

Gamasutra: Scott Fine's Blog - NFL RUSH Heroes & Rivals Postmortem



by [Scott Fine](#) on 12/09/15 04:09:00 pm

Featured Post

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Last weekend, I had the pleasure of sitting down with an old friend of mine, Derek Prate. For those of you who haven't heard of him, he was one of the other designers on the NFL RUSH series of apps. Nowadays, he enlightens the next generation of game designers at Chapman University as an adjunct professor. But for a little over a year, I worked very closely with him to push out the NFL RUSH apps, and later to try save them.

While we were catching up, our conversation naturally drifted towards our time working on the apps. What we enjoyed. What we thought we could have done better. And what we thought could have been done better in general. Due to this conversation, I thought it might be fun to write a postmortem on NFL RUSH Heroes & Rivals, the larger of the two apps.



First, let us get what went wrong out of the way:

1. Scope blew up

Let's turn back the clock, and pull the curtain away to late January 2014. Everything was awesome. We had just made a deal with the NFL to create an app. The design team was told to research micro-games (Think

Wario-Ware), as there had been a few successful ones on the iOS App store. So we did. The initial concept for the NFL Apps was actually one app. It would have the player play micro-games, which would train players on their team to compete in a football game. We wanted to have it completed by pre-season so we could get featured in the iOS and Android app store.

Seven months was a short window, but it seemed doable for eight micro games and the primary football game. But as time progressed, the game got larger. Micro-games turned into mini-games. I'm not sure who made the decision, but we decided there would be a social element. So I created the Teams System. For the Clubs System we pulled the Clans system from School of Dragons. While this was still large and we were going to have to cut it close, we could have still made it. It wouldn't have been the highest quality app, but it would have still been an excellent app.

Then came the straw that broke the camel's back. As the one app was scaling up and becoming a fairly large beast, word came down that we had to do a second one. This one was to be smaller and more family focused. So Heroes and Rivals was meant to be targeted at a hardcore football fandom, while GameDay Heroes was meant to be played by families in one room. This split the team. And while GameDay Heroes went on to be released on time, because the team was bouncing back and forth, both apps suffered due to the lack of attention the team was able to give to them. Had we done only one app or the other, we probably could have released a truly polished experience. Instead, we scoped the games poorly, and for that they both suffered.

2. Made a football game with no football/ Just reskinned games

Due to having two ever expanding apps in the pipeline, we were forced to reskin already existing games. We released them with slight mechanical tweaks, but as a whole they were the very similar. For example, D-Dash is a reskin of Ghost Town Grab from JumpStart.

Ghost town grab:



D-Dash:

Fun Story: I received D-Dash maybe two weeks before we shipped. My only instructions were: "It's not testing well. Make it fun." Mind you, this was on top of everything else we were trying to accomplish. So I tried a few things without much luck, and three days before release I turned to Derek and said, "I want to try something crazy. I want to change all the level layouts." He thought it might work, and told me I should talk to our Design Manager. He gave me the go ahead, and I made the tweaks. I adjusted the location of the collectables and power ups, requiring the player to face danger in order to get the highest score. I also required them to platform in order to do it. This created more risk and felt more rewarding for players. While the game isn't the best mini-game in the app, it became actually fun.

While this was a great idea to speed up production time, it ultimately came back to bite us. This is because our “Hardcore” football game didn’t have “Hardcore” football in it. Yes, in the mini-games the player may be collecting footballs, but that has almost nothing to do with real football. Mechanically, it doesn’t feel anything like football. Of the eight games only two felt remotely like football:

Perfect Pass – Where the player has to tap on the field to throw the ball to their receiver, all the while keeping an eye on rushers and enemies trying to get an interception.



Upright Aim – In this one, players would swipe the screen to kick the ball to make a field goal. They would have to deal with rushers and the wind while kicking the ball from different positions on the field.



Side note: An argument could be made for Tackle Trouble, but I think it appeals more to a broader, more causal audience rather than a hardcore football audience.

These two were also original games built from the ground up for this app. The other six were reskins and not “Hardcore” football enough to appeal to our audience.

Side note: I’m not saying the other mini-games were bad. Quite the contrary, there were a few which children physically would not put down. The two biggest contenders were Perfect Pass and Tackle Trouble, but they were not appealing towards the audience we were trying to go after. Think of it this way, we essentially gave Animal Crossing to a hardcore Call of Duty player.

3. Tutorials/Pre-loading took too long

Upon release, we had a strange problem. Players would download the app, but would never make it past the log in screen and into the rest of the game. Not long after booting it up on our own phones, we learned about

the curse of the pre-loader.



A lot of mobile games today have pre-loaders. This is so app developers can release apps which are larger than 100 mb and not require Wi-Fi for an initial download.

Side note: You can't imagine the number of players you'll lose if you require Wi-Fi to download your game. They might look at it and think, "Huh that's cool. I'll download it," but when they try, they can't because they aren't connected to Wi-Fi. This results in them forgetting about your app and thus never actually downloading and playing it. Everything with mobile apps are spur of the moment, instant gratification. That's why in app purchases for premium currency work so well.

Our pre-loader was downloading over 3 gigs of data. It was taking well over ten minutes, even while connected to Wi-Fi, to get our game running. Mind you, this was after we had them create an account and go through that whole process.

So things weren't going so great, but we were able to fix that by reducing the load time to a more manageable amount. So let's say the player finally gets in. What happens next?

Tutorials.



AND EVEN MORE TUTORIALS!



This was a problem. We had tutorials for everything. We held the player's hand through the entire process, which took well over fifteen minutes to get through. And there was no way to skip them. So we built this great game we wanted everyone to play, but we won't let them play it. Over ten minutes to get into the game, then an additional fifteen minutes or so just to get through the tutorials and then play the actual game. I know AAA console experiences which have shorter tutorials than that, yet we did this on a device which the average user engages for less than ten minutes at a time.

This, more than anything, hurt us.

Luckily, we were able to reduce the loader time and cut out 90% of the tutorials once we realized the issue. The remaining tutorials were cut down to a reasonable size, and allowed the player to skip them. But the fixes came too late. Our moment in the spotlight had passed and, while we did fix most of the app, it would never recover.

As a result of this app failing, along with a couple others, the company fell into financial trouble and, last I heard, over half of the staff had been laid off. I sometimes think about if I had known then what I know now, maybe I could have worked harder to fix the problems and fought harder for good design choices. Sadly, I can't. The only thing I can do is take my experience and make sure the same mistakes aren't made in the next project I get to be apart of.

With all the sadness and what went wrong out of the way, let's finish off on a high note.

What went right:

1. Some really good mini-games

While the mini-games were not the best for kids who were actually very interested in football, many of them were still fun experiences. The tweaks we made on the reskins made the games a lot of fun.

For example, in the original game, Dodge n Dash, the player would collect treasure chests. Upon collecting a treasure chest, they would gain 10 points and an enemy spawns somewhere else on the screen. This continues until the player's character touches an enemy and dies. This isn't particularly fun, because at a certain point there is no way to survive.

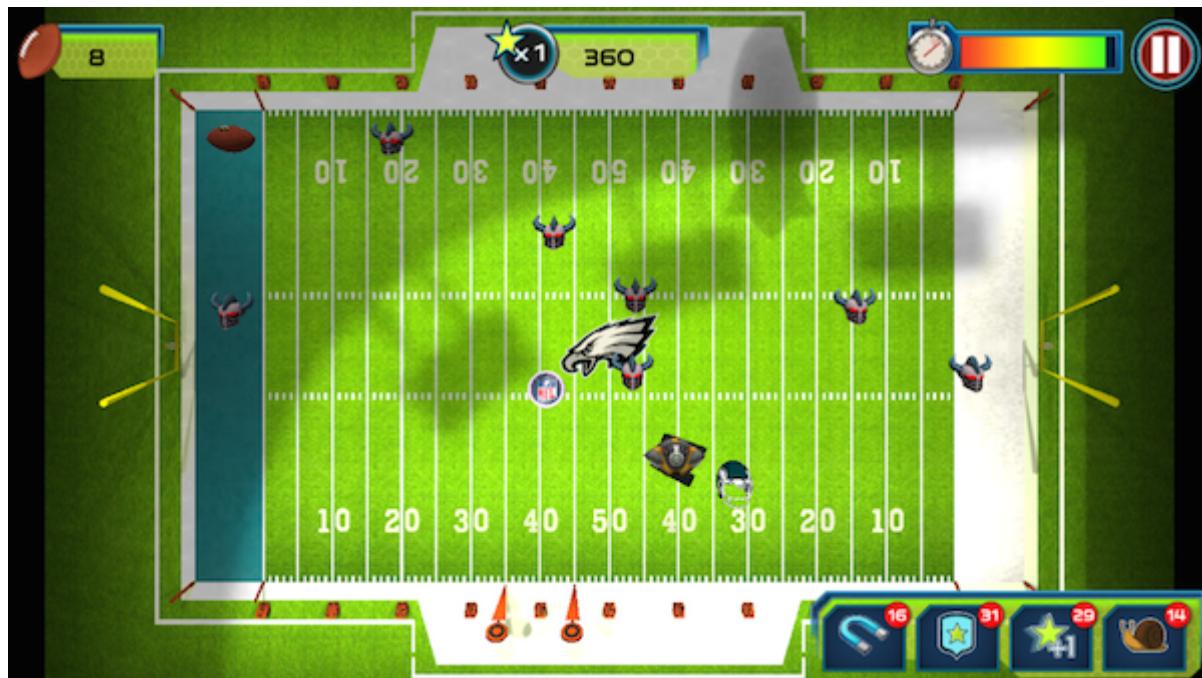


When it got into my hands, I made a few additions:

- Every 5th enemy that spawns chases the player, instead of traveling randomly.
- After every X item collected, a NFL shield coin will spawn. Shield coins could initially spawn after five to nine collectibles are collected. But every shield coin collected raised the minimum and the maximum for the range by one. This made the game difficulty ramp up nicely.

- When a player collected the shield coin, enemies would turn into collectibles for a short amount of time. If the player collected the enemy collectibles, the player would gain bonus points and enemies would be removed from the game.
- Enemy movement slowly increased over time to encourage players to collect shield coins.
- Initially, the more footballs a player collected without collecting a shield coin, the higher the multiplier would be, thus increasing the points the player would receive. This encouraged players to collect as many footballs as they could without clearing the field.

This particular mechanic changed with another alteration we put in the game. After some play-tester feedback, we decided to add a health bar as well. This meant that, instead of players losing from being touched once, they could take a few hits. As more enemies piled on top of the player's character, the health bar would drain faster. When the health bar was completely empty, they lost. Players could get out of the tackle via tapping the screen rapidly. The mechanic changed by resetting the multiplier when they were tackled by enemies rather than by when they grabbed the shield coin. It was actually a lot of fun and kids loved it.



Side note: I wanted to play with the idea of risk vs reward. The theme of scoring more points for putting yourself in more danger is a fun little mechanic I tried to apply across most of the mini-games for this app. Most of them evolved over time into combo systems, where a player was rewarded additional points for doing something continuously and not failing.

These kinds of changes were made across all the reskinned apps, by all the designers, making them considerably more fun.

2. The Team's untapped skills

In the 11th hour, you'll always see what you are truly capable of. This went for the team as well. Towards the end, each developer on the team went above and beyond. Some designers did additional coding. Others reviewed games which were not theirs to ensure everything was working properly. We had artists and programmers play-testing builds. Everyone was wearing multiple hats to finish the products on time and ship the best possible experience. There was a lot of "Wait... you can code?" and "Hey, I've got 15 minutes. Who needs me to play test something?" going around. And the best part was that we did it without crunch time.

Soapbox: I keep hearing glorified moments where developers come together during crunch to finish a game. It's suppose to make them feel closer? How are they supposed to feel closer when they are sleep-deprived and constantly snapping at each other? Working on a common goal that is difficult brings people closer together. This brought us closer via being forced to do multiple jobs. We enjoyed each other's company and had something to show for it. I feel like crunch bringing everyone closer is more akin to a natural disaster happening and everyone has to band together, over straining themselves to survive. They become closer only because they have a traumatic experience in common.

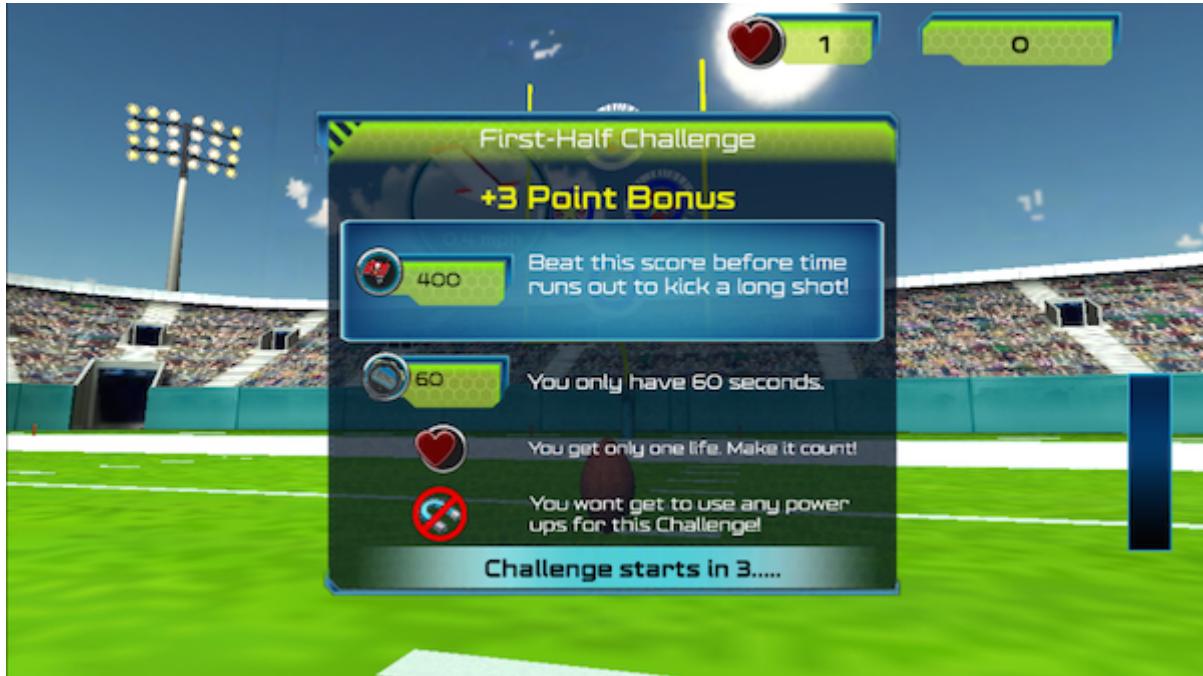
3. The update

You've read all the things that went wrong. The release was pretty much a disaster, but we did our best to recover. After the release of the app, our Design Manager started giving designers specific apps which they would primarily work on. We all shuffled around projects, but I was settled on the NFL apps with Derek helping me out 25% of the time (his focus at this time was School of Dragons.) With this newfound control, we went to work on saving the apps.

We took a hard look at what we could reasonably salvage and fix. We redid the menu system, changing it from the previous system, which hid all the options, to the current tabbed system where all the options are directly in front of the player. We cleared out most of the tutorials, streamlining the experience. The big football game got more feedback, and I re-balanced it to give the players more control over the outcome.



Here's a very high level explanation: Before it was like playing rock-paper-scissors, with the players' stats combined with the chosen plays determining how well they did. The change kept this as the base, but added a challenge for the Offensive player to complete before scores were rendered. Depending on the plays chosen, they would be thrown into a mini-game. Based on the difference between the player and their opponent's score, they would have to score above a certain point threshold, within the mini-game, to win the challenge. If they won the challenge, they would get a bonus to their score and have a guarantee win against the other player. This really gave the mini-games a purpose, and made the app feel like one cohesive experience. It made an experience which previously had a very steep learning curve turn into something more accessible and fun for players.



When I was let go, we were still working to improve the app. There was some discussion about potentially doing more experiences with the NFL. Words like World of Warcraft, Mario Party and Hearthstone were being tossed around. A lot. But I sadly believe support has been stopped due to the smaller team.

I look back at this project with fond memories. I learned a ton, and met some of the most amazing people I know today. I'd like to thank Derek Prate for helping me to reflect on this project and Kaitlyn Fine for editing this post.

I'm hoping that you can learn from some of our mistakes, as those who do not learn from the past are doomed to repeat it.

I'll see you guys next week,

Scott

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