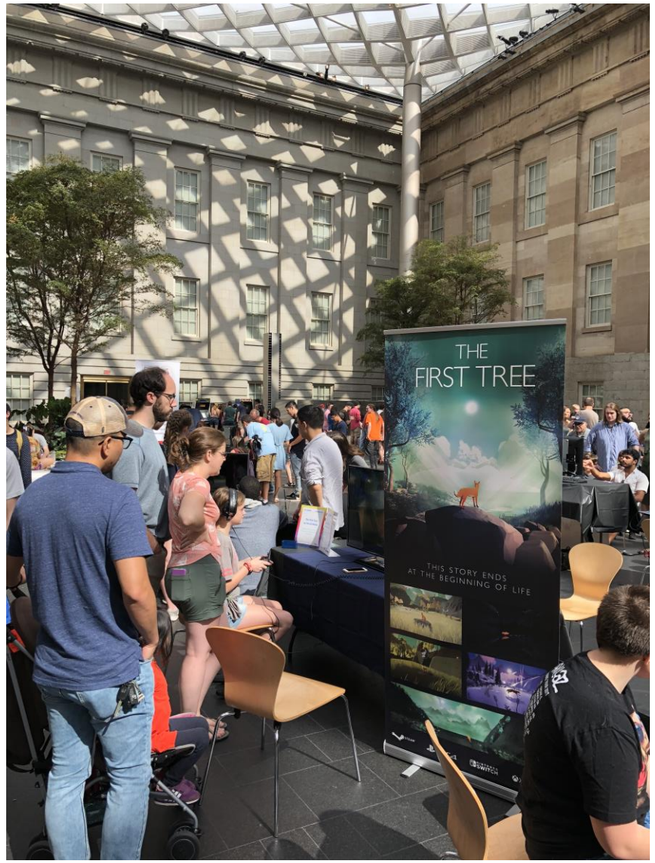
INDEPENDENT GAMES SUMMIT

No Time, No Budget, No Problem: Finishing The First Tree

David Wehle

GDC
GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE
MARCH 18–22, 2019 | #GDC19

INDEPENDENT GAMES SUMMIT



INDIE MEGA BOOTH

STEP BEYOND REALITY

THE FIRST TREE

launched Sept. 14, 2017 on Steam

Costs

$10,250

Time

18 months of nights and weekends

(or ~900 hours)

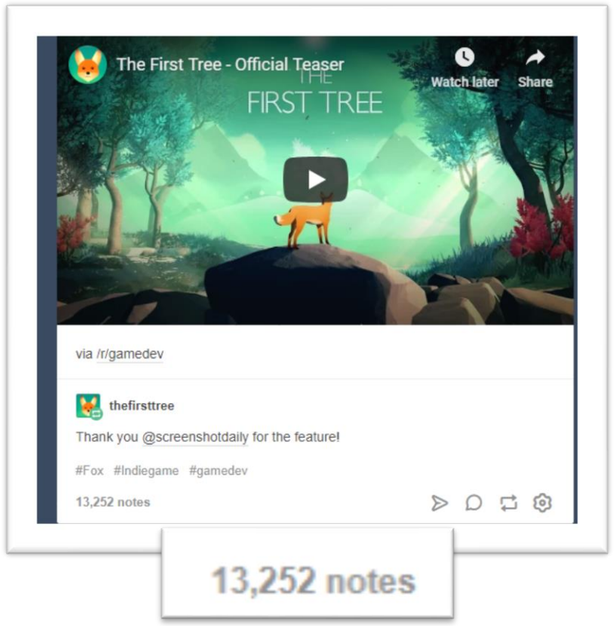
Revenue

~$150,000

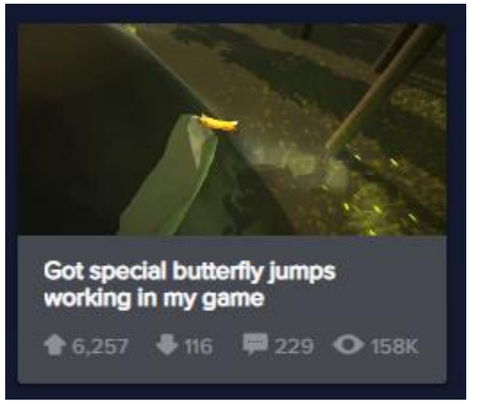
(first year)

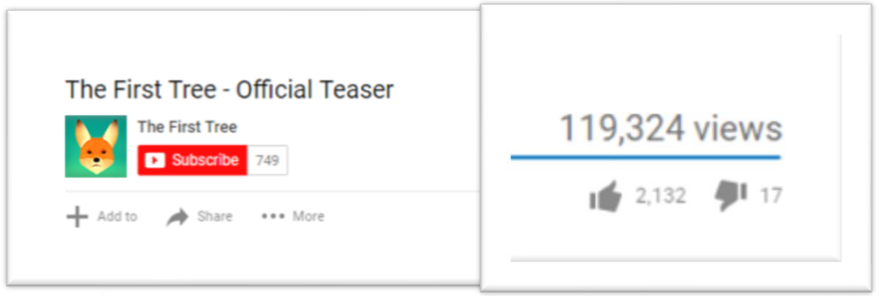
After 2 days: 3 million views on the GIF,

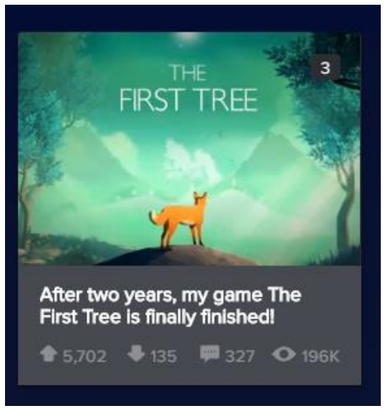
Over 200k Steam page visits



Imgur trophies







Home is Where One Starts...

What I did wrong

- I launched at midnight.
- I changed my launch date last minute.
- Practically no journalists or streamers published anything on launch day.
- No email list, only 200 Twitter followers.
- I launched without trading cards, subtitles, other languages, etc.

How did I do it for The First Tree?

Low-time / High-impact strategies

This talk is divided into two sections:

1. How I **developed** a game with little time/money
2. How I **marketed** the game with little time/money

Low-Time/High Impact **Development**

1. Find time
2. Asset stores are your friends
3. Never have a 0% day

Typical Weekday

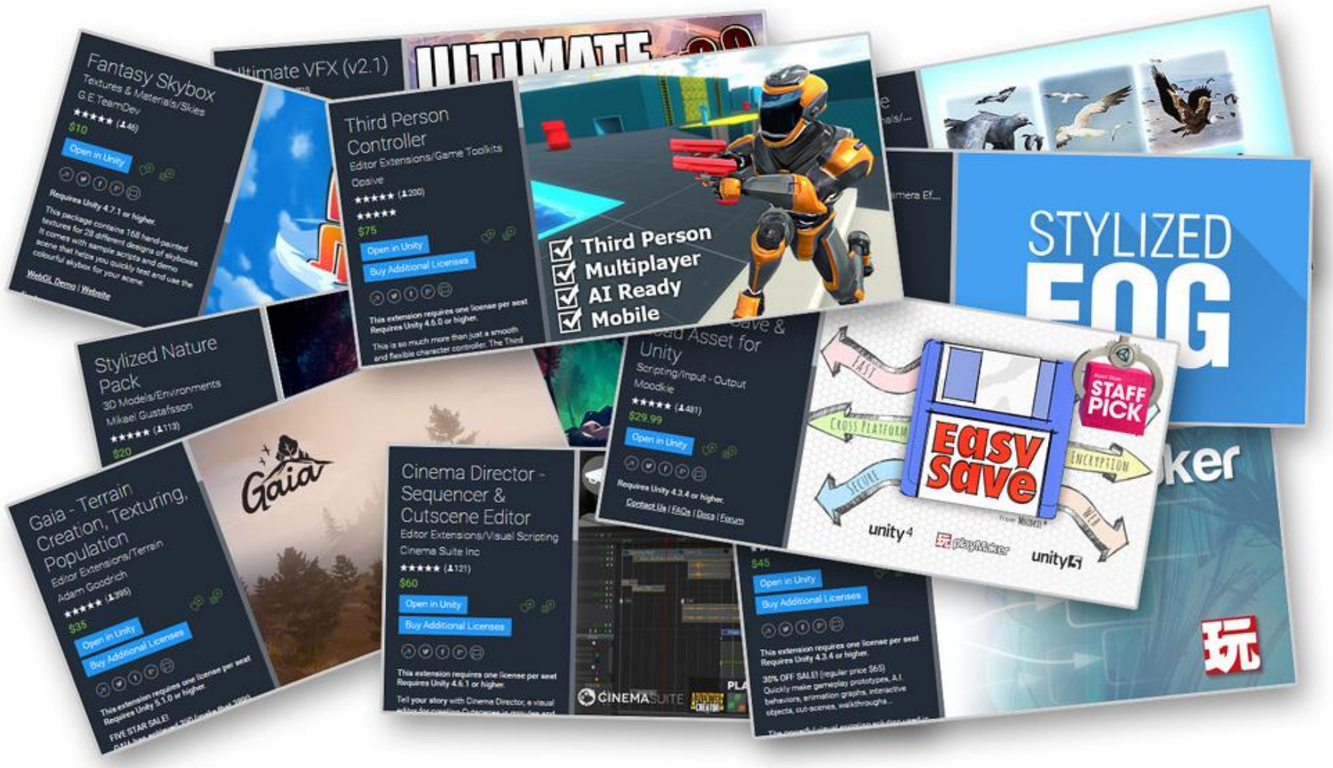
Work
- 8 hour work day
- Commute is 20 minutes

GAME DEV
- 45 minutes
- Hired neighborhood teens to watch our kids
  - $7/hour

Family Time
- Quality Time Together™

GAME DEV
- Another 1–2 hours in the evening

Week average: 10 hours



POND5

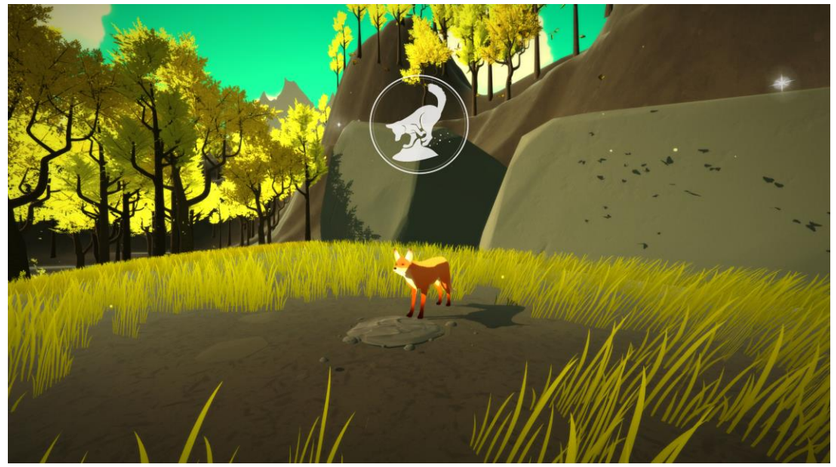
TURBOSQUID™

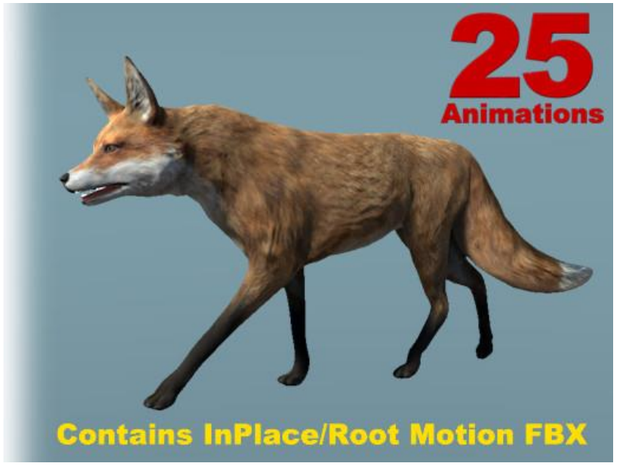
freesound

MUSICBED

envato

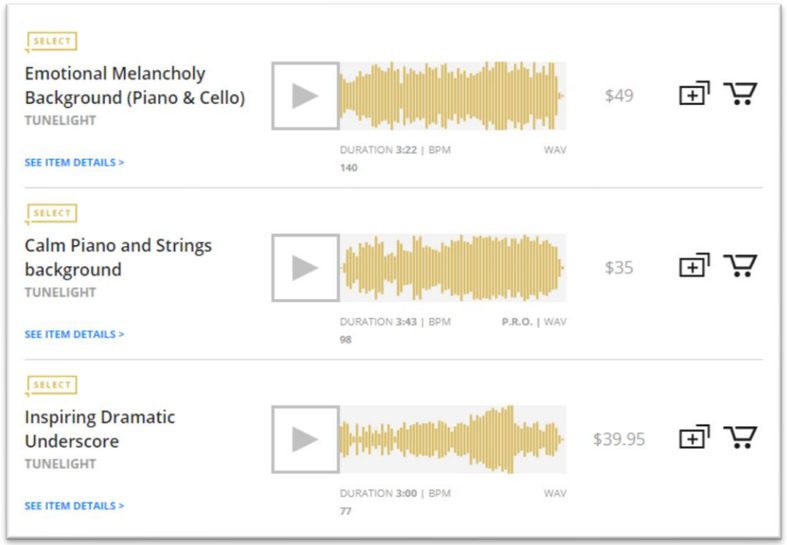
Credit: Mikael Gustafsson





Credit: 4Toon Studio

THE
FIRST TREE
Original Soundtrack
Music by Josh Kramer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Emotional Melancholy Background (Piano & Cello)
TUNELIGHT
$49
SEE ITEM DETAILS >
DURATION 3:22 | BPM 140 WAV
SELECT
Calm Piano and Strings background
TUNELIGHT
$35
SEE ITEM DETAILS >
DURATION 3:43 | BPM 98 P.R.O. | WAV
SELECT
Inspiring Dramatic Underscore
TUNELIGHT
$39.95
SEE ITEM DETAILS >
DURATION 3:00 | BPM 77 WAV

Never have a 0% day

Cons

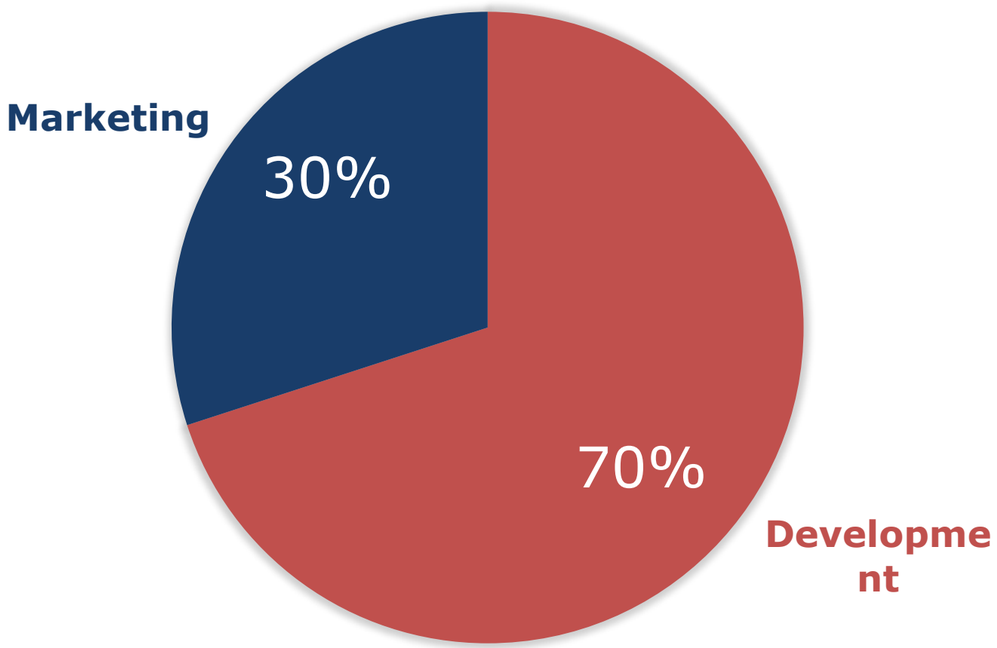
- Compromised vision
- Recognizable stock assets
  - Anticipate copyright claims for streamers.
- Extremely messy project / codebase
  - Like, it’s really, really bad.

And the one pro?

You finished* your game!

*Meaning it’s presentable

A typical week:



A typical marketing to-do list:

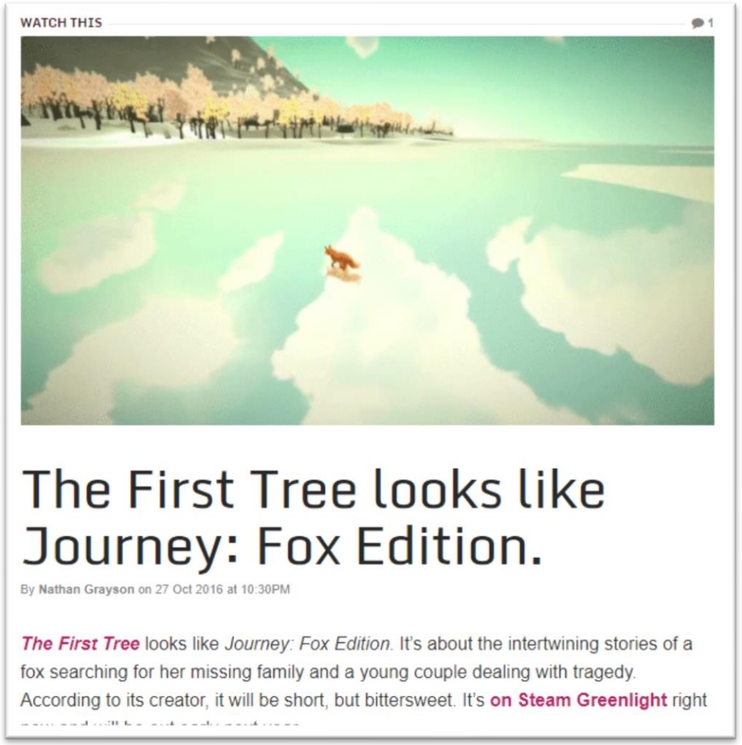
1. Make GIF
2. Post GIF
3. Rinse, repeat for 10 months

Low-Time/High Impact **Marketing**

1. Find your hook before development
2. “Visuals-first” development (gifs only!)
3. Social media blitz on launch

Credit: Shencomix.com

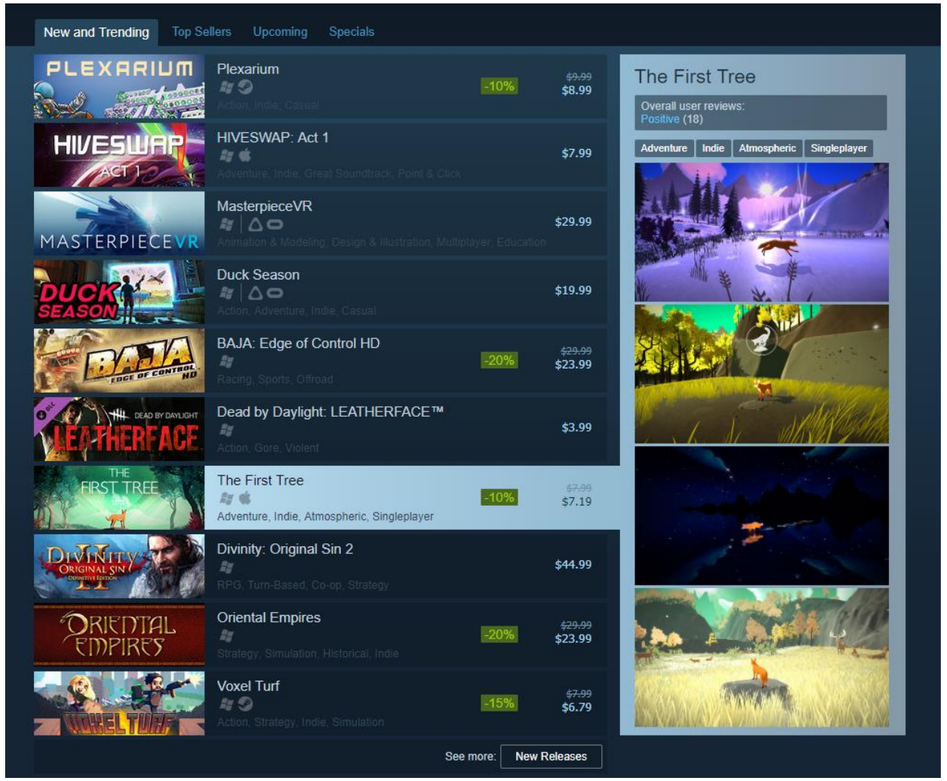
KOTAKU



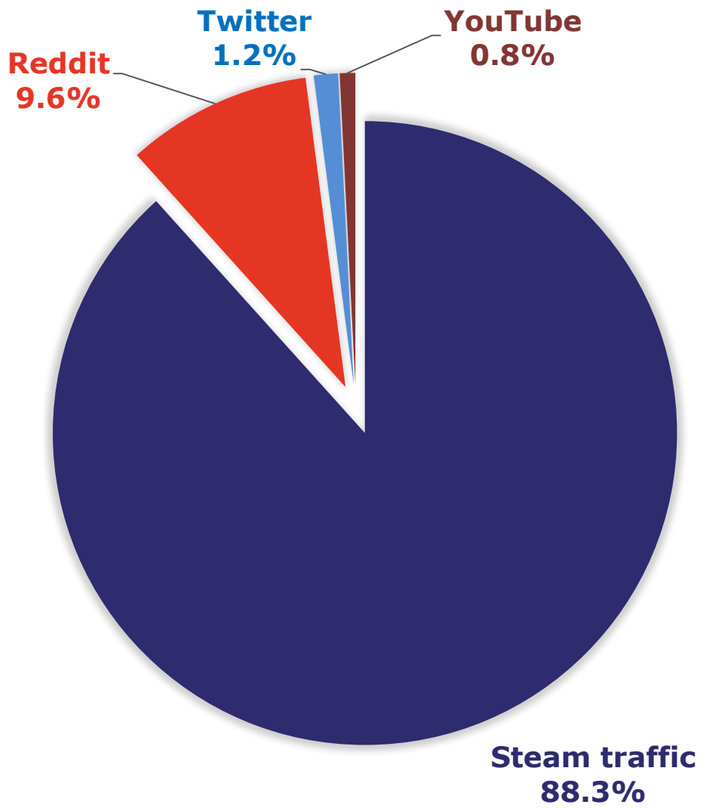
Visuals-first development

- Get a website, trailer, and Steam page ASAP
- GIFs were shared 10x more than screenshots
- Ooblets followed this principal to great success

Email list + wishlist + Social media blitz = New and Trending tab



Store page traffic on launch day



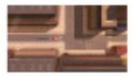
105k

A golf game for people who hate golf! - Worked on it for two years (media.giphy.com)

submitted 17 days ago by timgarbos to r/gaming 4 3 2

2194 comments share unsave hide give award report crosspost [I+c]

66.5k



After trying for 9 years to make it as an indie dev, I'm finally ready to share my game with reddit. This is my GTA2-inspired Battle Royale called Geneshift! (i.imgur.com)

submitted 1 month ago by bencelot to r/gaming 8 2

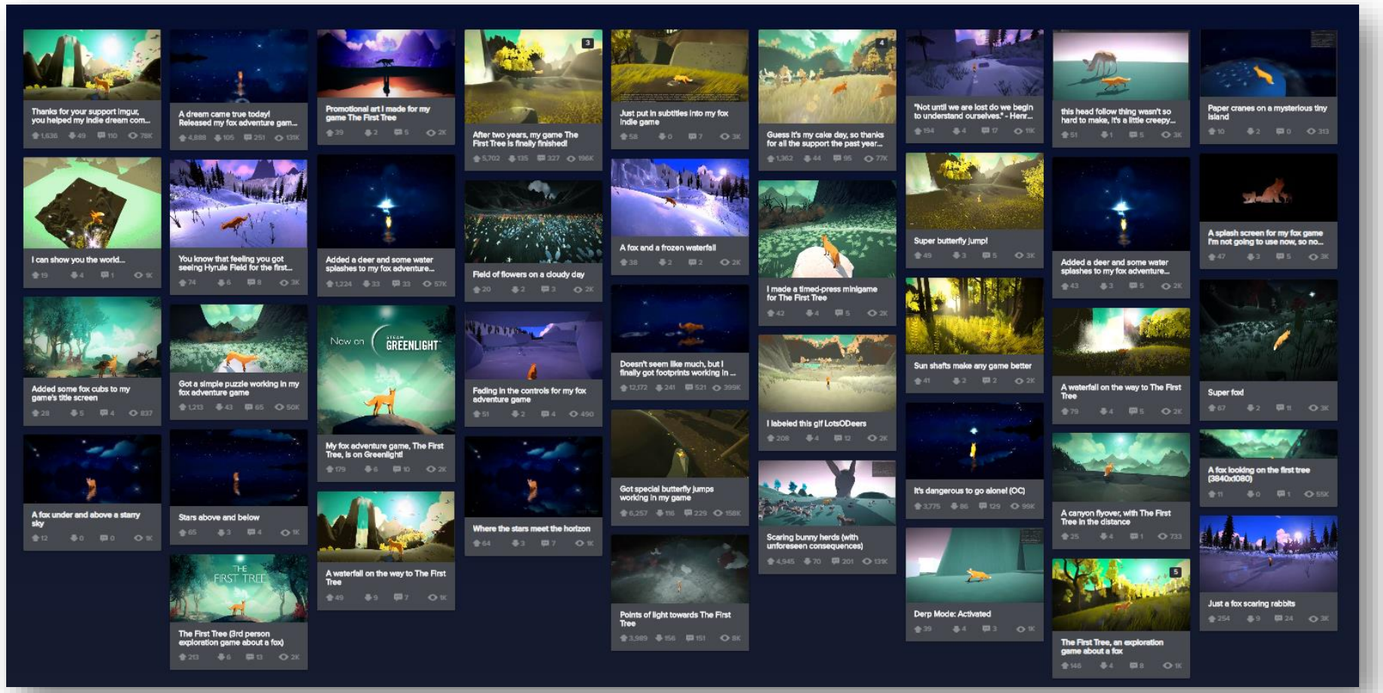
1673 comments share unsave hide give award report crosspost [I+c]

31.0k

25 years ago I got a Nintendo for Christmas... this year I released my first game on Nintendo! (i.redd.it)

submitted 2 months ago by indiegamesarefun [+1] to r/gaming 2

408 comments share unsave hide give award report crosspost [I+c]



6 Super fox! [The First Tree] (i.imgur.com)
submitted 2 years ago by Brak15 to r/gaming
6 comments share save hide delete nsfw sp

2 Points of light towards The First Tree (imgur.com)
submitted 2 years ago by Brak15 to r/gaming
comment share save hide delete nsfw spoiler crosspost

0 Derp Mode: Activated (imgur.com)
submitted 2 years ago by Brak15 to r/gaming
4 comments share save hide delete nsfw spoile

Examples of good Reddit posts

"As a kid I always dreamed of releasing a game on a Nintendo console... today it happened!"

Examples of good Reddit posts

"After 2 years of work and no knowledge of code, I still launched my fox adventure game today, The First Tree!"

Examples of good Reddit posts

“Doesn't seem like much, but getting footprints working in my game is huge for me [The First Tree]”

Examples of good Reddit posts

"Stress testing bunny herds in a game (with unforeseen consequences)"

Not so good...

"The First Tree launch trailer (releasing on Steam September 14)"

Not so good...

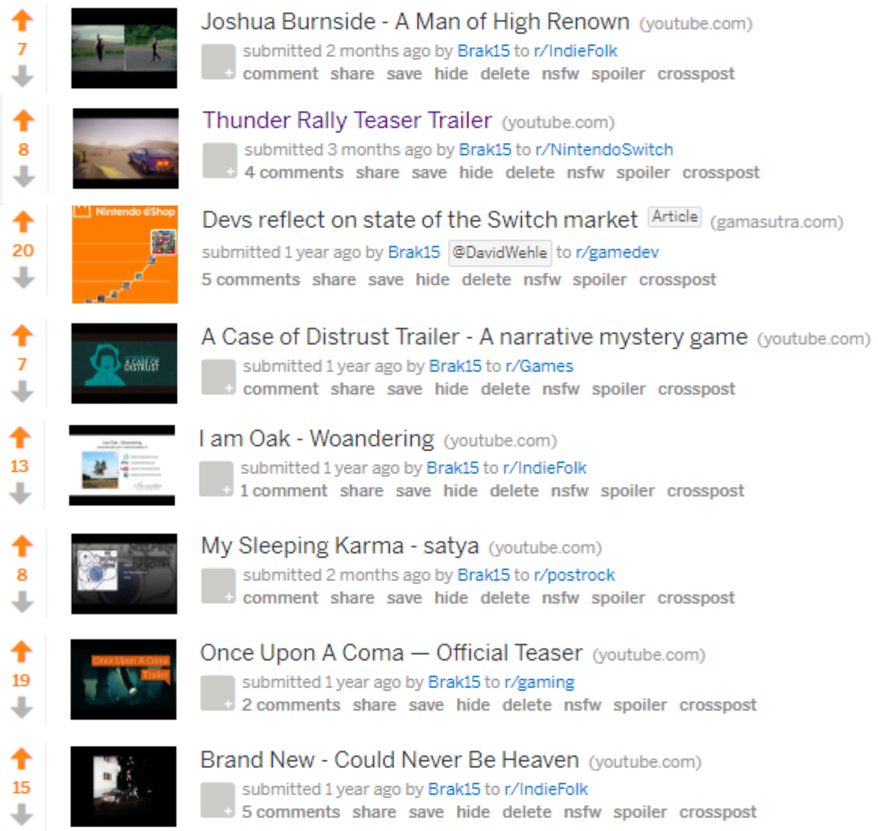
“Super fox! [The First Tree]”

Not so good...

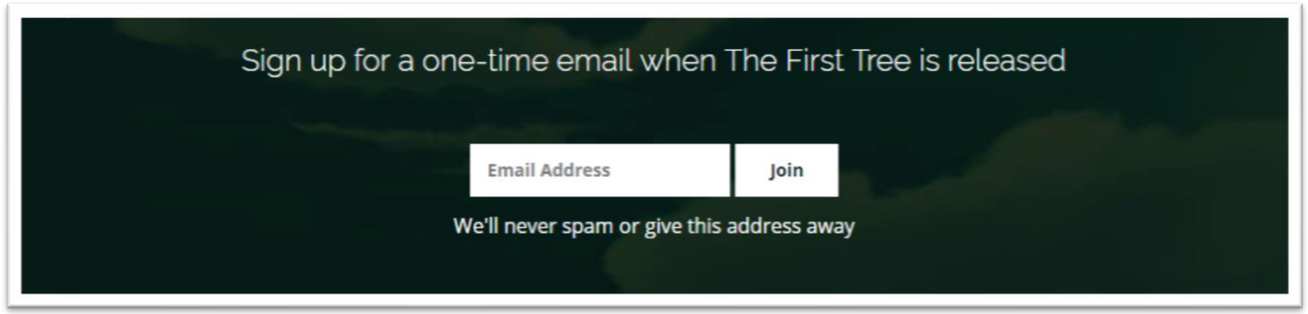
“Points of light towards The First Tree”

Self-promotional rules

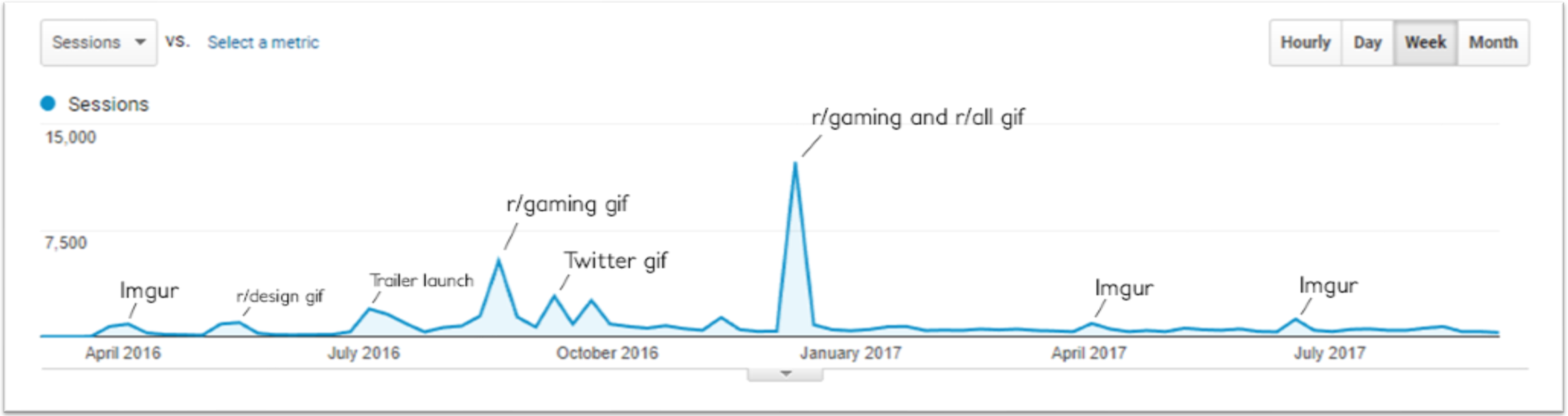
- This is by far the biggest complaint from indie devs using Reddit.
- Only 10% of submissions can be about your project.
- Create an account 1-3 months prior to launch, and submit an image/link/GIF once a day.



Remember the “call to action”



Get those wishlists/emails!


Sessions
vs.
Select a metric
Hourly
Day
Week
Month
Sessions
15,000
7,500
Imgur
r/design gif
Trailer launch
r/gaming gif
Twitter gif
r/gaming and r/all gif
Imgur
Imgur
April 2016
July 2016
October 2016
January 2017
April 2017
July 2017

Leading up to launch…

- 12,000 Steam wishlists
- 4700 Twitter followers
- 4400 mailing list subscribers
- 1300 Tumblr followers
- 100,000 views on YouTube trailer

My launch day checklist (AKA the blitz)

- Stacy Plays! Follow up with her on twitter
- Add box art to twitch/giantbomb
- Post reddit stuff at 1:54pm possibly? (fictorum did this and got front page)
- Email a press release to inbox@gamespress.com
- Add Steam forum topics for support
- Update website
- Send Mailchimp email
- IndieDB article
- Post on Gamasutra - post mortem
  - Post on r/gamedev
  - Post on r/Unity3D
  - Post on Facebook indie dev group
- Twitter like crazy (custom image for launch tweet)
- Post launch announcements on reddit
  - r/pcgaming
  - r/gamernews
  - AMA on r/games
  - r/indiegaming
  - r/foxes
- Facebook post for friends
- Facebook post on Indie Game groups
- Post GIFs on imgur (and update descriptions on previous images)
  - Tumblr too?
- Announcement on HiWOS steam page?
- Steam announcement the day before AND day of
- 9Gag post with tagged people

Uh oh, your big launch Reddit post failed?

- Don’t despair!
- Mailing list helped my game the most at first.
- Use smaller subreddits like r/Unity3D, r/pcgaming, r/indiegaming
- Just keep at it during all of launch day!

In Conclusion

Thank you!

Follow me on Twitter: @DavidWehle