to gather data and consider the beta succesful, so we started the marketing blindly.

The first week after the free open beta was announced we got around 200 subscriptions and we knew that was failing, but suddenly, without us understanding why, it started rapidly growing. It went from 200 to 13.000 in a couple of days! By the time we started the actual beta that number was around **18.000 subscribers**. It seemed like there was an audience for the game after all and we understood it as a positive sign. The truth is from all those subscribers only 1.200 opened the game at some point and the maximum concurrent players we had was 23 (during the first 2 days of the free beta). It was still good, because some of those players became real fans and started to give really good feedback on how to improve and balance the game. We even had some videos from youtubers that made us think that it could grow from there, although the numbers were still low.

The worse aspect of having 18.000 subscribers was that it made us think that the marketing we were doing was somehow working, because we were able to get that many people in a really short period of time. **Now we know that it was just a delusion.** There are lots of giveaway communities where people share these kind of free betas and they spread really fast, our marketing had very little influence on that.

Marketing

Dynasty Feud's marketing is simple to define: by the book. We did our research (although, admittedly not a super extensive one) on how to approach the marketing of our first game and we more or less followed those steps.

We went to different game events to showcase the game, we sent emails to press and youtubers, we did a couple of press releases, talked about the development in communities… I guess most of you understand what I mean with "by the book".

We even hired a PR company assuming they would give us advice on how to improve the marketing plan and that they would guide us throughout the process. Warning: PR companies do not work that way. I think they should, because they are supposed to have the know-how of the marketing side, but get rid of that idea. **The only one who can market your game properly is YOU.**

I would say the best way to market a game is showing the enthusiasm you have for it and sharing it everywhere. But not only that, value the enthusiasm other developers put in their own games and be part of the community. Give your opinion about other projects, propose ideas and give advice and be part of the discussions that take place.

As developers, we did a lot of work on the game each day and every time someone had to take some time to post on our devlog or do something else marketing related, it felt like we were wasting our time. Although you are not directly giving value to the game itself, the truth is

that if no one knows about your game its value is "zero". Basically what I am trying to say is that you are probably giving more value to your game letting others know it exists, than adding a new cool feature.

Visibility

Just before releasing Dynasty Feud, we already knew that the marketing campaign had not been a success (that is why our expectations were low). In all cases, we still thought that, since the game was fun, and with the visibility Steam offers during the release we could reach to part of those players that would enjoy playing Dynasty Feud.

Guess what? That round is worth nothing if you don't have enough marketing to push it. ==Steam is not the place where you want to do your marketing. You need to get the visibility outside and bring your traffic to your Steam page. Once you have that traffic and a good visit to sale/wishlist conversion Steam will add you to the positive spiral. Otherwise, since no one knows your game exists, it's hard for anyone to buy it the first time they see it on the storefront and Steam will bury you.==

With the new Steam Discovery 2.0 update the amount of impression your game will receive will decrease drastically if the conversion rates and sales are low. Steam's algorithm will tag you as "not interesting" and you will completely disappear from the front page in a couple of days.

Nowadays, you need to earn your initial visibility to give that first push. Once the wheel starts spinning, Steam will maintain it spinning for a while. It feels like either you get accepted to the party or you don't, so do your best to be accepted and do it before release. If you do it after, you are fighting against an impossible-to-beat enemy: Steam's discovery algorithm.

This article talks about the Two Spirals (Life and Death) that do not only affect press and media, it can also be extended to the visibility Steam will give to your game.

Reference: <u>Good isn´t good enough</u>
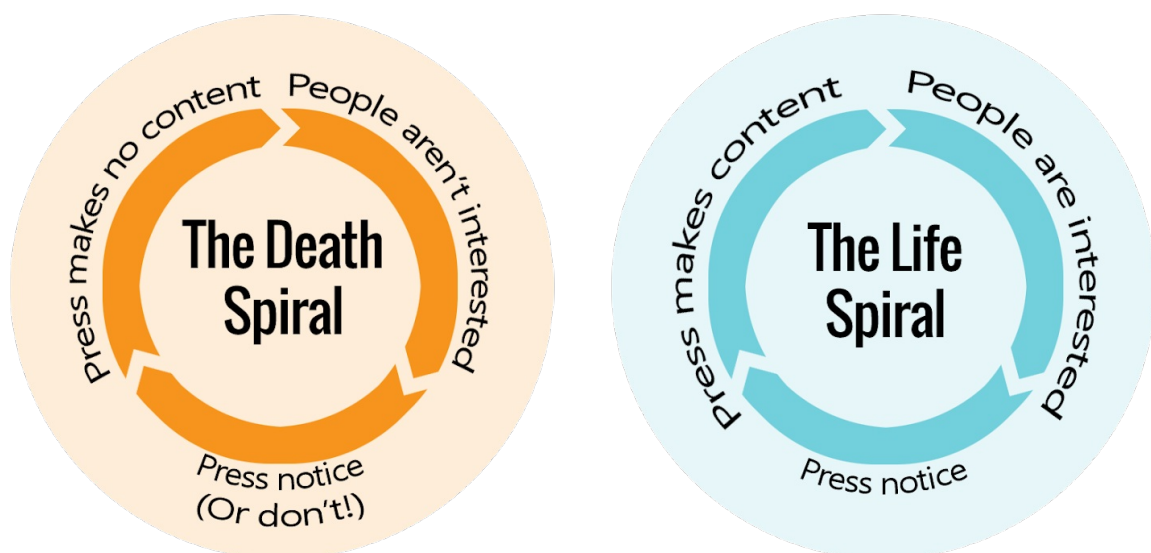
Conclusions

Too Many of Us

The main reason why thinking about your game as a product is that important is simply because nowadays the amount of games getting onto Steam each day is <u>huge</u> and it does not look like it will get better. The <u>last Steam changes</u> towards <u>Steam Direct</u> (specially with what the <u>close down of Greenlight entails</u>) implies even more games coming out each day.

The math is simple, there is an audience with X amount of money to spend in videogames and that value does not change with the number of games released. Basically having more people sitting on the table does not make the cake bigger, so some need to starve for others to eat. This means that the ones eating enough to survive will be very few and most will die waiting for their piece of the cake. I guess this is the so called <u>Indiepocalypse…</u>

This is really good from the users' point of view, because they have more options when selecting what game they want to play, which will increase the quality and lower the prices. But it will be fatal for most of the developers, who need to sell a top notch product at a really low price in order to have the opportunity to keep doing games.

Design with how to sell in mind

It's probably one of the biggest lesson we learnt. We are doing this because we love games, but if we want to keep working on our loved games, we need to think about selling them. Otherwise there is no long term for any studio. As I said before, probably not every game can have that awesome pitch, which probably reduces the probability of the game doing well.

The truth is there is probably no magic formula, but if you plan on doing a game without having a plan to sell and without a market analysis to check if there is an audience for it, the reality is that your only chance of success is based on luck. If that is the option you take, I would recommend playing the lottery better, you'll have more chances on getting something in return, and waste less time and money.

You can find some <u>piece of advice</u> about ways to decide the right game, but the reality is much more complicated than that. The examples shown in that article are already confirmed hits, so there is some cherry picking involved to support the presented ideas. Ideally that analysis should come before release and you should check your capabilities to predict what works and what doesn't. In that sense <u>SteamProphet</u> can become really helpful to practice your clairvoyant skills. You will get good at finding the hooks Ryan Clark's article talks about and be able to more or less accurately predict how your game will do.

Epilogue

This is our story. I hope it didn't sound too defeatist, because that was not my intention, but I do think that us developers tend to ignore the option of failure. We compare ourselves to the successful games and we forget that there are probably hundreds of them that failed and that we don't even know about. I wanted to share the story of our failed game, trying to paint a realistic picture of what it is to be an indie game developer nowadays.

Thanks for reading!

Related Jobs

Galvanic Games, Inc — Seattle, Washington, United States
[06.22.18]
Multiplayer Game Engineer

Deep Silver Volition — Champaign, Illinois, United States
[06.22.18]
Senior System Designer

Armature Studio — AUSTIN, Texas, United States
[06.22.18]
SENIOR GAMEPLAY PROGRAMMER

Digital Extremes — London, Ontario, Canada
[06.22.18]
Senior Lighting Artist

[View All Jobs]