


Postmortem: Amazia, a CCG for mobile

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Blogs

by [Sina Shahbazi](#) on 04/01/18 01:27:00 pm

Featured Post



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Amazia was a strategy card game built with the CCG model in mind for mobile that was released around 4 months ago. For those who don't know about the game, it was originally planned to be built for Kickstarter and PC but midway through its development pivoted to be developed and released for mobile devices in the local Iranian market.

The game was well received and has been featured extensively by the local app store Cafe Bazaar, with over 20,000 active installs and generally favorable responses from players, however the game has been an absolute disaster financially. The game's revenue hasn't even matched 5% of its meager budget to this date and continued development had to halt due it not even making enough for its ongoing operational costs.

If you've by any chance ever heard of me talk about the game before its release, I never was hopeful for it to succeed after the major pivot and in this postmortem of the game I'll be obviously talking about the bad and what went wrong a lot more than what went right. So in the spirit of critical examination I will start with the negatives and at the end write about the few positive consolation points. In both categories I've ordered them by importance with the most important factors coming in sooner.

What Went Wrong

1. The vision of the game was not shared among the team members

If there's just one lesson to give from the development of Amazia, it's that a shared and clear vision for a game must be established and held onto through the entire dev cycle. This is especially true of a small indie team like ourselves, and even more critical that it's shared between the co-founders. The problem in the case of Amazia was that I had laid out a vision and a strategy to achieve it at the start of pre-production and the game was being developed with this vision in mind for some time until my partner and the lead programmer of the game decided that it would be a better idea to pivot to an easier and more manageable target of

releasing for the local market. I was convinced because it was supposed to be a soft launch to gather feedback about the game. In an unclear vision though, targets shift and change and some months down the line we were not soft launching, we were in full production mode for the game.

It's easy in theory to settle this problem with having a team member like the game designer or producer be the person making the final calls, but in reality team dynamics are more complicated than that. Game development is a team effort and there's no place for a dictator. At the same time, that shouldn't be an excuse for the team to lack vision and direction as well. Sometimes the lack of clear vision is not critical but for Amazia it was fatal.

2. Basic marketing theory was disregarded

Both of the co-founders for Amazia have academic backgrounds in business, so it's astounding how we missed some of the very basics of marketing. No, I don't mean advertising and public relations, I'm talking about market analysis and strategy. Though I had initially done an STP analysis and guide for Amazia, it was all thrown out after we switched to the local mobile version, because the entire market was changed. Keep in mind that originally Amazia was meant to be a game that was targeting a niche of players who wanted a deeper game than Hearthstone but easier to access than games like Yu-gi-oh or Magic. It's a niche that's also been attempted to be filled by many other games such as Duelyst, Faeria and Shadowverse, so it wasn't as if the competition was light, but that's also where the smaller details of the marketing strategy come in play as for where to focus the PR message on.

These plan would be no more after the pivot. Everything changed, the whole landscape was different, from the audience, to our product, to our distribution and communication channels. Worse however was that we didn't sit down and re-do these marketing basics. We never segmented the local market, or thought how we could reach them. We didn't consider what need we were fulfilling. What was our core product? A strategy game. Ok, now does that core product have demand in this local market? These were all questions that should have been answered and weren't answered all the way until it was too late and there was only blame to pass.

Our marketing was terrible. We targeted the wrong market, we didn't give our target what they needed, we didn't have a plan to get fans involved and we could never position ourselves in a place that fit our game.

3. There was only one dedicated programmer

An online F2P CCG that was to handle many different features was a massive task. It was made even bigger by the fact that pretty much all the programming was done by one person. That's not to say no one else did any programming ever, but the contributions were small and in the long run the team was hit hard by this constraint, especially towards the end where our programmer was getting somewhat tired. It's a remarkable achievement nonetheless and when talking to different publishers, both local and abroad, they were all astonished by the feat of completing the entire thing with all its features in one year.

That being said, as the designer on the team, there were many work-hours that I felt I wasn't contributing as much as I could. Now I'm not exactly a programming illiterate, and I did code the different cards of the game which was the bulk of the content, but I could have been a sort of junior programmer as well, working on systems and other features. Maybe I could have done the tutorial, or improved the game feel. Our lead never agreed on training me, always arguing that it would take time and we're just about to release and finish the job. This went on for months unfortunately so he wasn't justified in his assumption. Should the game had more than one programmer, we could have saved on time and money more and the power dynamics of the team would have been more balanced.

4. Game Feel and polish was lacking

A lot has been said on the importance of polish. It's a bit of vague term. It could mean balancing and fine-tuning the gameplay, it could mean getting rid of bugs or it could mean getting the art to be that little bit prettier. In our team what we usually meant by polish was game-feel and sparkly animations and effects. Allocation of funds was lopsided to say the least. We ended up with very high quality card art, but we didn't get any animations or visual effects to go with the game, so as a result we implemented a generic animation that would be used for all effects, only differing in its sound effect and color depending on the type of effect it was producing.

Games like Hearthstone and all other Blizzard games live by their high degree of polish. It was a shame Amazia lacked this quality as it was evident that younger and casual players in particular had a harder time getting into the game due to it not being exciting enough.

5. Monetization was thrown together near the end

Of course conventional wisdom tells us not to do that. Conventional wisdom tells us everything's important though and we can't leave out some aspect of the game for late in development to think about. As with most other parts of the game, monetization was also thought of in detail for the original vision but had to be changed for the new game. The scheme we went with was the Hearthstone path of buying packs that open random cards. Later I decided to add the Clash Royale "3 cards-a-day" rotational offer as well to buy with real cash.

Nothing seemed to work despite our much lower prices compared to our competitors. This is the result of a society not valuing paying for games after decades of pirating them for free. Iranians just don't pay for games. Our conversion rate only increased after I added a one-time purchase value offer that gave a lot for a very low cost, but even then it was much lower than anything sustainable.

We found too late that for a game to be financially successful in this local market, it must have the capacity to practically earn endless amount from a paying consumer. This is the targeting whale strategy, and due to very low sub 1% conversion rates, it's the only viable strategy to earn money with games. This is the case with Clash of Clans, Clash Royale and most other

Clash clones that have been financially successful earning thousands of dollars from individuals. Amazia had no bottomless pit to spend money in. You could get all content with around \$50 in microtransactions, and that's without playing and earning cards with in-game rewards.

Consolation Points

Scoping was done accurately

Apparently scoping and increasing the scope of a game midway through development is a bane for many game projects. Our original estimate for the starting strategy was to get on Kickstarter by September with a demo of the game. We ended up finishing the entire game by November despite a massive change of plans in the middle. A single programmer created an online competitive turn based strategy game with microtransactions and friends. That's server backend, game client and database all done by one person in a relatively short time by game industry standards. It might not have ended up as the prettiest game out there, but that's more an issue of our lack of artists than our scoping.

Even with the changes in place, every step I tried to make sure that adding and removing more content and features could be done with the minimum cost to our overall schedule. As designers we should be very conscious of what changes require as their needs.

Scoping was accurate and it was also heavily constrained by a very tight budget of only \$28,000 spread over a period longer than a year. Considering all the expenses it was only made possible by being very picky on exactly what would be put in the game and what was not worth it. Do we need in game chats, or can we just use pre-made emotes? How much does adding more than one background to the game improve it? Is each and every card in the game as useful as possible? These are all questions that were answered well along the way.

The game's design was successfully simplified

The game of the original vision never got made and put in the hands of players so I can make no judgement of its value. Amazia after its pivot though needed some simplifications. These simplifications were necessitated by two reasons: First we knew that the mobile market has a much more casual base of players compared to the niche of "deeper than Hearthstone", and second because the mobile device supports far less inputs and a smaller screen, thus the UX must be easy to flow and navigate. The game's design went in a period where I had to cut as much as I could without cutting too much. It's a painful task, but in the end it went rather well.

Amazia ended up as a game about as simple and accessible as Hearthstone but with maybe a bit more depth. That was great. My wife who had previously only played Candy Crashed got so deep into the game that she was on top of the game's leaderboard. Iran's gaming community has historically never touched strategy card games before and it was a pleasure seeing so many people enthusiastically playing the game, many whom weren't avid gamers. This was made possible due to these simplifications and cuts of features. Most of the game's core was still intact in the end and we managed to bring in new people to play.

This is not to say that the game was very successful in attracting new players entirely. The very nature of the game and the target market's gaming literacy in regards with the genre made it an uphill battle. Our day 1 retention rates never hit above 30% once we got featured in the app store's front page and got opened to the masses. Still, the status it has achieved is not bad and should be taken as a positive.

Art was outsourced without any hiccups

We outsourced our art out of necessity; we just couldn't afford a full-time artist. That was certainly damaging and a major point where we could have improved. Our outsourcing experience surprisingly ended up very pleasant. We could depend on our artists with much simpler lenses. We paid money for a set of pieces of work, and in the time that we agreed upon they would always deliver the works. It made planning much simpler.

We both knew how much it would cost, and when it would be finished. That was a great blessing to work with.

Ending

The development of Amazia truly was a roller-coaster ride. It's a real shame that the game never managed to hit any financial success or even fail a bit more mildly that we could cover our operating costs and continue with the original vision in mind. It's been a bit sad writing this but also reflective of all the missteps that were taken. If you have any questions, please ask in the comments below.

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