Failing to Fail:
The Spiderweb Software Way

Jeff Vogel
Founder, Spiderweb Software

Thank you for taking a chance on my talk.

My name is Jeff Vogel.

I started Spiderweb Software in 1994.

We are a tiny indie game company based in Seattle.

You're never heard of us.

We're been around FOREVER.

We have written a bunch of low-budget fantasy role-playing games for Windows, Mac, and iPad...

Our games:

Exile: Escape From the Pit
Exile 2: Crystal Souls
Exile 3: Ruined World
Blades of Exile
Avernum
Avernum 2
Avernum 3
Avernum 4
Avernum 5
Avernum 6
Blades of Avernum

Nethergate
Nethergate: Resurrection
Geneforge
Geneforge 2
Geneforge 3
Geneforge 4: Rebellion
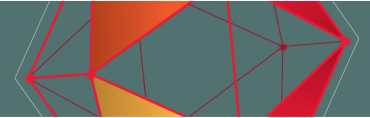Geneforge 5: Overthrow
Avadon: The Black Fortress
Avadon 2: The Corruption

Avadon 3: The Warborn
Avernum: Escape From the Pit
Avernum 2: Crystal Souls

Avernum 3: Ruined World

(For those keeping score.
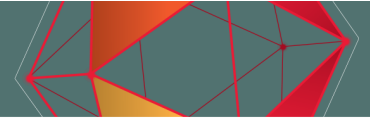
24 titles.
16 full-size all-new games.
8 full remasters.

😐

24 years.)

Exile: Escape From the Pit (Jan. 1995)

Avernum 3:
Ruined World

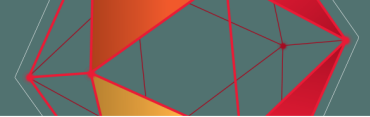**(Jan., 2018)**

We don't write hits.

But anyway.

What is the point of this?

It's a case study of a career.

I've been making a living writing indie games continuously for 24 years and am still going strong.

Indie games are a big thing now, but long indie careers are not. Yet.

How can you do the same thing?

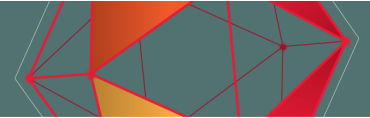**How do you make a full, continuous career in the indie games biz?**

(Few have. If any.)
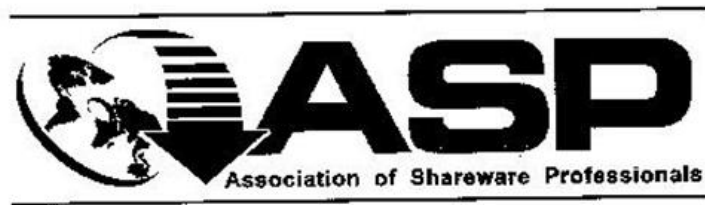
Here are some funny stories
and potentially helpful advice.

I won't tell you THE ANSWER.
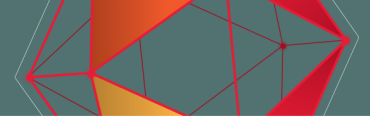But I might be able to help you ask better questions.

1. Shareware and other ancient history.

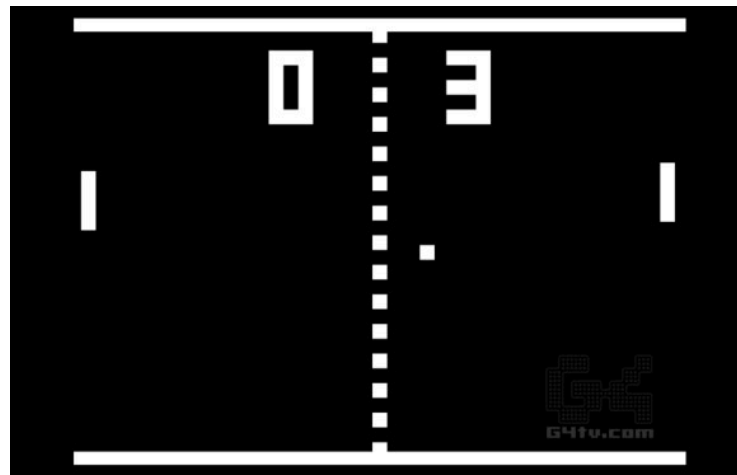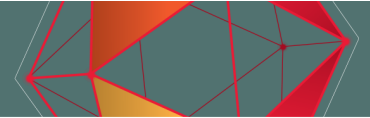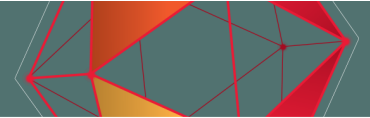**1970 - 1994**

This is the "Laugh at old people." segment.

How I got started:

Games were my calling.

I started with mazes when I was 5.
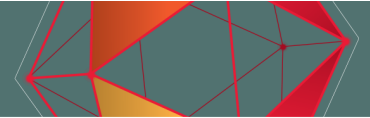
I played my first video game (Sea Wolf) in 1976 or so.

1 quarter.
70 seconds.

WEST OF HOUSE   SCORE: 0/0
ZORK: THE GREAT UNDERGROUND EMPIRE -
PART I
COPYRIGHT (C) 1980 BY INFOCOM, INC. ALL
RIGHTS RESERVED.
ZORK IS A TRADEMARK OF INFOCOM, INC.
RELEASE 15 / SERIAL NUMBER UG3AU5

WEST OF HOUSE
YOU ARE STANDING IN AN OPEN FIELD WEST
OF A WHITE HOUSE, WITH A BOARDED FRONT
DOOR.
THERE IS A SMALL MAILBOX HERE.
>*

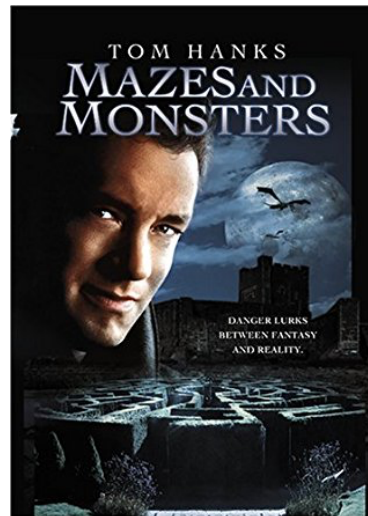**As a child, I dreamed of writing computer games for a living.**

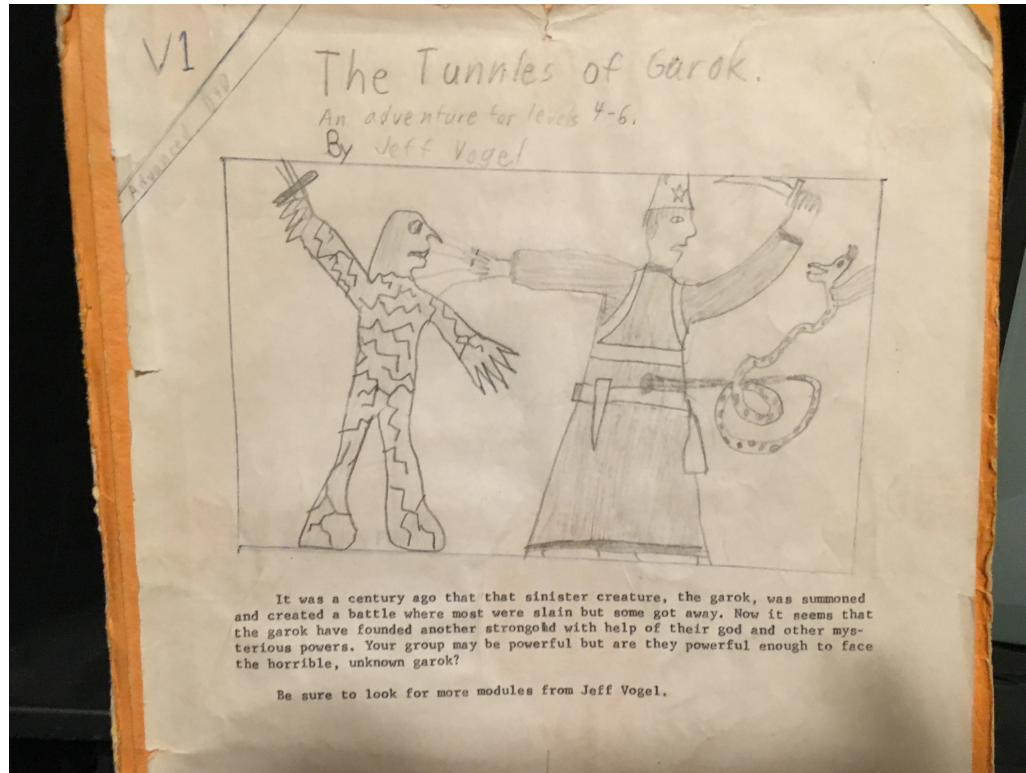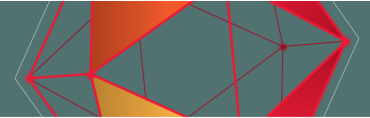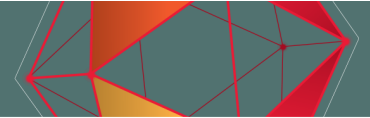**I wrote an Advanced Dungeons and Dragons module for my school library.**

It was banned.

Lesson: This is a young art form.

"Nobody knows anything."

- William Goldman

My first game was shareware.

What was 'shareware'?

Shareware tends to combine the worst of commercial software with the worst of free software.

Linus Torvalds

quotefancy

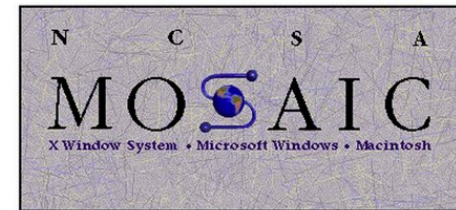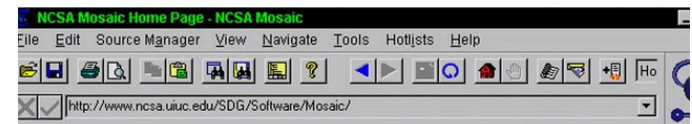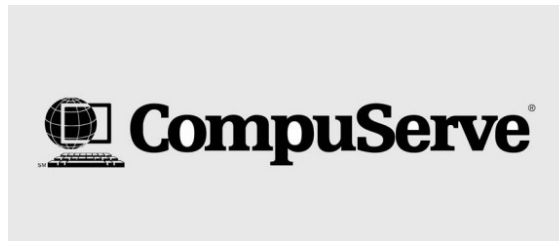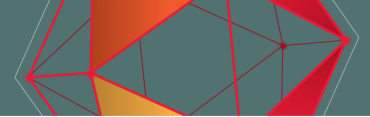# What was the Internet like?

Not a lot.

Remember … There was barely an Internet. The first web browser was only three years old and had no sites to go to.

Everyone at home used a modem.

How were games were distributed in Ancient Days?

We used AOL. CompuServe. Prodigy.

Shareware CDs sold with magazines.

Shareware collections sold at stores.

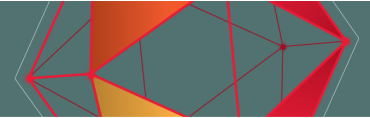And, of course, floppy disks sold at mall kiosks.

How money was collected in ancient days:

Checks. Mail order. Cash.

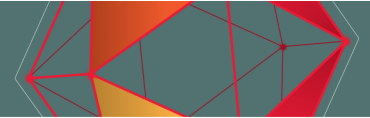**Credit cards, if you could get a
bank to trust you.
(You couldn't.)**

**In early 1994, while in grad school,
I obtained a PowerPC Macintosh 6100.**

(I have been very lucky.)

About $2200 with monitor. ($3700 is today dollars.)

30 MHz chip, 250 MB hard drive

8 MB RAM

(upgraded to 16 MB for $400, $680 in today dollars)

CodeWarrior development environment.

All programming was learned from

paper books, combined with
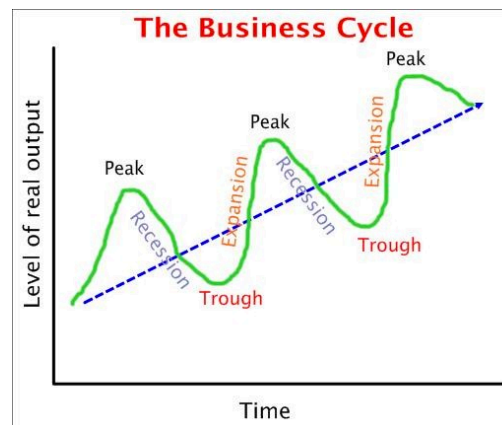
days of trial and error.

I wanted to play an awesome RPG, but there weren't any.

A BIG lucky break: I got the ability to write an RPG when there weren't any good RPGs.

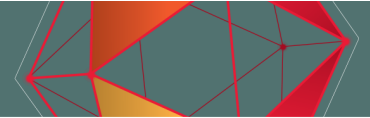**(In other words, I was lucky enough to get in during a trough in the business cycle.)**

Being a sensible person,
I hated grad school.

I finally had the chance to fulfill
a lifelong dream.

OK. I know I want to make an RPG.

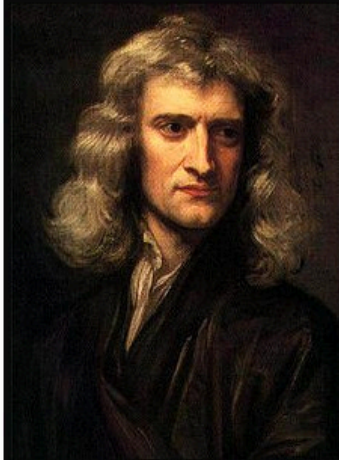**(Long, awkward silence.)**

How do I make that thing?

My design process:

I will recall every RPG I loved as a kid.
Then I will steal the best idea from each.

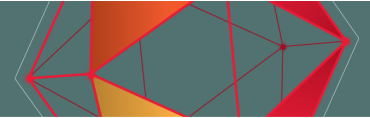If I have seen further than others, it is by standing upon the shoulders of giants.

(Isaac Newton)

izquotes.com

Lesson: Find your creative process.

Then defend it.

This is PRACTICAL advice.

If you want to make a living this way long-term, you need to create a life and mindset you can tolerate.

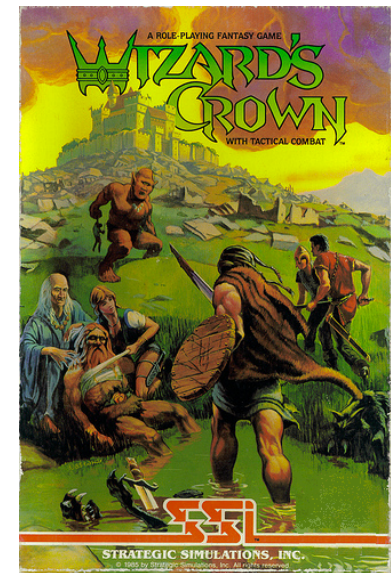**If something is wearing you down, you won't be able to tolerate it for 40 years. Change it.**
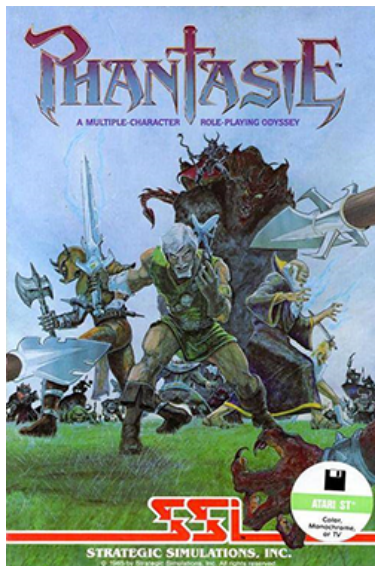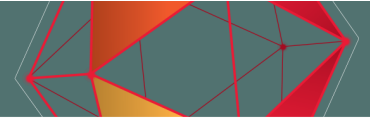
I start writing the game.

I do school stuff during the day.
I work on my game at night.

I was young.

I had infinite time and energy.
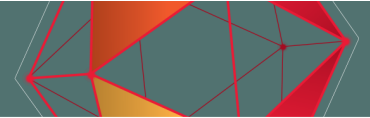
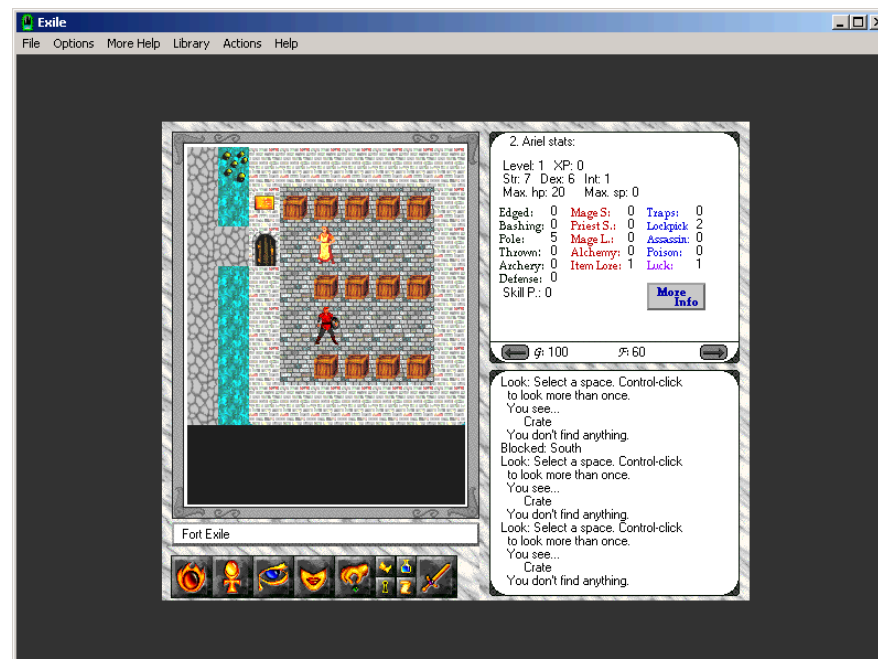I spent four months writing an RPG engine.

My wife makes graphics for me.

I finish the game in 9-10 months, counting testing.
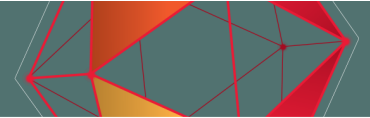
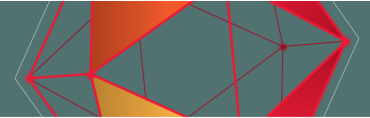**It could have been so much better.**

2. I SHIP A GAME OMG.

1995

I discover another part of my process.

I get it done. Then I move on.

"It's better than good! It's good enough!"

- Community

I get a publisher, kind of.
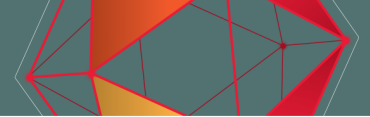
Lesson: Be lucky.

We start a business.

This means tedious legal stuff.
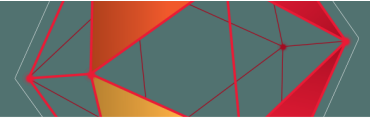
Lesson: Get an accountant.

(And have a lawyer for contracts and IP on speed-dial.)

I need to pick a price.

I charge $25!

(That's $41.35 in 2017 money.)

I have to decide how big my demo is. (It's big.)

I've always been proud of this part.

By the way, our unofficial motto has always been:

"If you aren't happy with our game, we don't want your money."

I press the ship button, and
Everything changes.

Screwdriver

Thanks to our publisher and a MacWorld shareware disk, we are a success.

(Having no competition helps.)

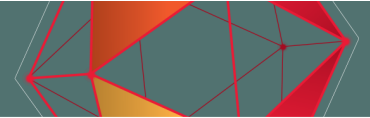**Our 1995 sales:**
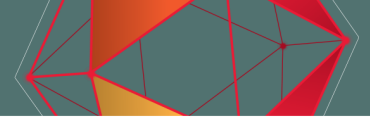**(1 employee)**

$32829 USD ($53757 in 2017 $)
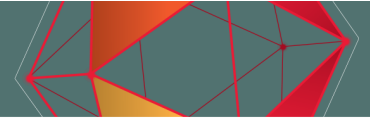
Best of all …

I OWN MY WORK.

I have a game that I own and that sells. (And not a day has gone by since then that I didn't make money off of it.)

Everything is now about two things:

Fan base.

Back catalog.

3. I Go Full Time.

1996

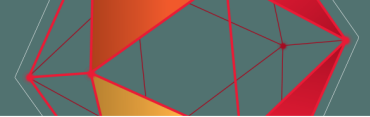**My game is out and kind of sells.**

My grad school performance is down to zero.

So I take the consolation prize (a Masters).
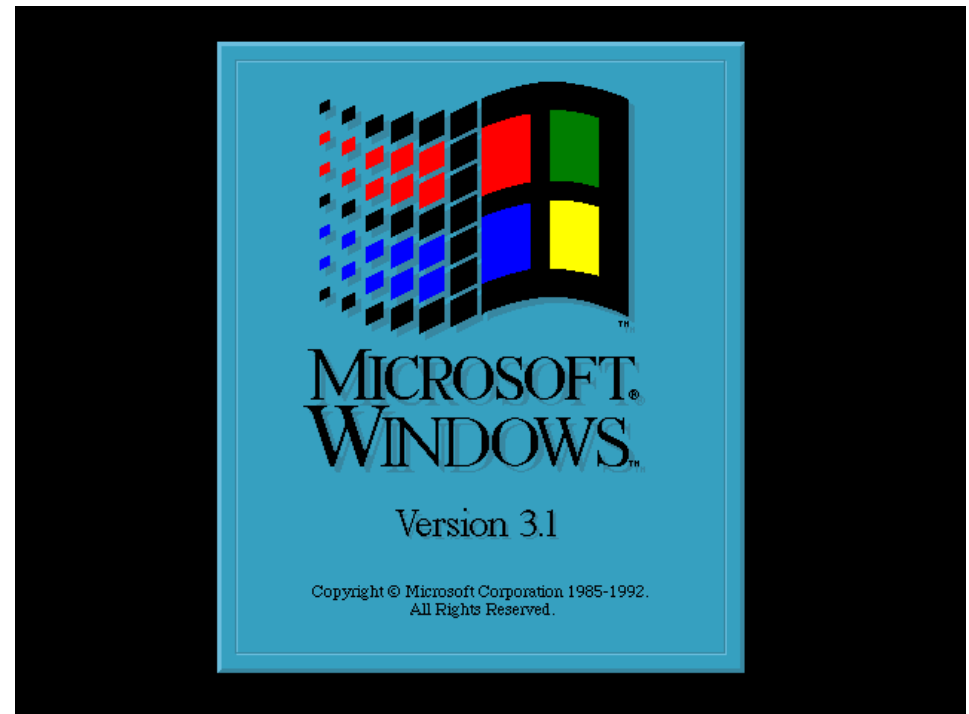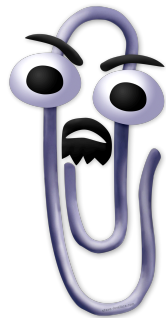**Then I get out.**
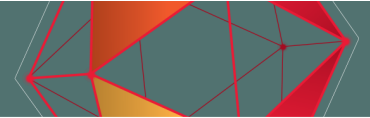
I port Exile to Windows.

Windows 3.1 is terrible.

Exile sells there too.

What should I write for a second game?
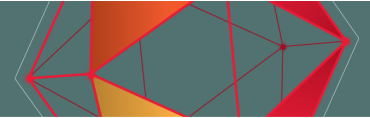
I have a brilliant idea!

I start a sequel! Exile 2: Crystal Souls.

"The things I did not know at first, I learned by doing twice."
- William Martin Joel

I have my first slow period.

The post-release sharp sales drop hits me for the first time.

For Exile 2, I develop my strategy for writing games as a lone bottom feeder.

I go it alone.

I reuse code.

I reuse assets.

Each game, I figure out the worst parts of the engine and fix those.

To sum up: LEAN AND MEAN.
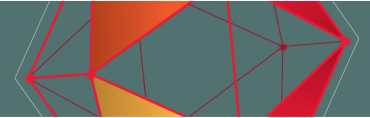
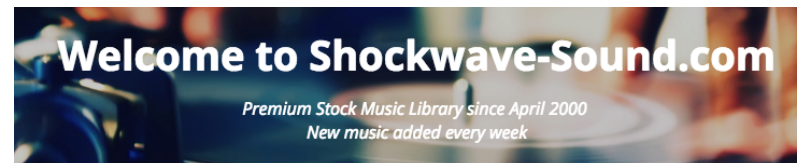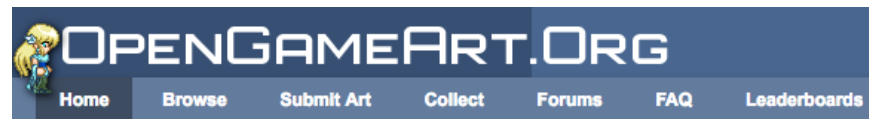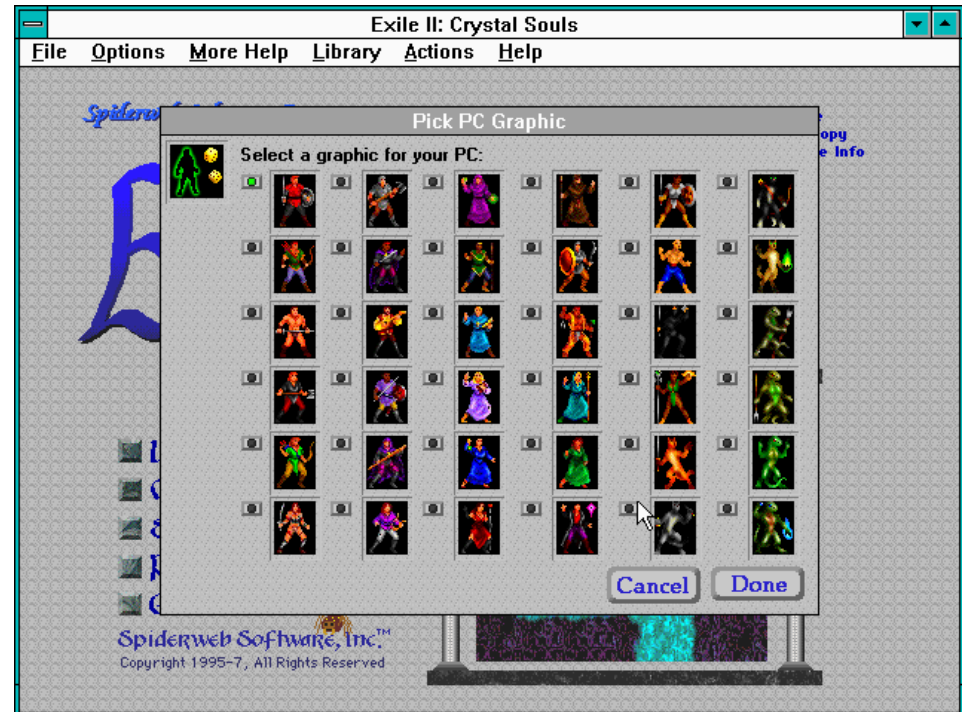**Lesson: Again, find your creative process.**
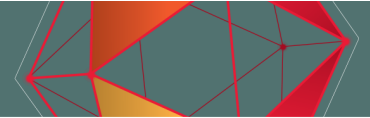
(And it's OK to be cheap.)

3. I have a hit.

1997-1998

What should I write for a third game?

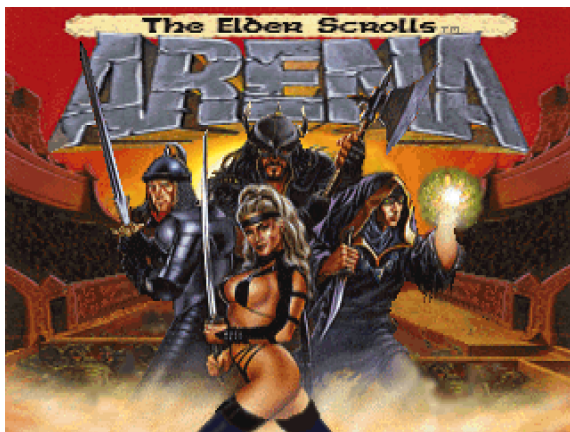**I have a brilliant idea!**

I start a sequel! Exile 3: Ruined World.

My design process: Playing every hit game that came out in the previous 3 years and steal the best idea from each.

Lesson: Most of the time, innovation isn't needed.

A great Indie strategy is to develop for one of the many evergreen genres too small for the AAA folks.

(Not many of these genres exist now, alas.)

It's 1997. We make a web site!

spiderwebsoftware.com

We put demos here too. We control them!

(Someone has been squatting on spiderweb.com for 25 years.)

Welcome to ...

SPIDERWEB SOFTWARE

The source for Exile: Escape From the Pit, Exile II: Crystal Souls, and Exile III: Ruined World!

Welcome to the Spiderweb Software, Inc. Homepage. Spiderweb Software is a small company dedicated to creating the best possible entertainment shareware for the Macintosh and PC Windows 3.1/95 platforms.

On this Web page, you can find information and screenshots for Spiderweb Software's three hot games: *Exile: Escape From the Pit*, *Exile II: Crystal Souls*, and our new hit *Exile III: Ruined World*.. Then, if you are intrigued, you can download the demos of these games right here.

New Stuff!

- New versions of Exile II for Windows 3.1/95 and Macintosh are now out! Plenty of small bug fixes.
- Exile III: Ruined World v1.0.3 for Macintosh is now out (new as of March 18)! A patch up from 1.0.* is also out. It just got 4 joysticks from Inside Mac Games, and keeps getting more and more popular. To check it out, click here.
- We finally got our new, spiffy ordering form up. If you want to get your game registered as fast as possible, go here.

Our products:

Games for PC Windows 3.1/95	Games for Macintosh
Exile III: Ruined World	Exile III: Ruined World
Exile II: Crystal Souls	Exile II: Crystal Souls
Exile: Escape From the Pit	Exile: Escape From the Pit

We go independent.

Running the business ourselves means we have to build everything.

I convince (beg) someone to let me take credit cards.

We program our own online store. Host our own demos.
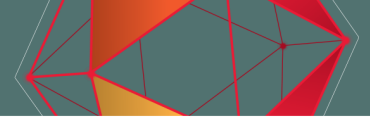
This is a HASSLE.

Lesson: Appreciate how awesome the Future is.

Exile 3: Ruined World comes out.

It is a hit.

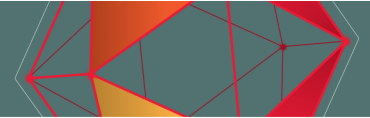What does a shareware "hit" mean in 1997?

Less than now.

Our 1995 sales:

(1 employee)

$32829 USD ($53757 in 2017 $)

Our 1997 sales:

(1 employee)

$207172.37 USD ($329360.89 in 2017 $)

www.BigCatClipart.com · 543

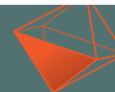**My wife quits a job she doesn't like and we run Spiderweb together.**

We have to do all our own everything.

We deal with many, many "humans" over email and on the phone.

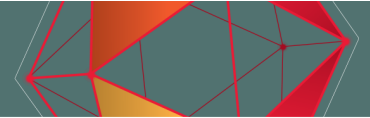Turns out, people are horrible even if they're talking to you with words like a human.

Lesson: Some people are mean.

Love has a nasty habit of disappearing overnight.

- the beatles

boardofwisdom.com

There's nothing more furious than the rage of a scorned fan.

Lesson: Shelter your brain.

Lesson: Don't be afraid to fire a customer.

We try to help other shareware developers.

WRITE SHAREWARE!
THE SHAREWARE DEVELOPER'S RESOURCE

http://www.spiderwebsoftware.com/shareware.html
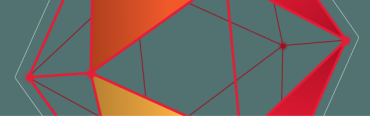
4. The Dot-Com Bubble!

pets.com

1998-2001

It was the first great cloud of internet ridiculousness.
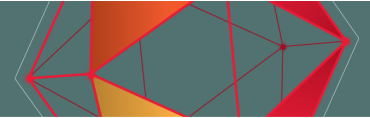
There were a flood of doomed Internet companies.

Their founders grew their companies fast with no hope of long-term profitability in order to go public, cash in on an IPO, and get out before everything exploded.

(It all crashed, of course. Happily, we learned our lessons and none of this will ever happen again.)

Surprisingly, the bubble helped us.

Tons of doomed gaming web site.
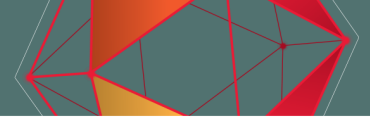**Tons of free press.**
Tons of shareware CDs.

FREE PR!!!!!

Between the hit and the boom, we had money.

We had to decide what sort of business we would run.
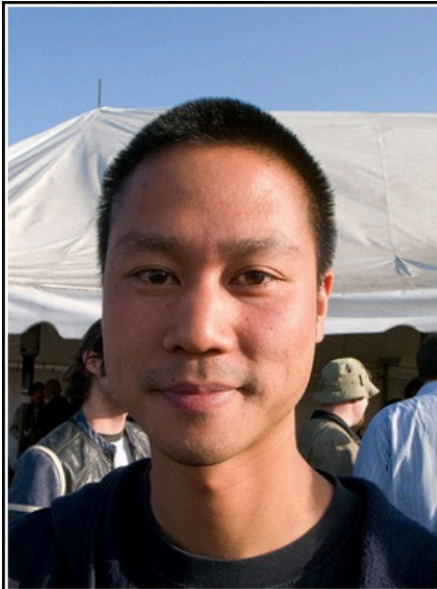
I knew I had the chance to build something really big.

We made a decision.

We hired a full-time employee, so that we could take vacations.

And that's it.

Most companies are very quick to hire and slow to fire, when really it should be the other way around.
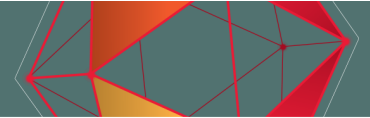
— Tony Hsieh —

AZ QUOTES

We have no regrets.
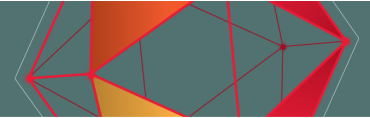
Lesson: Again AGAIN, find your creative process.

One more fun fact!
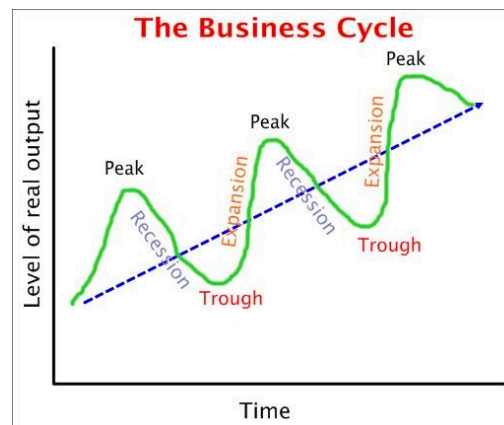
People paid me to write about games!

Like, writing about games was good money!

Lesson: Business cycles exist.

Between 1998 and 2001, in our modest way, we write a lot more games.

We make Blades of Exile, which adds to the Exile engine a scenario editor.

It's frighteningly popular.
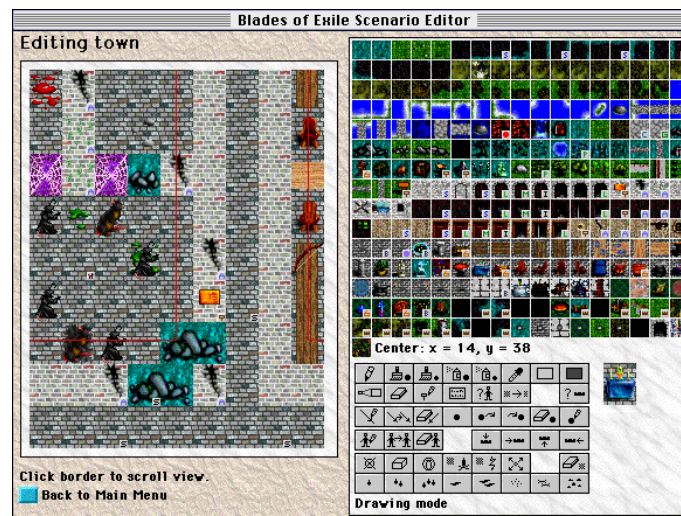
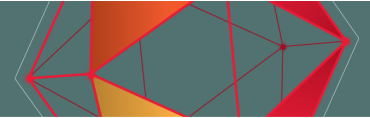**We make Nethergate.**

A historical RPG in Roman-occupied Britain.

It contains actual research!

It has an innovative story structure where you play as Romans or Celts and experience both sides of a single story.

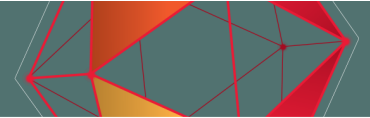It sells pretty good, but it seemed too much like an educational game, which is death.

Everyone tells me every day how terrible my game graphics are.

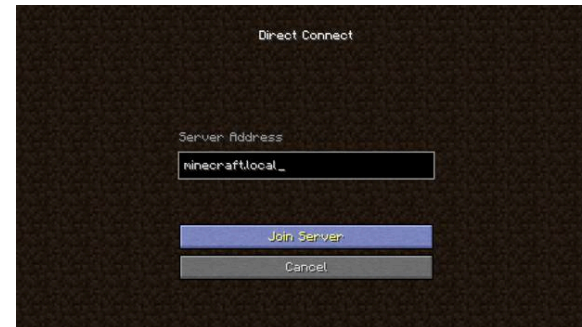I spend a lot of money and effort getting nicer graphics.

Result: Everyone tells me every day how terrible my game graphics are.

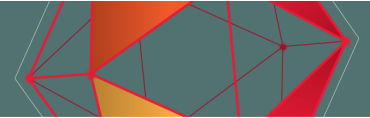# Side Observation: Just about everything is good to SOMEBODY.

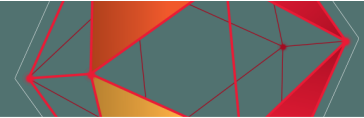**After seven years, we were confident. We had a niche and we served it well.**
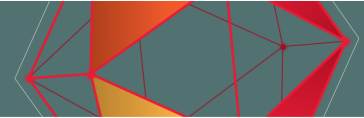
5. We grind along and almost go out of business.

2001-2010

We make the Geneforge series.
This contains actual innovation.

We do our first remaster! It's great! We do two more!!!

We make games for six more years. They sell. Not as much as before, but solid.

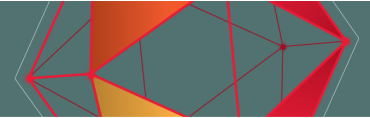**We have a fan base and back catalog. We have annual sales.**

(10% OFF!!!!!)

Spiderweb grosses about $200000 USD a year. This is a constant for us for most of our career.

Seven years after the dot.com crash. It's 2007.

We stagnate.

Geneforge 3 (2008)

We spend a lot of time on two games that don't do well.
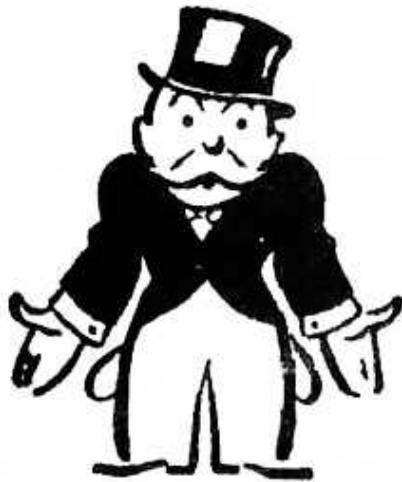
We almost go out of business.

Our 2003 gross sales:
(3 employees)

$212998 USD ($291100 in 2017 $)

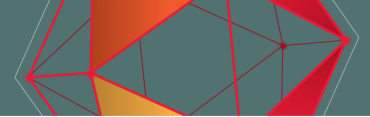**Our 2004 gross sales:**
(3 employees)

$168357 USD ($222739 in 2017 $)

We have to figure out how to survive.

We completely revise how we develop games.

We rework how we tell stories and make a whole new engine.

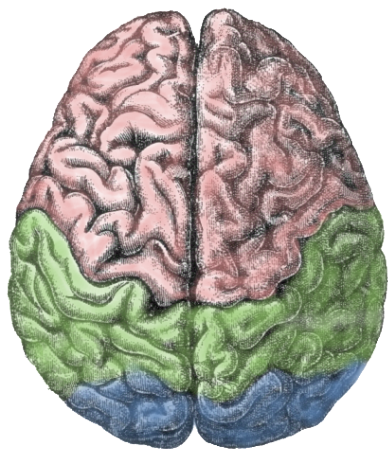**Lesson: It's important to keep growing as an artist.**

This is a PRACTICAL tip.

Brains crave variety.

Our next games sell well.
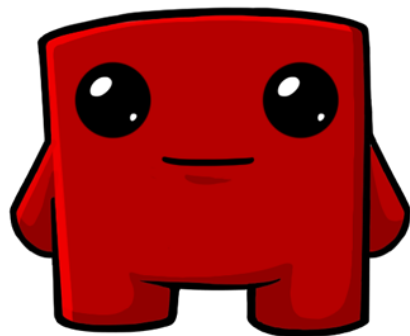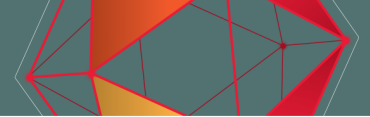
We stay in business. Phew!

6. The Indie Bubble happens.

2011-2017

Three factors combine to make indie games huge overnight:

AAA Stagnation.

New indie tools and ambition.

Quality stores for indie games.

(Plus the Hidden Factor X.)
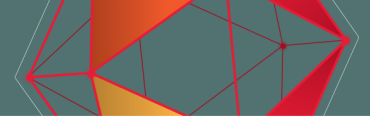
(People want us to succeed!)

We are able to make a lot of money.

Lesson: Luck, revisited.

We get onto a lot of online stores and get more press coverage than we should.

Lesson: Be the easy person to work with.

We change our pricing strategy because Steam tells us to.

Our games are now $10.

We make it up in volume.

Our 2011 gross sales:

(3 employees)

$750666 USD ($843353 in 2017 $)
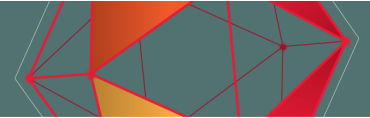
We write more games. We remaster more games.

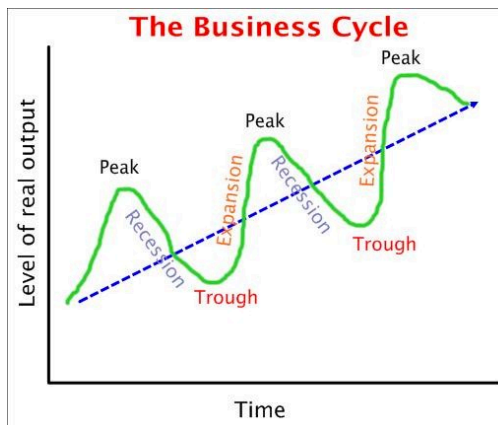**They sell a lot. Then they sell less.**

Massive competition comes in.
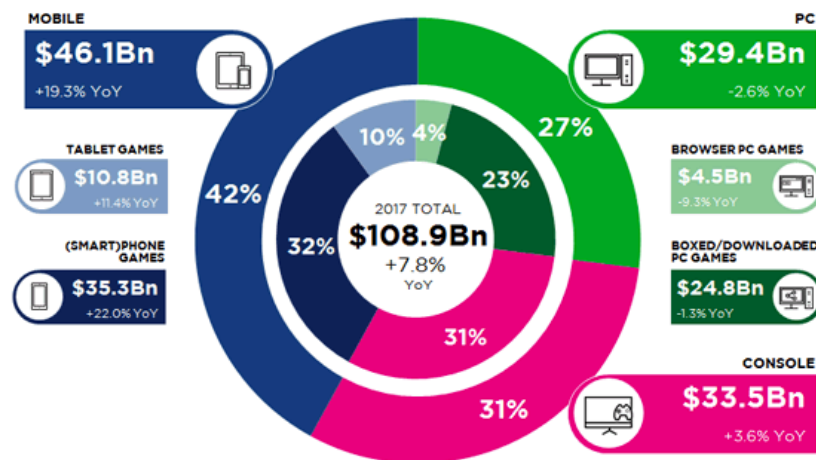
Sales go down.

We raise our prices again.

A new generation of indie heroes rises.

I get old.

7. Now

(Source: newzoo.com, which is a web site or something.)

2018 - ?

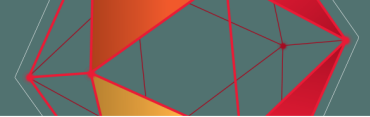**Video games are an enormously competitive blood-sport business.**

Developers are still nice to each other because that's the only way this life is tolerable.

In January, we shipped Avernum 3: Ruined World, the second remaster of our "hit."

I've started designing a whole new game in a whole new world. We'll alternate between new stuff and remasters as long as we can.

Spiderweb Software will keep doing what we do as long as we can.

We'll write the sort of games we like to play.

If that fails, I'll get a real job.

An existing fan base and back catalog keeps us alive.

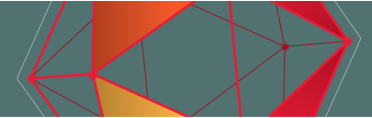A game that was fun once is still fun.

You got to pay your dues if
you want to sing the
blues... And you know it
don't come easy.

Ringo Starr
PICTUREQUOTES.com

PICTUREQU❤TES
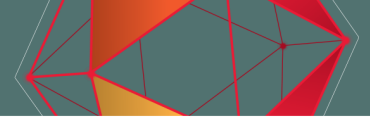
8. It is possible for you to do what we did?

This is the big mystery.

If you don't make a big hit game, you have to build up a fan base.

This takes years of work and tenacity.

It's a very difficult, time-consuming business, with a lot of luck and unpredictability.

Making a living as an artist has always and will always be hard.
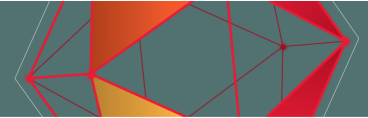
There is one prerequisite, and, once you have it, you should be able to figure out how to build a career ...

Lesson: Don't quit your day job until you can afford to.

9. Final inspirational words for inspiration!

Be proud.

It is a noble thing to create.

"We are the music makers, and we are the dreamers of dreams."

- Obi-Wun Kenobi

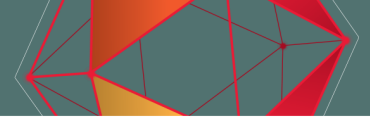**www.spiderwebsoftware.com**
Twitter: @spiderwebsoft
Blog: http://jeff-vogel.blogspot.com/