

Postmortem: Flippfly's Race the Sun

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Aaron & Forest San Filippo are two brothers who make up *Flippfly*, creators of *Race the Sun*.

Race The Sun is the debut game from Flippfly, a studio formed by two brothers. The game launched in 2013 on PC, and the team has subsequently brought it to PS4, PS3, Vita, IOS, and WiiU.

In this postmortem, we recount the ups-and-downs of development and launching *Race The Sun*, and the lessons we learned while becoming a multiplatform development studio.

Fortunately, We Had A Winning Concept And “Found The Fun” Early

We honed in on the core mechanic of the game in just a couple days, and had something up and running in less than a week. From there, we spent around a month tuning the controls for the right feel on all platforms. We believe this focus on the core feel of the game early on, was a big part of the game’s success. We set out to make a game that *felt* exhilarating and fast, and we stuck to this goal throughout the project. After this initial prototype was created, we decided that we would make the game into a 2-3 month project.

Unfortunately, We Were Overconfident

After we initially had some success with the prototype, we launched a version of the game on Kongregate in the form of an “alpha demo.” Our thinking was that this would be an opportunity to get feedback and build an audience, and we hoped that players would buy a standalone full version if they liked the web demo. This version was featured by Kongregate, which emboldened us as a team and helped us get a lot of great feedback. **Soon after this, we decided to go into marketing mode, and started emailing press, and essentially trying to move into an “alpha sales” mode for the game, selling early versions of the game on our website.**

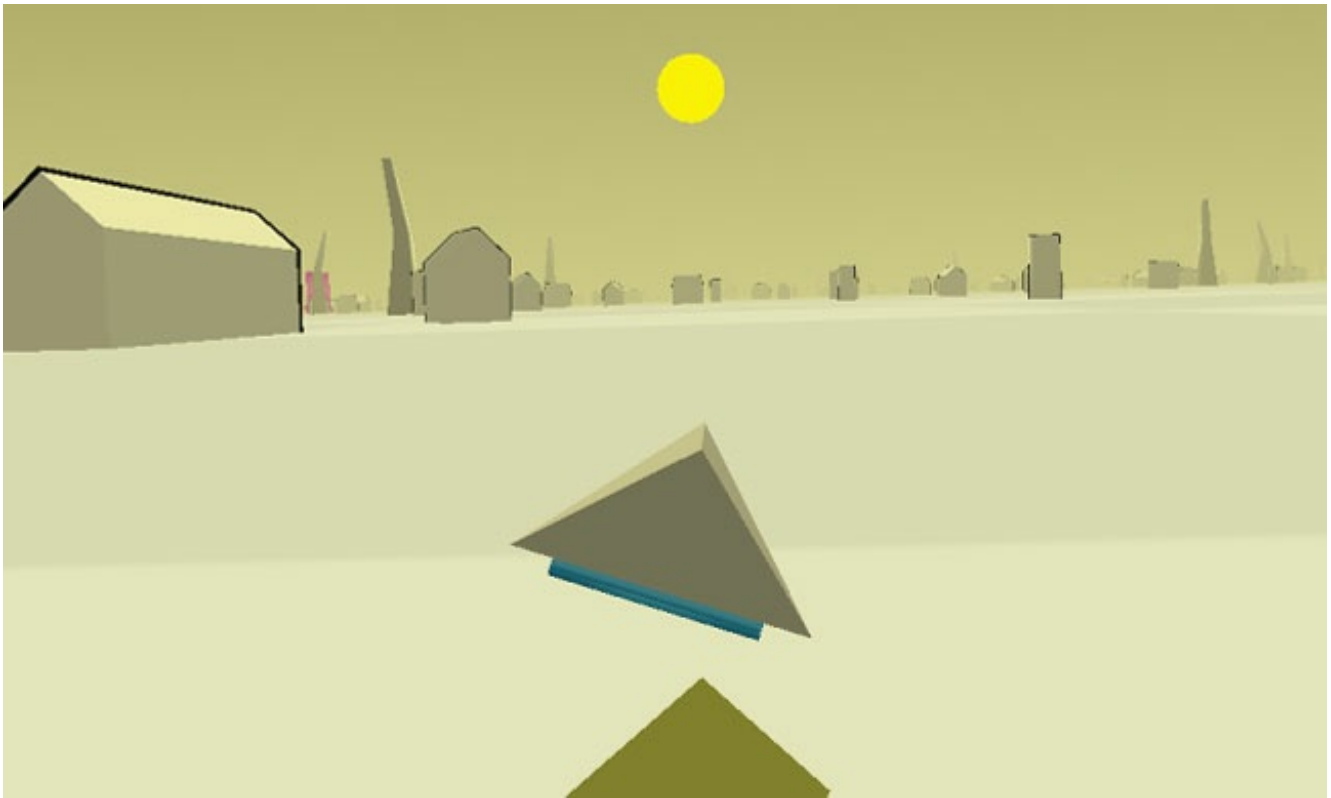
This took a lot of time, and was pretty demoralizing. To be frank - the game just wasn’t ready to be marketed to a paying audience, even though it was fun in a basic sense. We should have focused on making the game better during this stage - but we still had that “2-3 months” figure in our minds for the development schedule, and we just didn’t connect the dots that the game needed a lot more work before it was ready for actual retail release.

Fortunately, We Kept Learning And Growing

While the plethora of conflicting advice for indie developers was daunting, we dug in and tried to sort out the good from the bad. Building relationships with other developers helped us start to see what worked and what didn’t. We were still in the dark, but we were stumbling in the right direction.

Unfortunately, We Under-Budgeted

Around the 6 month mark, we were running out of money, the press was ignoring our game, and we weren’t selling any pre-orders. In this sad state, we decided to put together a Kickstarter to try to fund the rest of development. It got off to a *horrible* start, further demoralizing us as a team. After a week on Kickstarter with less than 10% funding, we seriously considered dropping the project.



Fortunately, We Saw The Light

After a week of Kickstarter failure, we re-evaluated the game at its very core, and realized we could make the world a lot more interesting and appealing. Part of the problem is that we just didn't have enough experience to recognize when a game is "good enough" in terms of features, presentation, and depth. The failed Kickstarter launch and the subsequent feedback we got from would-be backers helped us see the quality bar that we were missing.

This feedback forced us to question our assumptions about the game and how appealing it was, and inspired us to look at the game through a new lens. This was a breakthrough moment for the game, and for us as a team. We threw out the existing world of the game, and went into prototyping mode with a new tool for world creation - one that was based on simple primitive shapes constructed in an editor. This new world looked much more interesting and unique, and reignited our excitement for the project. Once we released a teaser with a week left in the Kickstarter, people started taking notice. We managed to get funded at \$21k, and then promptly dug in to finish the game with renewed optimism.

Unfortunately, It Took Another 4 Months To Finish

One of the promises we made during the Kickstarter, was that we would add a unique multiplayer mode. This ended up taking a lot longer than we hoped, and ultimately wasn't any fun. We should have got this feature working to some degree before we committed fully to it. **We've also come to grips with the fact that we consistently under-estimate how long things will take by at least a factor of 2x. Knowing this about ourselves helps us plan current and future projects.**

Fortunately, We Started Showing The Game At Events

Participating in events like PAX showed us how much we could learn through in-person playtesting. Not only did we discover tons of things about our game, we also made connections with other devs and industry folks. That network of people has proven to be incredibly important to us personally and professionally.



Unfortunately, We Launched Without Steam Support

When we were finally ready to call the game “done,” it was August 2013, and we were still stuck on Steam Greenlight. Despite re-working the game’s visuals and gaining significant community support in our Kickstarter, we simply weren’t getting enough attention for the game to get past Greenlight’s barriers. So we launched the game via our website - and (quite predictably,) the revenue for the game fizzled out after just a couple weeks.

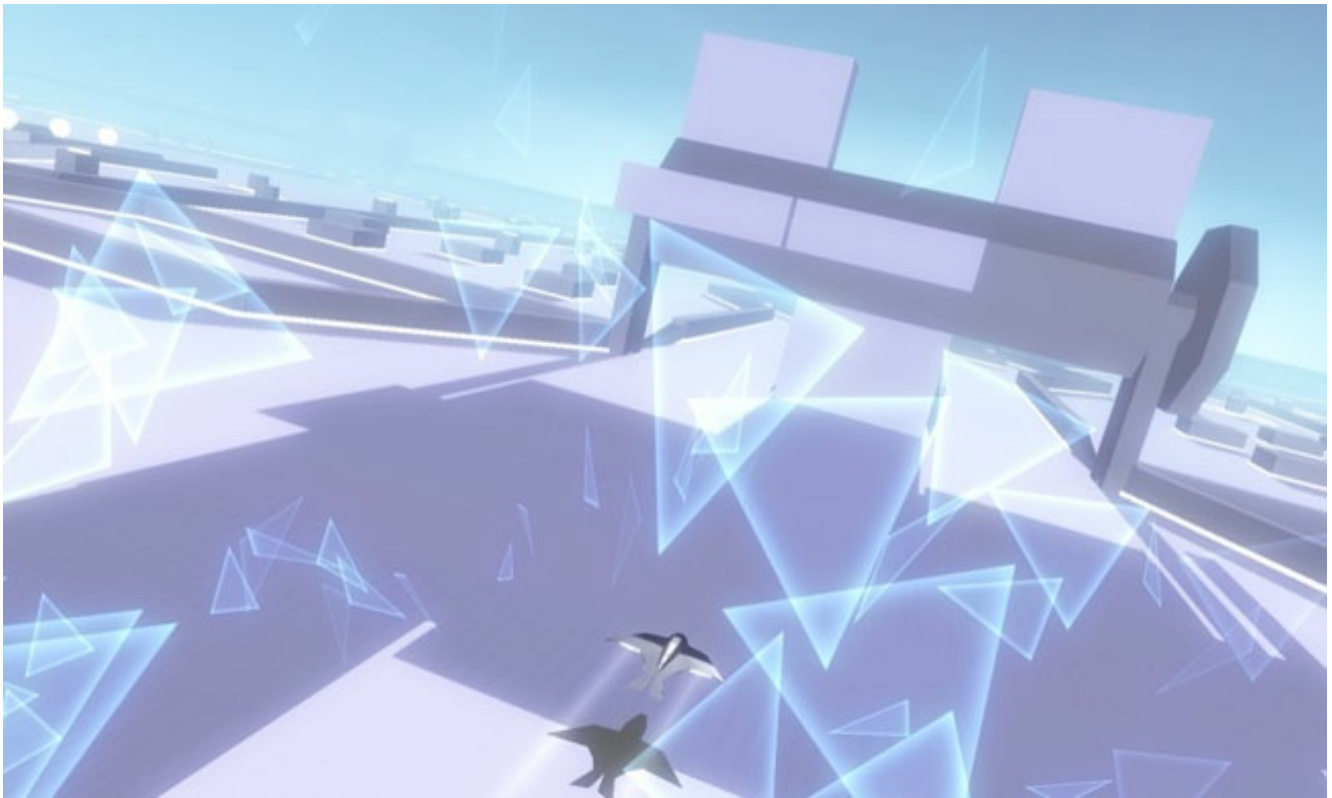
Fortunately, We Didn’t Give Up

At this point we started talking about our experience on our blog, and then decided to launch the “Not on Steam” sale for our game and other indies who didn’t have access to Steam. These two events combined really helped raise the attention on our game, and we were finally greenlit in the fall of 2013.

We launched before the huge influx of games hit Steam, and also got lucky with a popular “Let’s Play” from the Youtube critic TotalBiscuit right at the game’s launch. This (and a couple weeks on the Steam front page) resulted in enough revenue to fund us for the next 6 months or so. We felt like we had made it! We added Steam Workshop support after a month, and got featured again, securing funding for another few months. At this point, we turned our attention to the PlayStation version.

Unfortunately, The PlayStation Version Took Much Longer Than Planned

We underestimated the complexity involved in console ports - and we still hadn’t internalized how bad we were at time estimation. It was more than six months before the game launched on PS3, PS4 and Vita. In retrospect, the time spent on these ports was more than worthwhile, but it was frustrating to see things take much longer than we had planned.



Fortunately, Optimization Efforts Paid Off

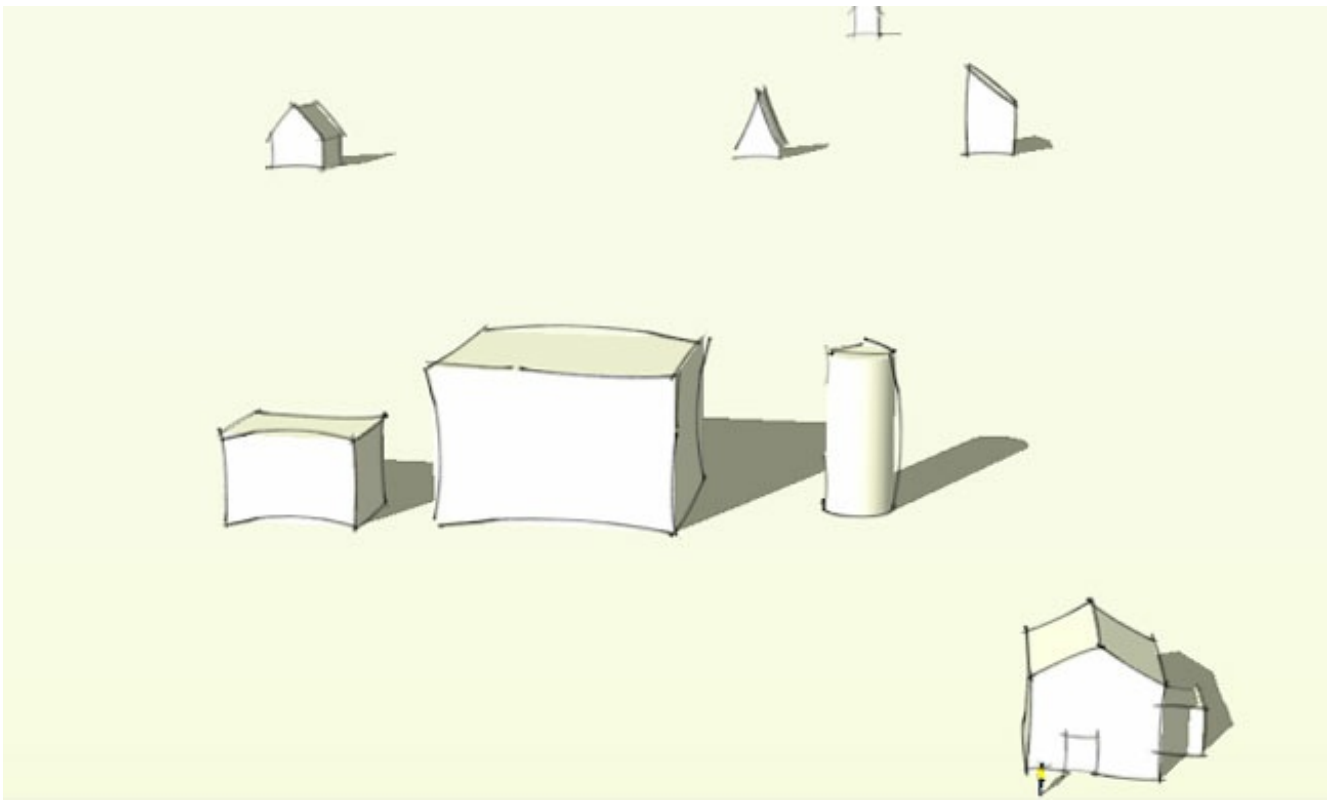
Part of the reason the PlayStation version took so long is that we had committed to making a Vita version of the game, and this required a lot of optimization work. This work took a lot longer than anticipated, and caused a lot of bugs that needed to be fixed before shipping the PlayStation version. On the plus side - players love the Vita version, and those optimization efforts helped a lot when we made an iOS version in the summer of '15. The game runs at a smooth 60 fps on modern iOS devices, and players love the smooth gameplay.

Unfortunately, Daily Leaderboards Are A Pain To Port

One of the features of the game is that it generates a new procedural world each day, using the same random seed for all players, and then scores from this world are submitted to a daily leaderboard. We decided early on to use the built-in leaderboard features for each new platform we brought the game to, believing players would appreciate this. The downside is that we essentially have to re-write leaderboard support for each platform, which always takes significant time. If we could go back in time, we'd use a single custom hosted leaderboard system, or skip daily leaderboards altogether. It doesn't seem to be a feature most players care about, and isn't worth the complexity it adds to each new port.

Fortunately, Multiplatform Development Worked Out

Doing the PlayStation port was a great learning experience for us, and also helped secure revenue for the next year. Since then, we've worked with contractors to do an iOS and Wii U version, and are currently working on several new SKUs. We feel that this multiplatform focus has allowed us to turn what would have been a moderately successful game into one that's sustained us as a company and helped us grow.



Unfortunately, We Haven't Published A New Game In 2.5 Years

While we learned that doing multiplatform development as a small team can make us sustainable - it also drains a lot of our energy and time. **The ports have taken longer than we planned, and each new platform has added varying degrees of overhead.** We've struggled to maintain a creative focus on new games while we execute and maintain these new platforms. We still feel that the multiplatform focus has been worth it for us on the whole - and we're now using that experience to help other indies bring their games to new platforms - but given what we know now we would encourage other small indie teams to carefully weigh the overhead in doing multiplatform development. For some, it may make the most sense to focus on one or two platforms - particularly if your goal is creative output.

Some Takeaways:

- Seek out brutally honest feedback, not just from peers but from your potential customers.
- Make sure the core of your game experience is stellar.
- Know when it's time to market your game, and when you should keep improving it.
- Carefully consider the tradeoffs with multiplatform development.
- Multiply your time estimates by 2x-4x.
- Don't promise untested features that may not be fun at all
- If you do plan to do ports, carefully plan features like controls and leaderboards and try to minimize the work required for each new platform.