



**MARCH 18-22, 2024**  
**SAN FRANCISCO, CA**

# Protecting Your Team: Founding Your Studio on People Not Product

Dr. Jenn (People Strategy Consultant, TVETM)

Trento von Lindenberg (CEO, Mouldbreaker Interactive)

Adinda van Oosten (Game Journalist and Educator, Acreates)

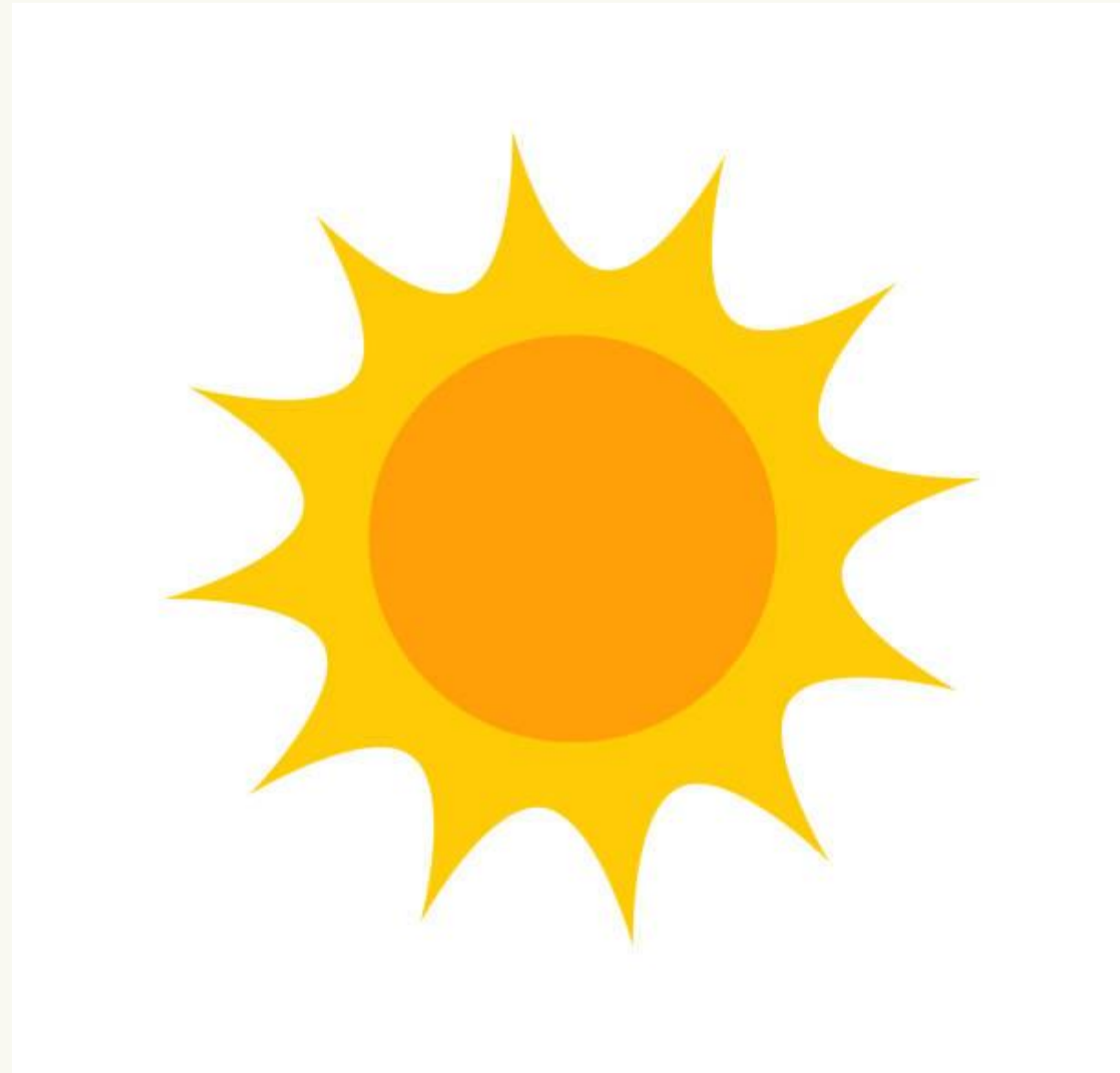
Julien Schillinger (CEO, PandaBee Studios UG (haftungsbeschränkt))

James Laird (Product Lead, Series AI)

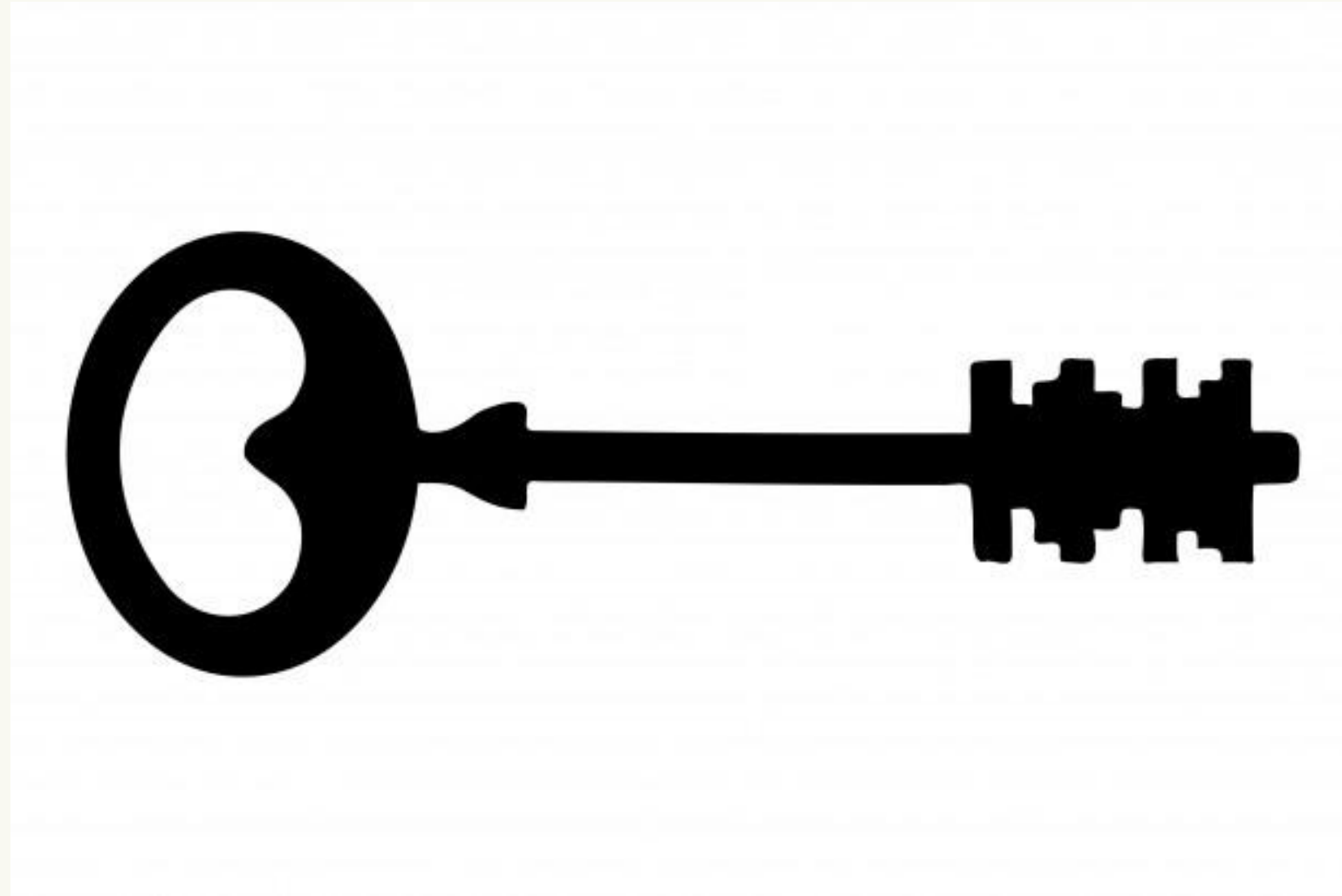
Don Daglow (Video Games Designer, Independent)

**#GDC2024**

# People Grow Best in the Sunshine



# Indie Studios May Hold The Key





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# Protect Your Team

They're Worth It

**Trento von Lindenberg**

CEO, Mouldbreaker Interactive



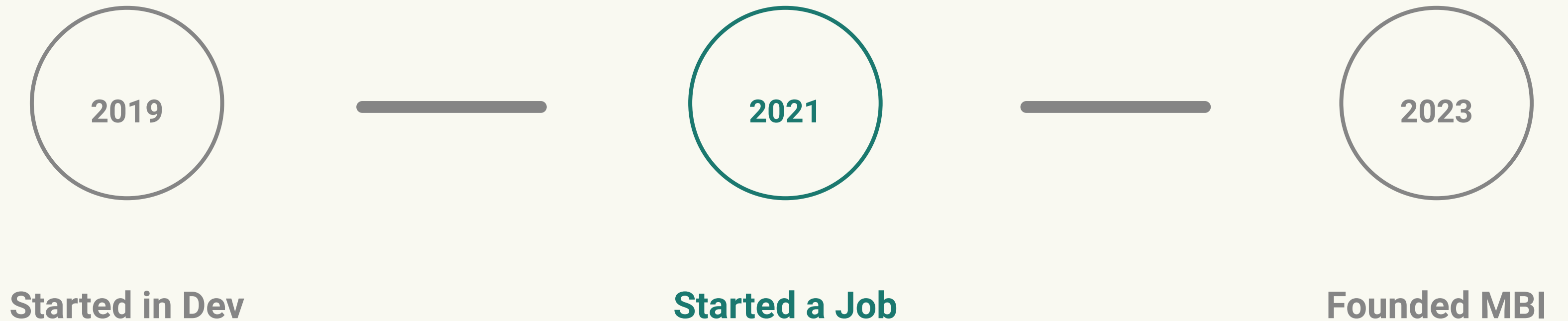
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# I'm not here to tell you what to do

Instead, I'd like to tell a story of “why”

And if it sounds familiar... give you a lifeline

# Let's go back to 2021





# A rough wake-up call

Games should be about the fun of creating something, together	“Laughing is unprofessional”
Games should be a collaborative environment	“Producers never like their teams”
Teams should be built on trust	“Gaslighting is my core philosophy”



I needed an anchor to stay... me



# My team became my rallying cry



Trento von  
Lindenberg  
CEO & Producer

Bio



Austin Garcia  
VP & Design  
Director

Bio



Sydney Ayers  
VP & Creative  
Director

Bio



Kaitlin "KB"  
Bonfiglio  
Human Relations  
Manager

Bio



Vic Naumov  
3D Character Artist  
& Animator

Bio



Vivi Nguyen  
Concept & 2D  
Artist

Bio



Joseph  
Perrino  
Technical Director

Bio



Olivia Lynn  
Backend  
Programmer

Bio



Michael  
Bridges  
Sound Designer &  
Composer

Bio

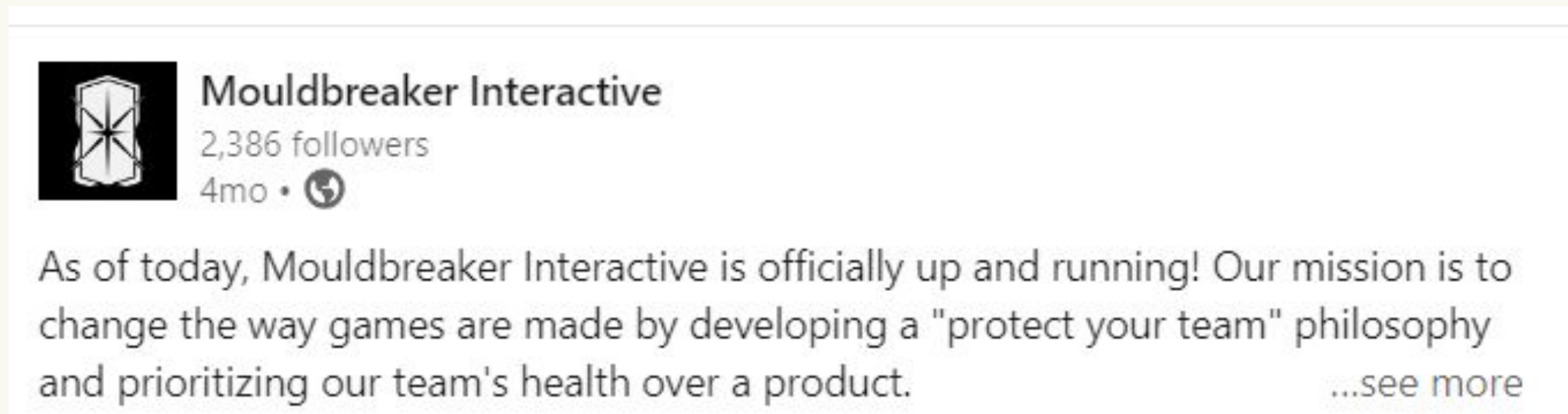


Catherine  
Litvaitis  
Community  
Developer

Bio

# We committed to a change

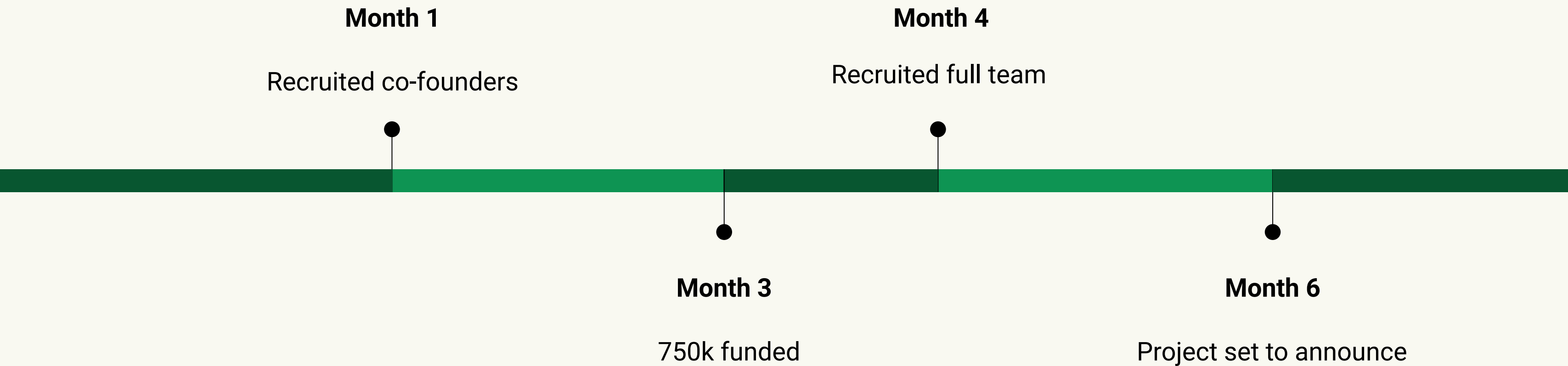
- After turning down three companies, it was clear **we needed more studios that believe in people over product**
- In October 2023, Mouldbreaker was born!



# We wanted to be people-first

- Established core company values early
  - Protect, Promote, Create, Advocate
- Hired a people-focused Human *Relations* Manager
- Built policies *with* our team
  - PTO Policies
  - Communication pillars
  - Monthly Holidays
  - Roadmap to 4-day workweeks

# And the lifeline is... *it worked*





# But one company isn't enough



Together, we can make a wider change in industry

# You can be a part of the change

- Find your rallying cry
- Advocate for others
- Challenge product over people
- Share resources (like these!)
- Remind others that **better people make better products**

And above all else:



*Feel free to use our policies!*



# Be Kind. Protect *your* team.

You're worth it... *and* it works.

# Thank you!



**MOULDBREAKER**  
INTERACTIVE

The Mouldbreaker Team



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# **A Catalyst for Change**

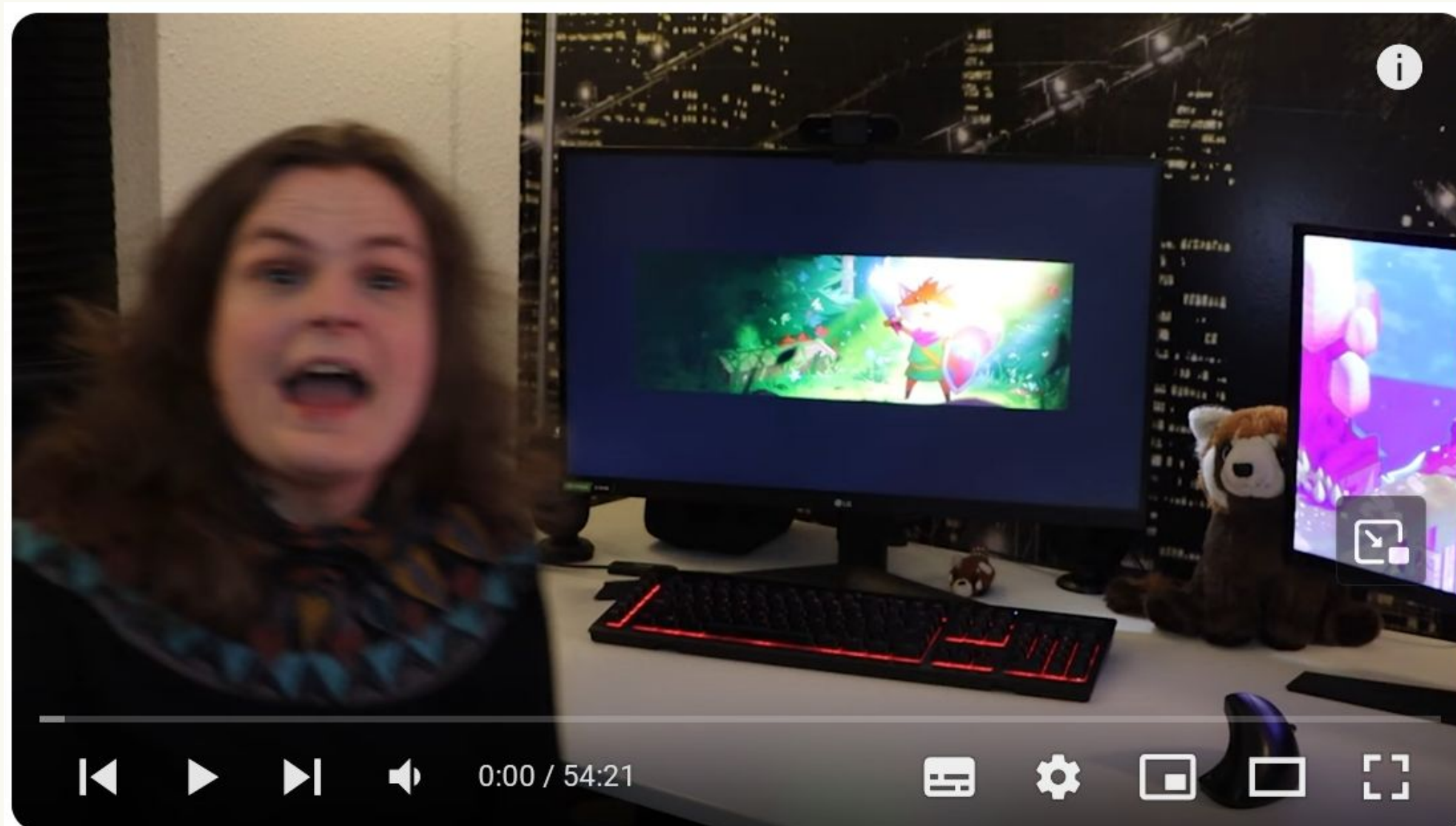
**How Indiestudios Strive to Serve Their People Better**

**Adinda van Oosten**

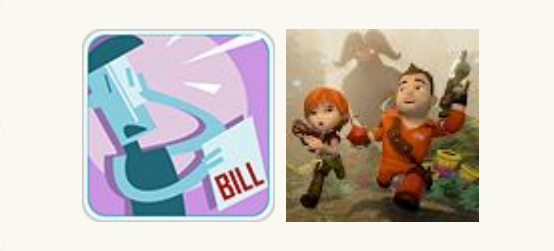
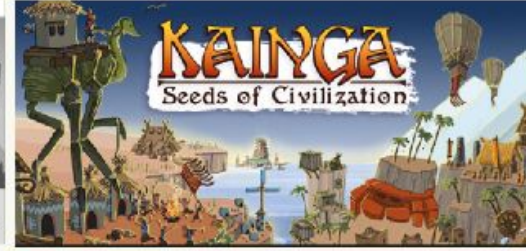
Acreates and Deltion College

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# Hi, I'm Adinda









# Crunch

-  
-





# Becoming Immune

- Self-care is paramount
- Avoid perfectionism
- Seek feedback often
- Don't make everything from scratch



*Just don't do it, no really don't Crunch*

# Over-Expansion



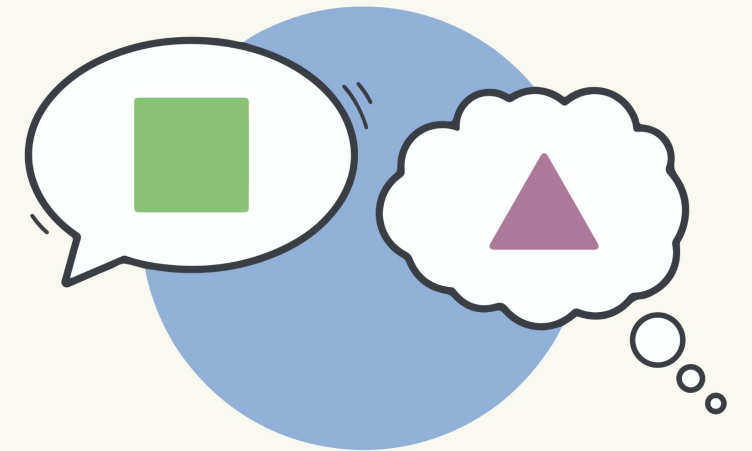
# Dexterity Saving Throw

- Have a plan B for your cash flow
- Invest in your team



# Complications with Publishers

- They have their own agenda
- Prizes are not important
- Most don't want to take a big risk
- They can dictate different priorities
- They provide a loan and ask for recoup





# The Fight for a Deal



- More than **50% indie games never** surpass **\$4000** in revenue
- **2/3** of games do **not exceed \$10,000** in lifetime earnings
- **9%** of indie games surpass the **\$200,000**
- 

YOU and YOUR PEOPLE ARE THE REAL GEMS!



# Know Your People



*“Making a game is hard: cannot imagine also having issues with management” - Anahit Fernandez*



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# Succeeding as a People First Studio

**Julien Schillinger**

CEO, PandaBee Studios UG (haftungsbeschränkt)

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# We are PandaBee



PANDABEE  
STUDIOS

Founded:

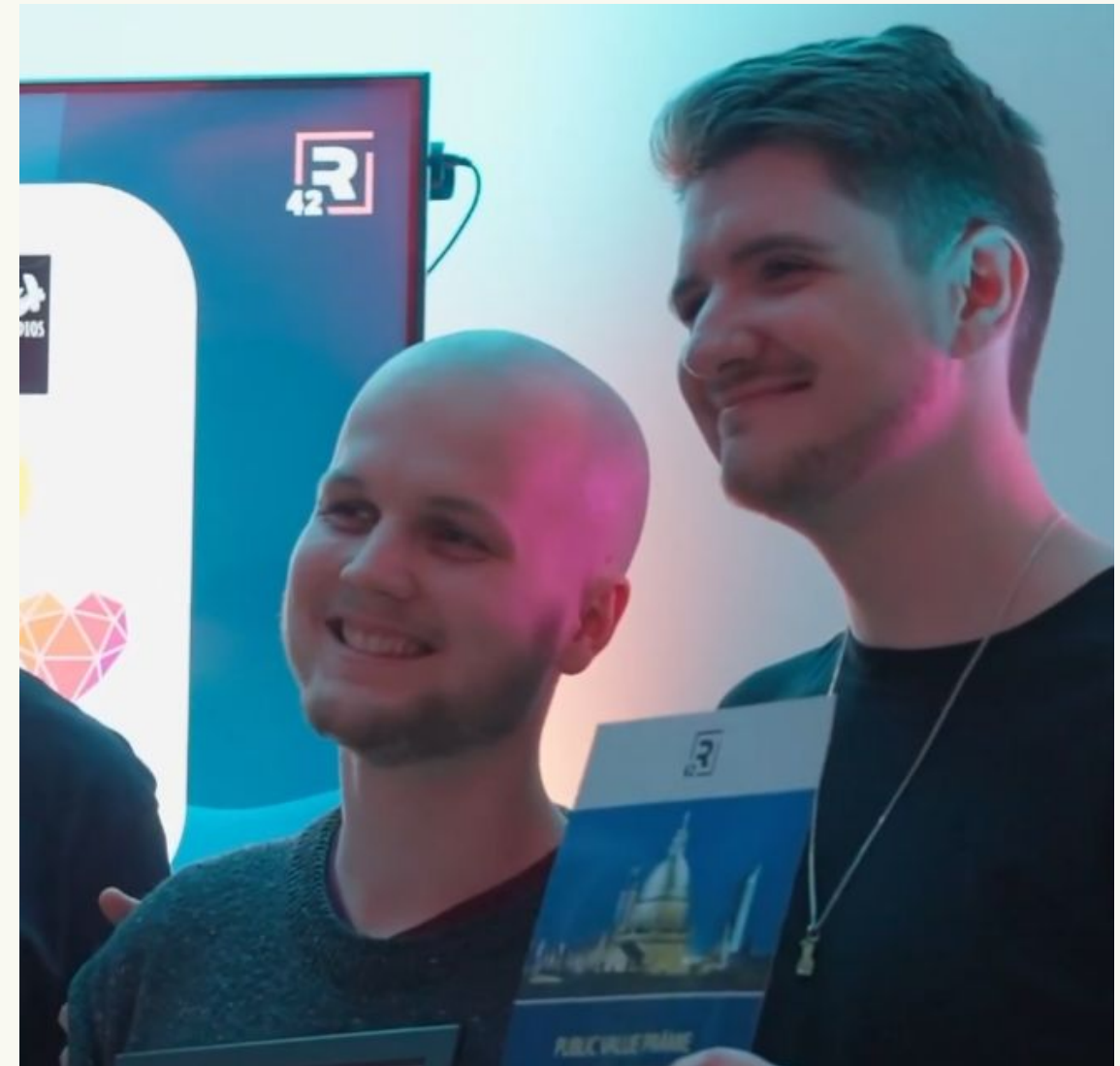
- 2021 in Germany

Mission:

- People first!

About:

- Indie Games
- Client Projects



Gustav & Julien



# We are PandaBee



PANDABEE  
STUDIOS

Founded:

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tilt frog on Steam



# People Friendly Environments

## Happy workers are 13% more productive

RESEARCH BUSINESS SOCIETY

Research by Oxford University's Saïd Business School, in collaboration with British multinational telecoms firm BT, has found a conclusive link between happiness and productivity.

Happiness-A Business Strategy  
Margaret D M Cullen, André P. Callitz

Happiness before profit creates a strong employee culture and improved business financial performance. The personal disadvantages of unhappy employees include increased work stress, moral stress and burnout, which lead to feelings of hopelessness, helplessness and incompetence. From a business point of view, happy employees can make better decisions and their frame of mind can impact the financial and social conditions in the business.



# Don't Be the Boss

You want to be a Leader.

- Leave your ego at home
- Individual care
- Actions shape culture
- Don't talk - Listen

Questions to ask yourself:

- Is it about Prestige?
- Do you have what it takes?

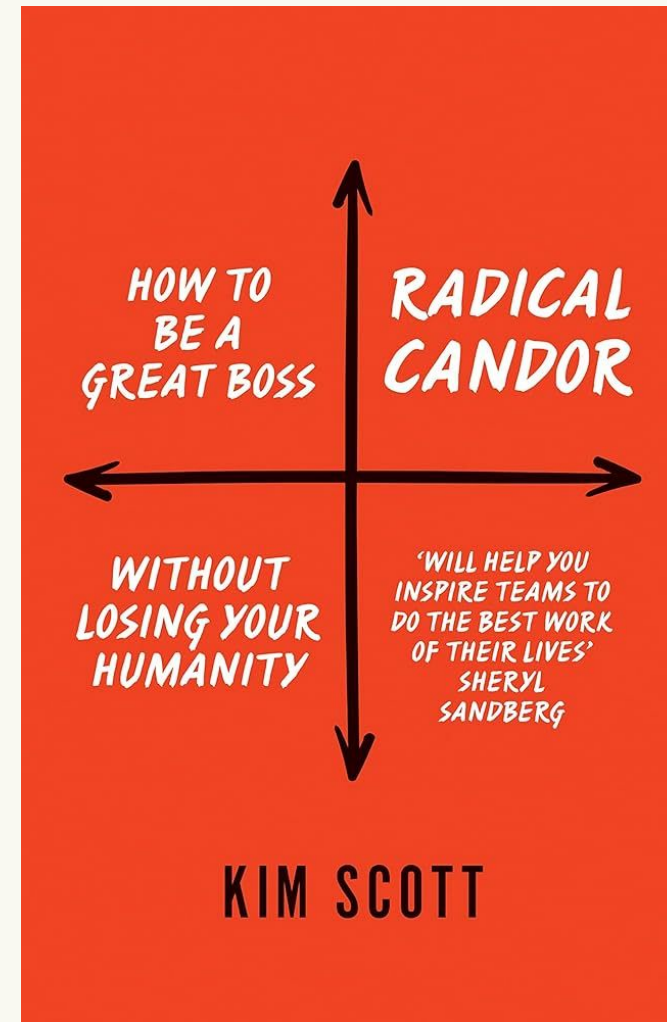
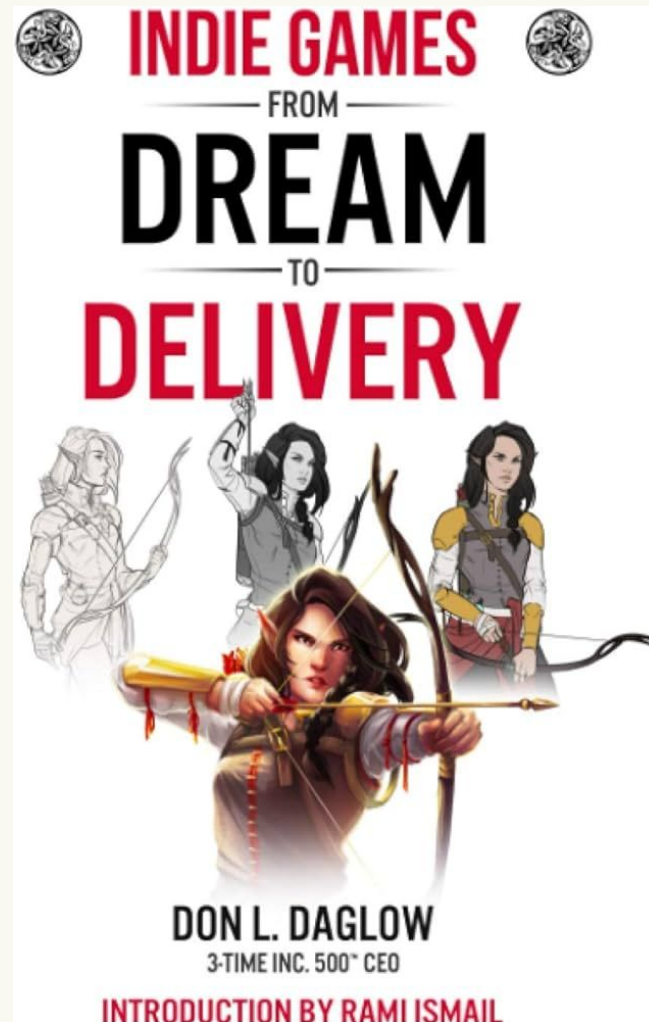
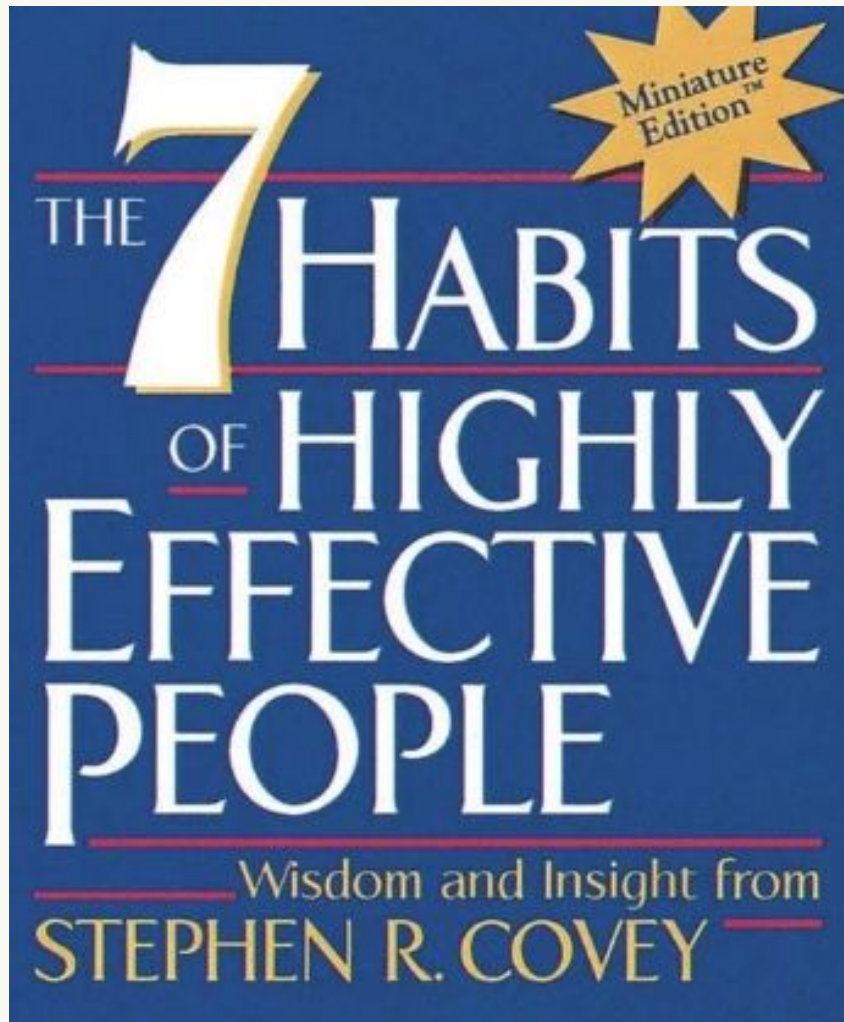




# Don't Be the Boss

Honorable Mention  
(German only)

Awesome Resources:





# Competition for your Spouse



# Competition for your Spouse

What your Founding Team should bring.

- Business, Tech, Marketing
- Are they made for it?
- Let your Heart speak
- It's not just on you
- Not too many either





# Contact

✉ [j.schillinger@pandabee-studios.com](mailto:j.schillinger@pandabee-studios.com)

Or reach out to me on LinkedIn:



# In Loving Memory

**Prof. Michael Baur**







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# Letting Your People be their Best

## How Communication Can Unlock Your Team's Potential

**James Laird**

Product Lead, Series AI

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# Episode





# Indie Teams



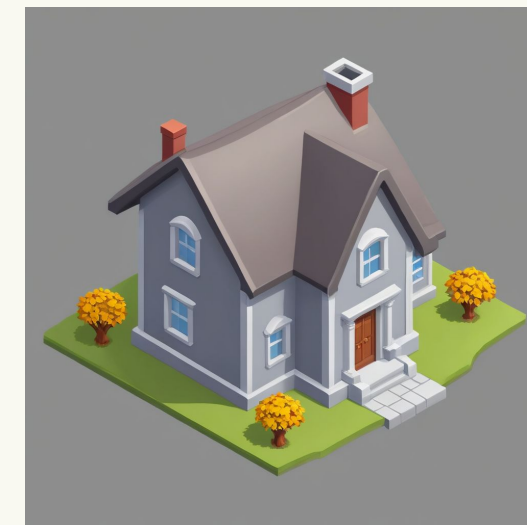
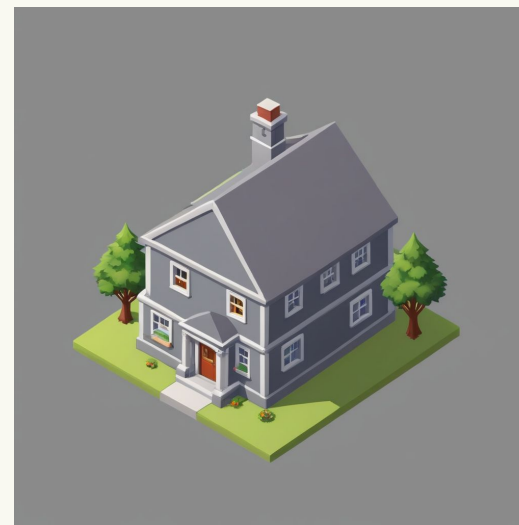
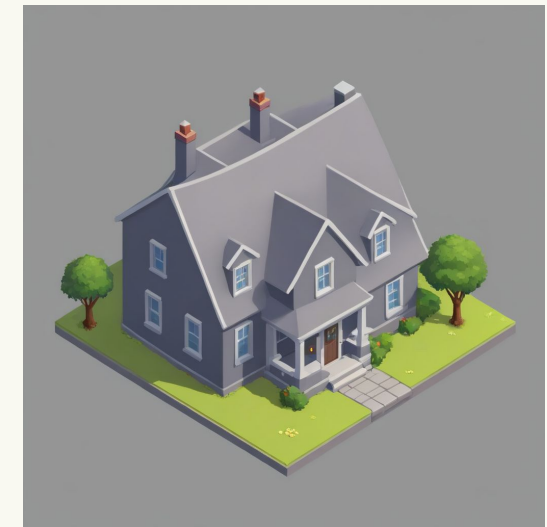
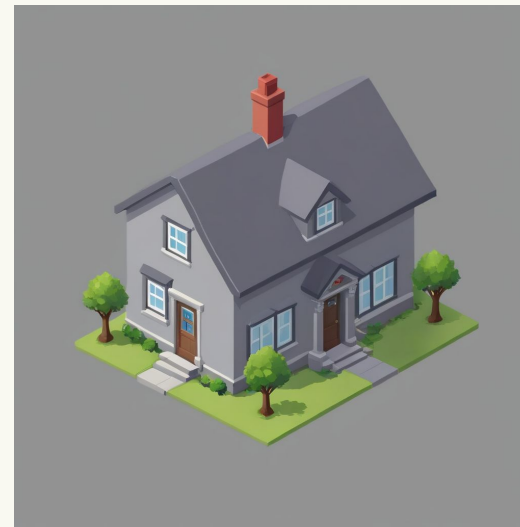


# ...Also Indie Teams



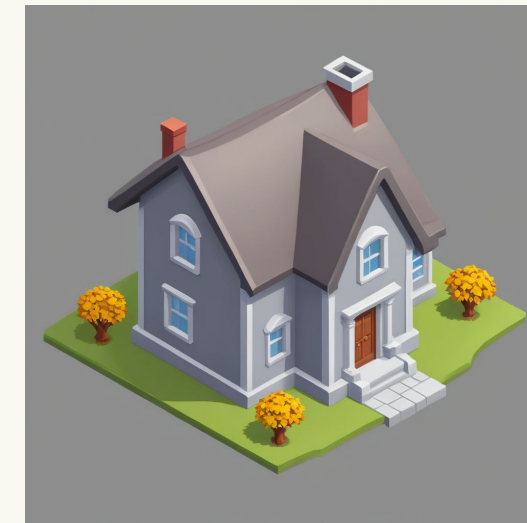
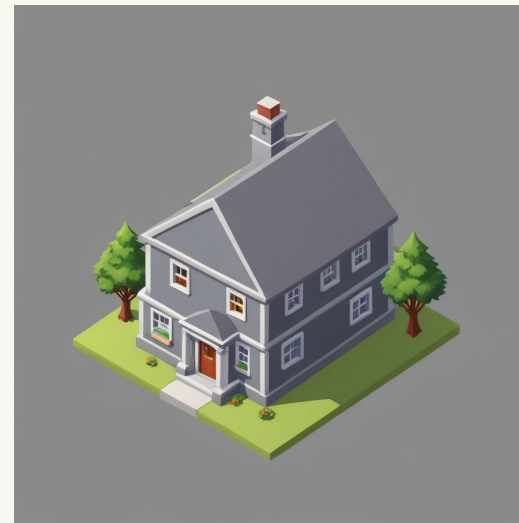
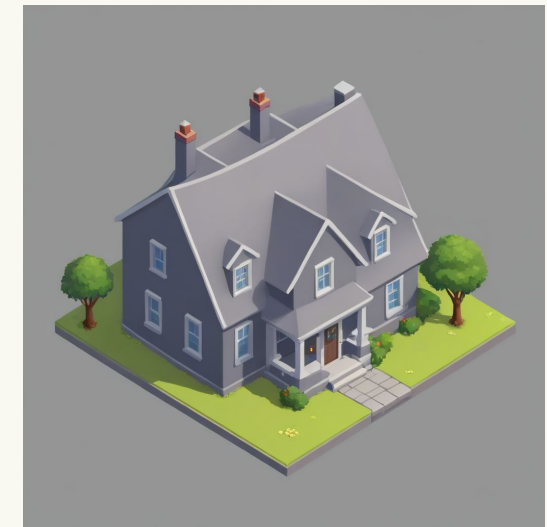
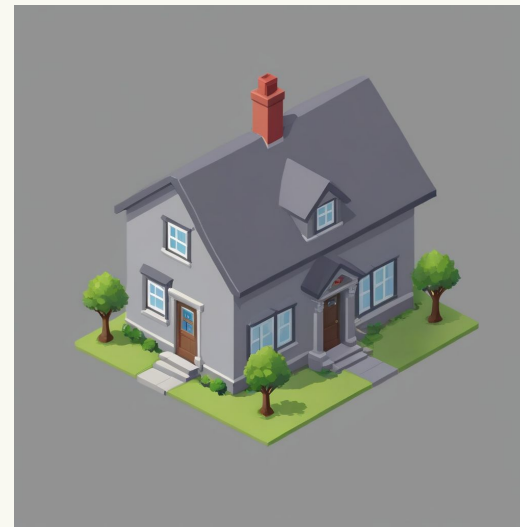


# Once upon a time...



# Be Empowered!

"We need to improve the building art."











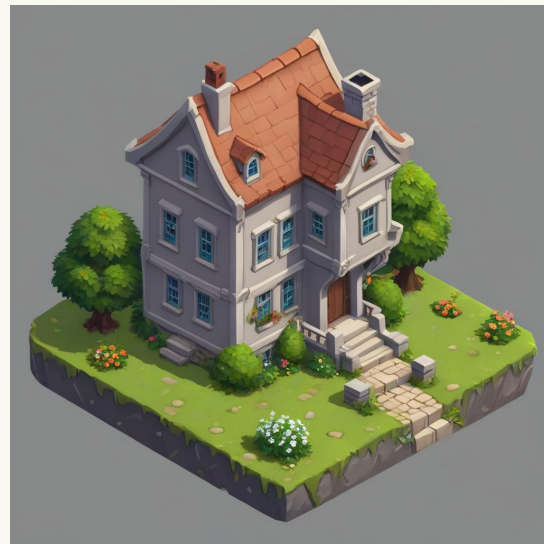


~~"We need to improve the building art."~~

"We need 8 new building assets in the build by the end of the month."

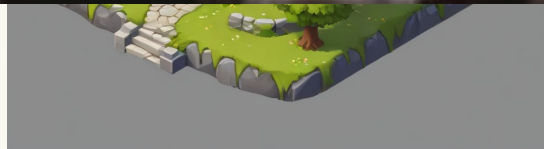
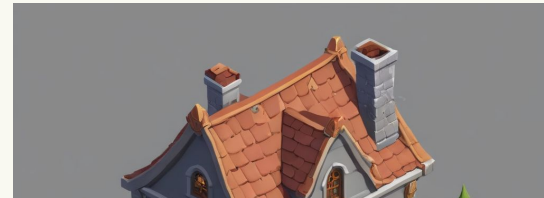
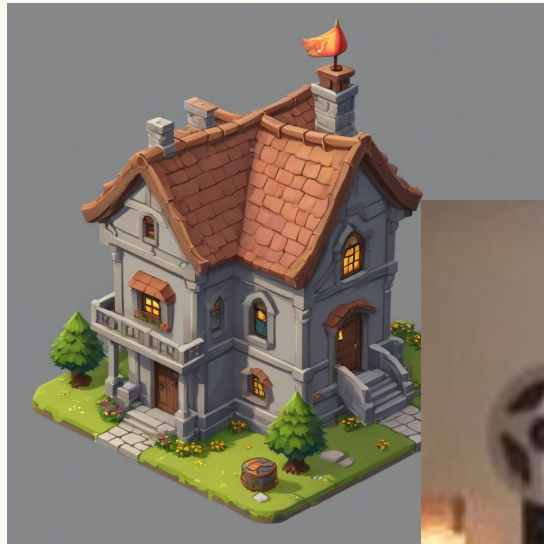
SUN 28	MON 29	TUE 30	WED 31	THU Feb 1	FRI 2	SAT 3
4	5 New Building Art Kickoff	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26 Art Changes Pushed to Bt	27 QA Pass on Building Art	28	29	Mar 1 Stakeholder Review!	2

# Success!





# But actually...



# If you want something done right...

~~"We need to improve the building art."~~

~~"We need 8 new building assets in the build by the end of the month."~~

"We need 8 new building assets in the build by the end of the month, and here is reference material I've found for all 8, and we need to have daily syncs to make sure this gets done right!"



# Success?





# What happened?



# Goals First

"During playtests, players can't tell which building does what. We have a stakeholder playtest at the end of the month."

"We're thinking that we need new building art."



# Communicating Goals:

More Productive Feedback



# Communicating Goals:

More Productive Feedback

Better Solutions





# Communicating Goals:

More Productive Feedback

Better Solutions

Happier People



# Communicating Goals:

More Productive Feedback

Better Solutions

Happier People

Discovery & Discussion





# Example: Content Design

**"We need 12 new campaign levels."**

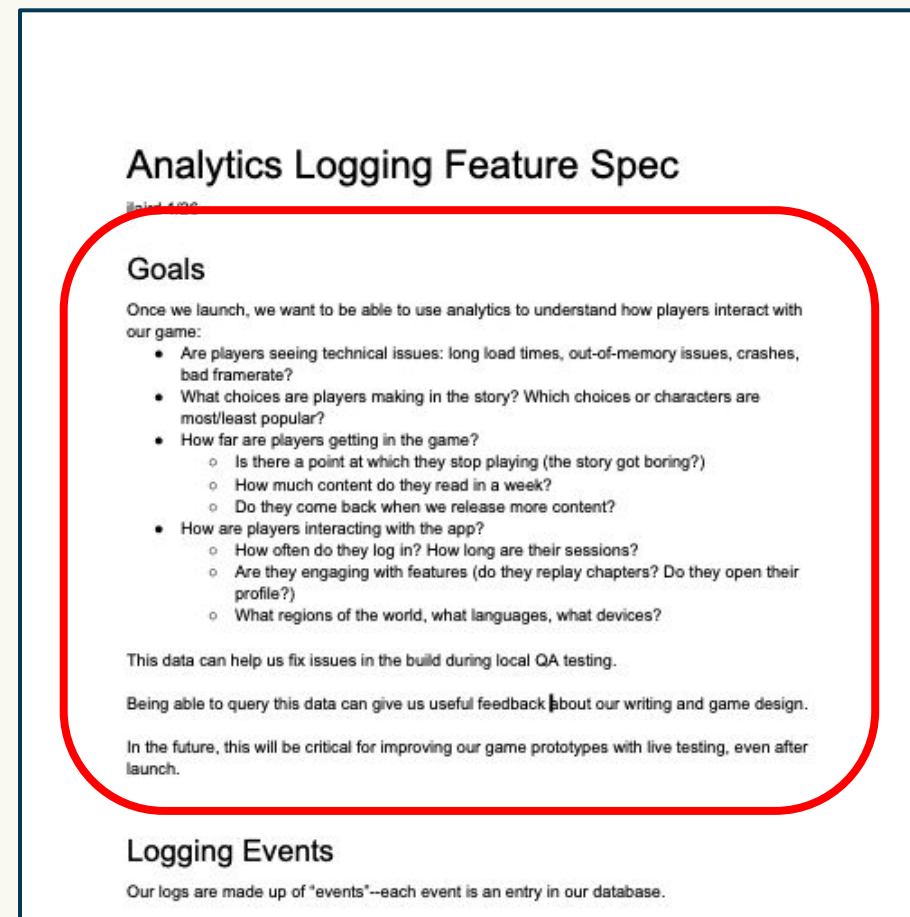
VS.

**"Our best players are running out of content. We need to make sure they still have a challenge at endgame."**

**We want to add more campaign content."**

# Goals-First in Practice

1-2 paragraphs at the beginning of a spec or design doc  
5-10 minutes at the beginning of a kickoff meeting



~1/2 page in an  
8-page spec



# Goals First: Make it a Habit





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# How to Avoid Layoffs

**Don Daglow**

President, Academy of Interactive Arts & Sciences Foundation

Founded three game studios, GM of two others

30 years of experience leading game studios

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# How to Avoid Layoffs

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# Layoffs Hurt Teams and Hurt People

Indie studio layoffs happen when...

- The team runs out of money and can't pay people
- The team runs out of time to prove the game will be fun and loses its publisher... and then runs out of money
- The team leaders realize that one of those two problems may happen, and they have to cut some jobs to try to avoid losing all of the jobs





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# Layoffs Hurt Teams and Hurt People

How do we avoid running out  
of money, time or both?

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## **Layoffs Hurt Teams and Hurt People**

**Indie team leaders lose more sleep worrying about running out of money than they lose worrying about their game.**

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## Side Gig or Paying the Bills?

If the team members are working in their spare time the team doesn't have to "make payroll."

Just be sure to agree in writing on how everyone gets paid if the game later earns money.



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# Teams that Pay People are Companies

Payroll

Employment Laws

Employer Taxes

Income Taxes

Equipment Costs

Office Lease (if not virtual)



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# Companies That Run Out of Cash Close Down

- Spend as little cash as possible each month
- Don't spend money on things you don't need right now
- Don't hire people until they're urgently needed
- Don't assume that the next check will arrive on time
- Don't assume this month's work will be acceptable





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# Companies that Run Out of Time Close Down

- Huge maps, 100-hour scenarios, MMOs suicidal
- Build fun, not blockbusters
- Pick a management system (Agile etc.) & stick to it
- Treat early deadlines as must-make, not just final date



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# How to Avoid Layoffs

- Layoffs hurt teams and hurt people
- Side gig or paying the bills?
- Teams that Pay People are Companies
- Companies that Run Out of Cash Close Down
- Companies that Run Out of Time Close Down
- Formally Decide if You Want to Be a Company



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# Thank you!

**\*Any similarity to actual persons or projects is purely coincidental**

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# Special Thank You!

Gustav Mehner, Edward Espinoza, Lauren Gonzales, Hal Bouma, Rob Percival, Sanjay Madhav, Colin Friday, Bob Glahn, Geoff Hom, Felix Kramer, Ian McKenzie, and the Conference Associates.

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