

DIY XBLA FTW

The Dishwasher: Vampire Smile Postmortem

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Lead Dishwasher, Ska Studios

DISWASHER
AND FIRE
SMILE

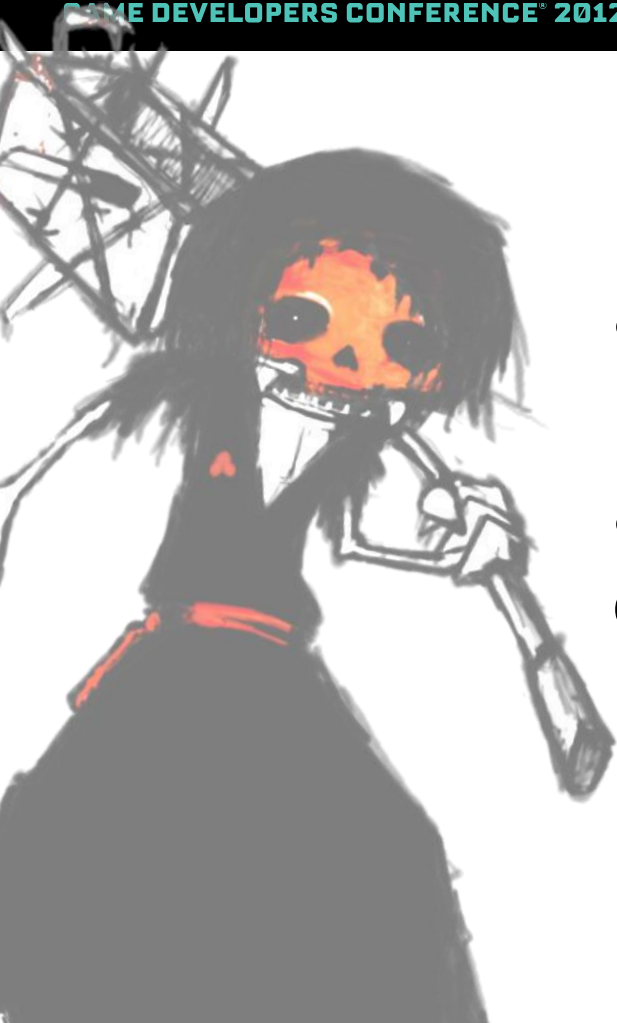
Intro

- Stylistic Action Platformer
- Sequel to The Dishwasher:
Dead Samurai
- XNA on XBLA
- 1 person dev team



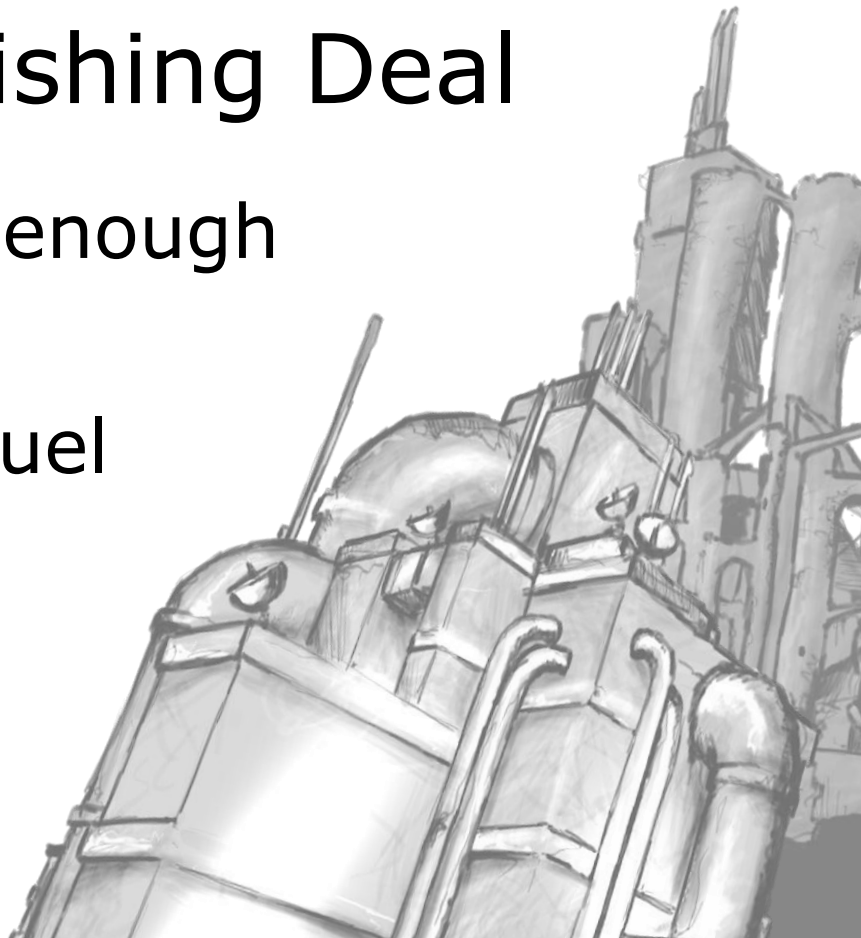
Background

- Dead Samurai was 2007 Dream Build Play winner
- Only hobbyist game dev experience prior



The Road to a Publishing Deal

- Dead Samurai did well enough
- Fans wanted a sequel
- Microsoft wanted a sequel
- I wanted a sequel
- I pitched the sequel
- *BLAM!*



Design Goals

- More substantial production quality
- 60 FPS + visual insanity
- Scripted storytelling in gameplay



- Scripted storytelling in gameplay
 - Pacing, atmosphere

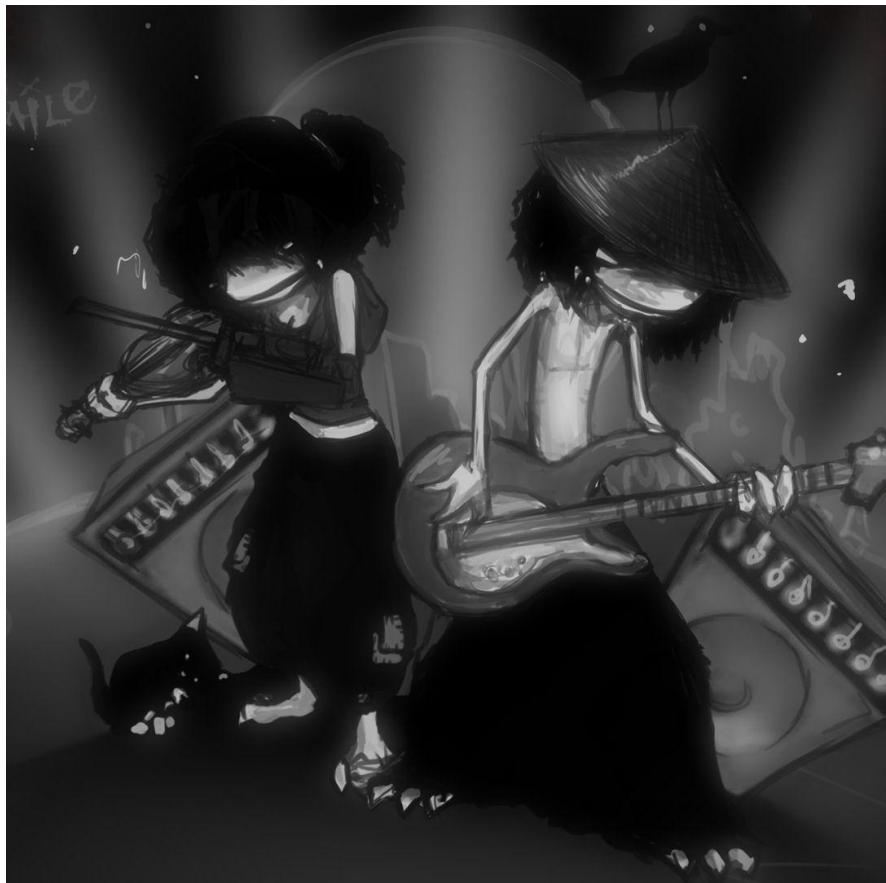


- Heavy use of blood, smoke, fire trails
- Pseudo physics: bouncing spark particles and gibs, wavy hair
- Dozens of contextual executions meant to push, not disrupt the flow



Themes

- Hospitals
- Suicide
- Wire fu
- The Count of Monte Cristo meets Machine Girl



Dead Samurai Revisited

- New/improved engine, revamped revisited characters



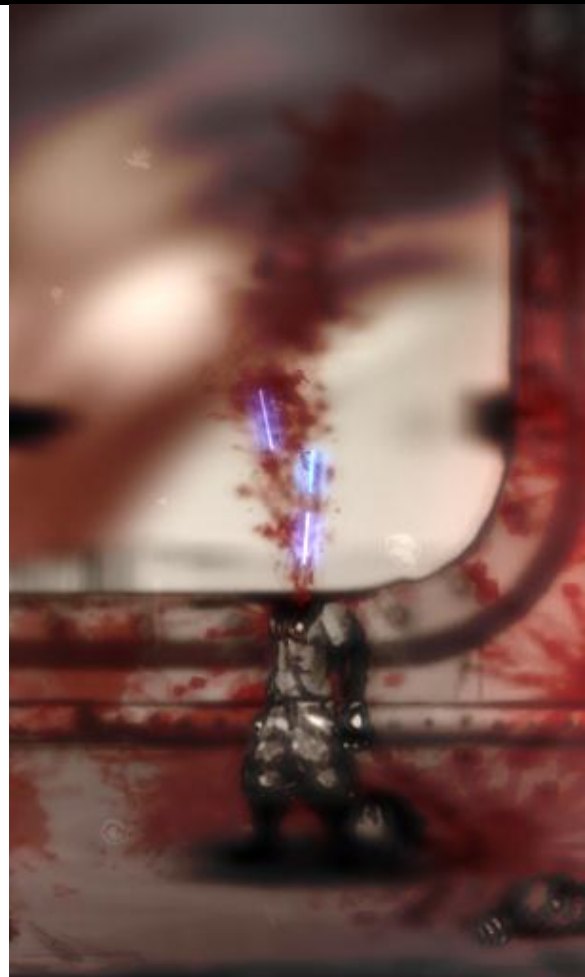
Dead Samurai Lessons

- Dead Samurai mishaps:
 - Fixed sprite size = blurry bosses
 - Map sprites had no scale/rotate
 - Map sprite sheet metadata maintained by hand in a text file
 - No character animation tweening

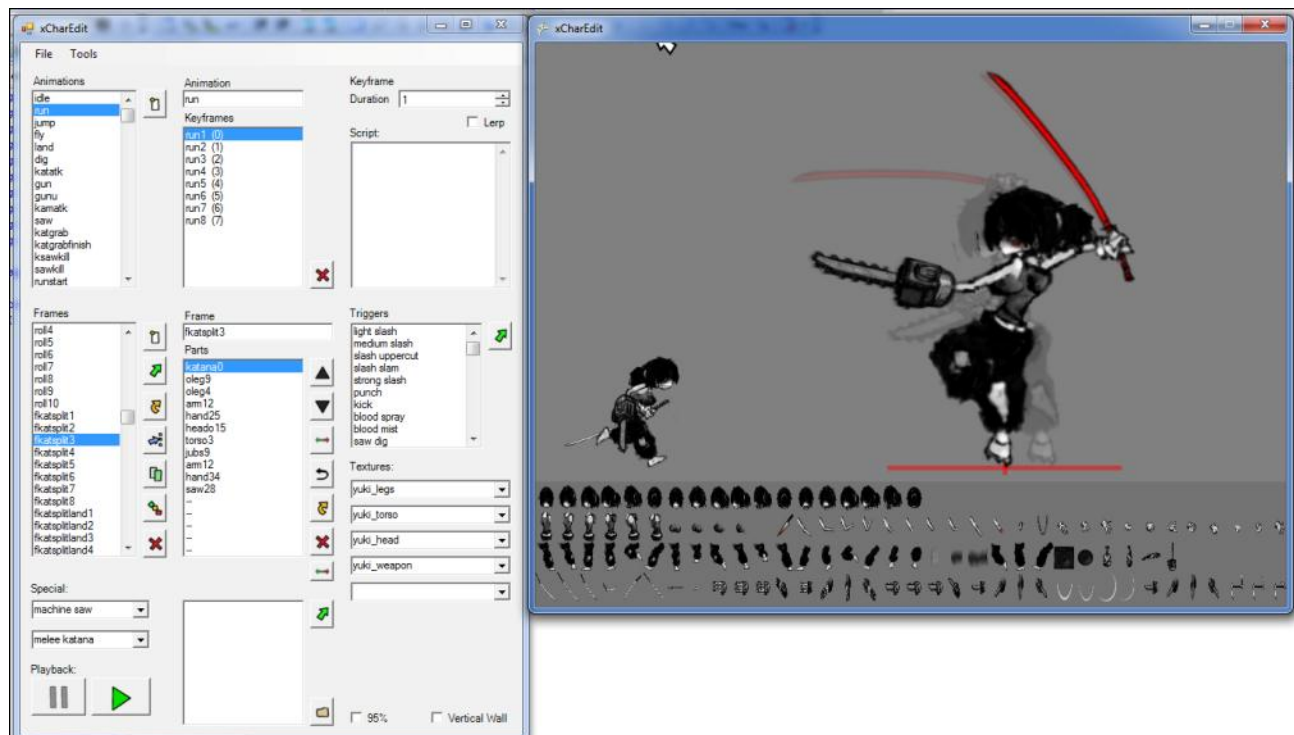


Tools

- Improved from Dishwasher, ugly as sin, quite functional
 - CharEdit
 - MapEdit
 - ...many more! (world map, guitar minigames, cutscenes)



- CharEdit: 2D, scriptable, now with tweening!

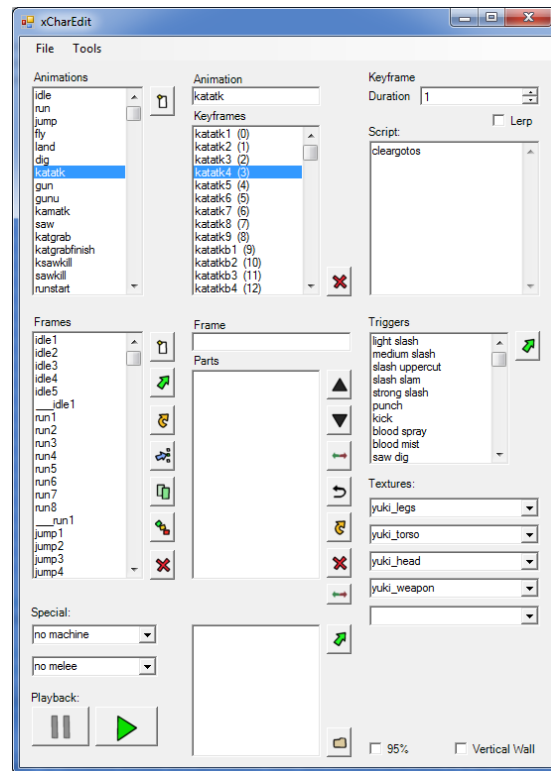


CharEdit Hierarchy

- **Part**: arm, leg, head, sword, etc.
- **Frame**: collection of **parts**
- **Keyframe**: references **Frame**, has **Script**
- **Animation**: sequence of **Keyframes**
- **Model**: collection of **Animations** and **Frames**

CharEdit: Scripting Combos

- Keyframe Script
 - Up to 4 lines, either:
 - *Command*
 - *Command integerParameter*
 - *Command stringParameter*
- E.g.:
 - `setatkgoto [keyframe]`
 - `setanim [animationName]`



Scripting Combos: BASIC-like!



1 – 4

slash!

5 – 10

slash followthrough

setatkgoto 12

setstronggoto 50

11

setanim idle (end)

12 – 15

backslash!

16 – 21

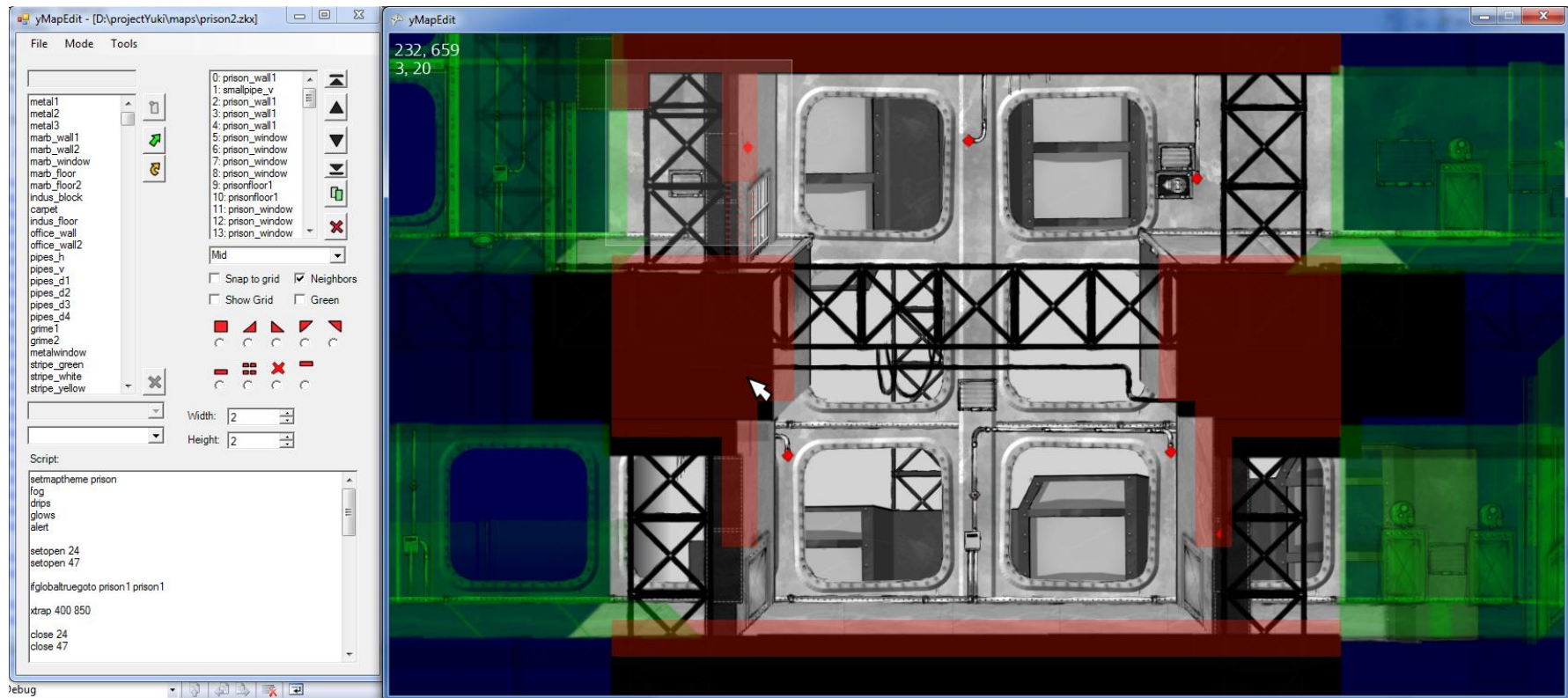
backslash followthrough

setatkgoto 23

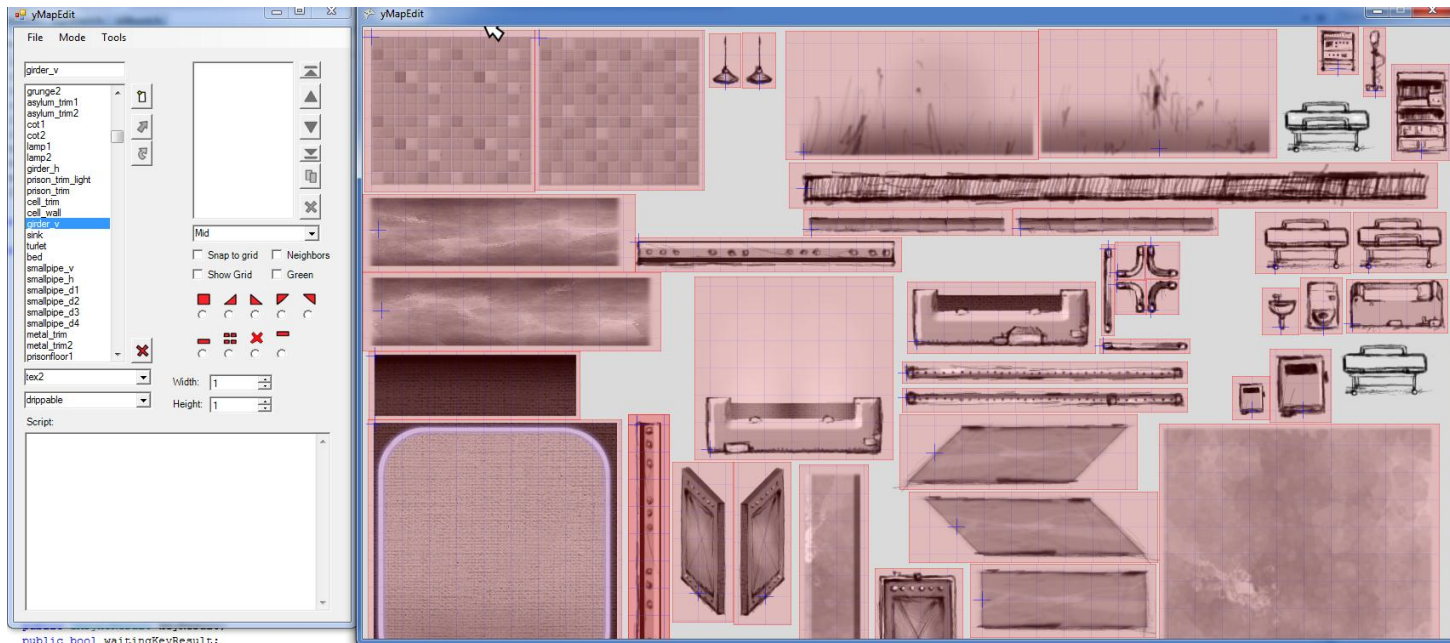
- “Triggers” are basically emitters
 - Fire an event when frame containing trigger is reached
 - Sword slashes, sparks, blood, gore, bullets...



- MapEdit: Metroidvania-style nodes

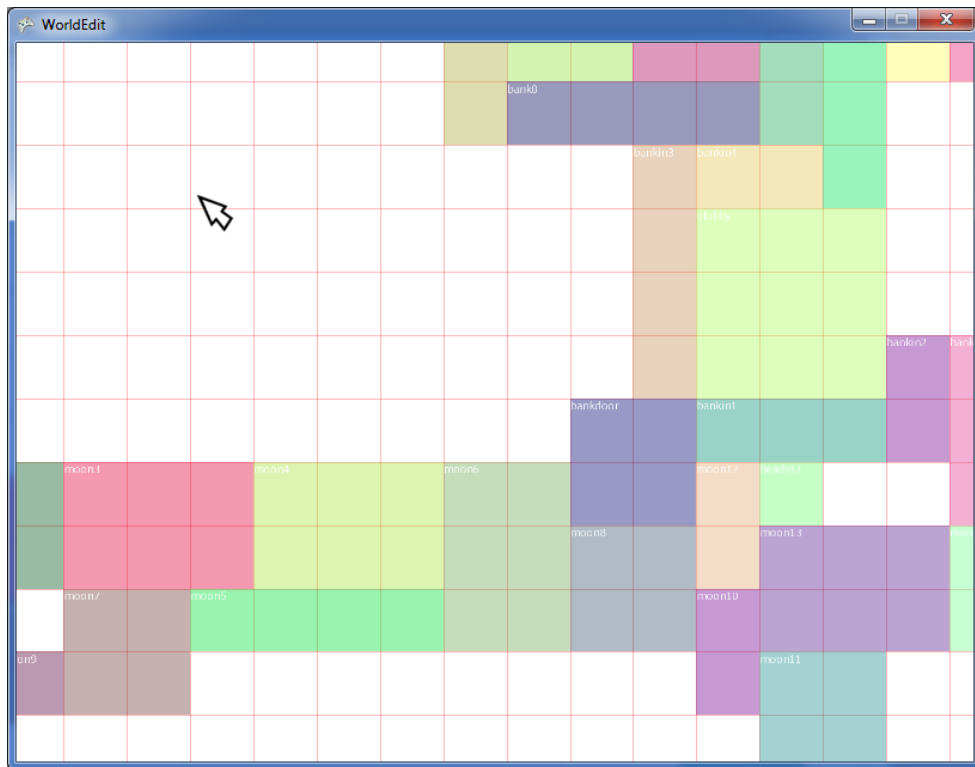


- GUI for defining sprite sheets
 - Sprites can have special behavior flags, like rotating (fans), pulsing (lights), swaying, etc.



- Rudimentary scripting for kill rooms (and other stuff)
 - Set map “theme” (hazy? Dank? Musty?)
 - Set/delete collision tiles
 - Create & watch trap triggers
 - Create, maintain “buckets”
 - Set/check flags
 - Scope levels: local, global, and *uber*

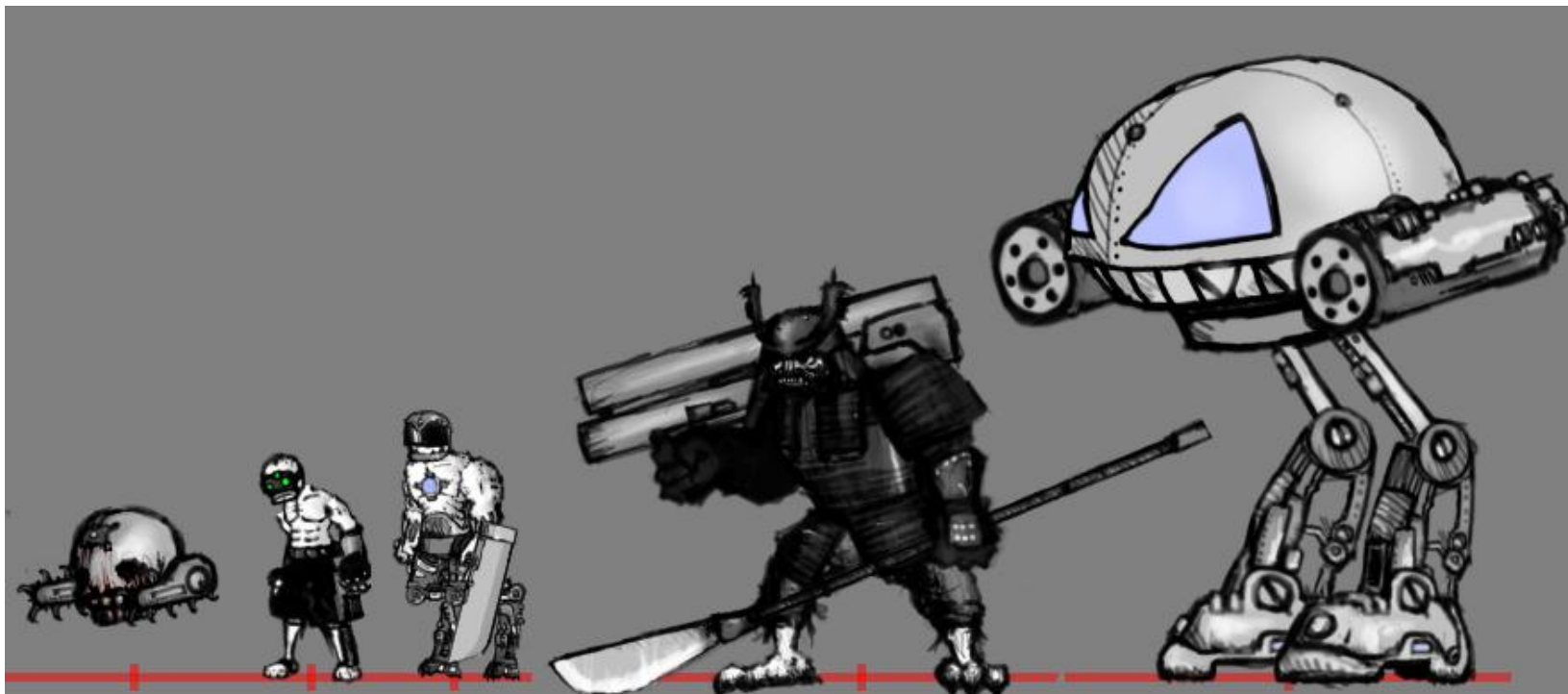
- Arrange map segments Metroidvania-style!



MapEdit + CharEdit = Game

- Maps: exploration, treasures, kill rooms, boss rooms
- Monsters: wide challenge scale
 - 1 hit grab kill bots: stress relief!
 - Button mashable baddies: good intro!
 - Block/warp/counter baddies require attention
 - Minibosses/bosses shrug hit animation

- Monster types: "Pods," "Swats," "Blades," minibosses and bosses



Xbox LIVE networking

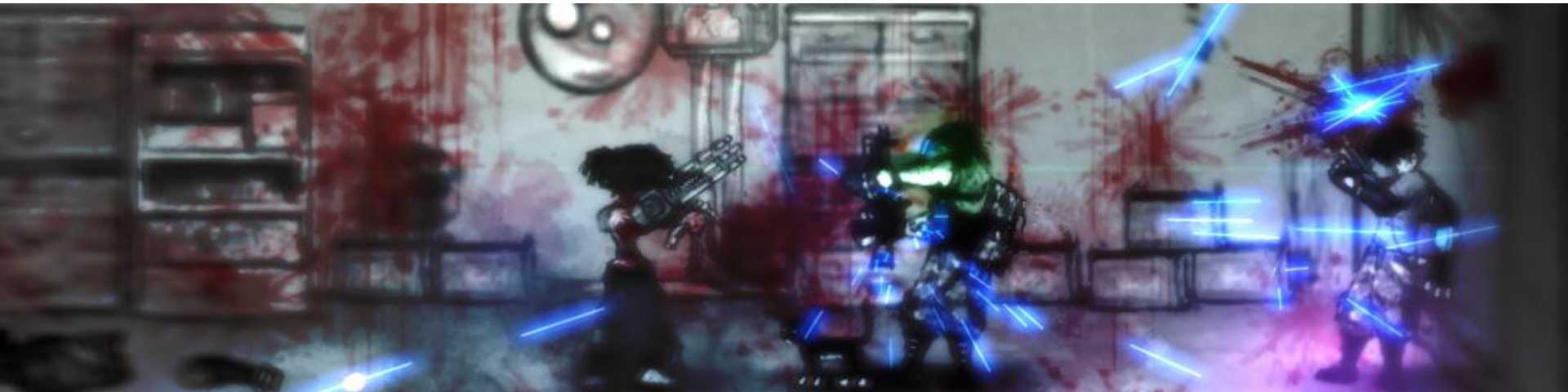
- Uses XNA framework...
 - Great for LIVE integration (friends, invites, etc.)
 - Easy to implement, send/receive data
- ...but I am bad at it
 - >50% of debugging was for multiplayer issues
 - Lots of crazy corner cases

Challenge: Stereoscopic 3D!

- Inherent problem: game doesn't render things in 3D space, just classic 2D parallax
 - Works but not for depth changes
- Mistake: drew everything *in front of* screen, should've drawn *behind*
- Interesting repercussion: began to see all real life depths incorrectly

Dev Tools

- XNA/e4a 3.0 in Visual Studio 2008
- C# FTW, 60k lines of code



Dev Studio

- 1 Alienware M17x and nothing else
- Almost Project Zomboided us when the HD failed



Art Department

- Paintshop Pro (terrible)
- Wacom Bamboo (amazing)



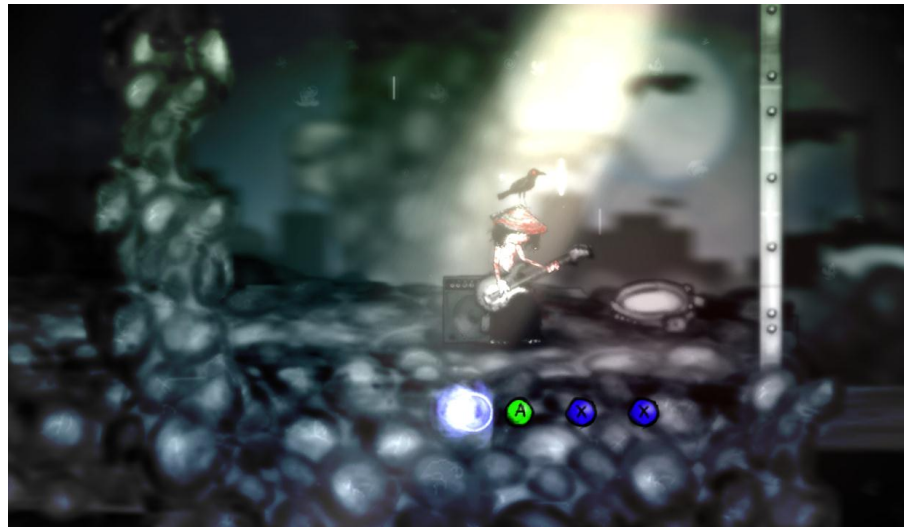
Epic Music Studio

- Garageband
- Fender Strat
- 49-key controller
- Some bass
- iMac that I hate



Epic Audio

- 15 tracks
- 6 rhythm minigame tracks (but no violin!)
- 1 creepy chiptune from Audio Aggregate
- Mary Morgan voices Yuki



Final Product

- Two solo campaigns, 1 coop campaign
- 50 arcade levels
- 12,000 frames of animation
- Xbox LIVE multiplayer

Next up: Adventures in Marketing

- Dishwasher 1 had stupidly awesome marketing from XBLA
- Dishwasher 2 would not



Adventures in Marketing

- XBLA to me: go nuts
- Doubled company size
- Breakdown became 50% development, 50% marketing



Tom Morello

- Halo: Reach screens had just been leaked by a MLG user named Tom Morello
- Leak satire!





FERVOR 朗らか *shine!*

- Sent dish soap to major outlets announcing Japanese liquid soap sponsorship
- Included leaflet linking to fervorshine.com
- Countdown to announce trailer

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE® 2012

March 5-9, 2012

MARCH 5-9, 2012 WWW.GDCONF.COM



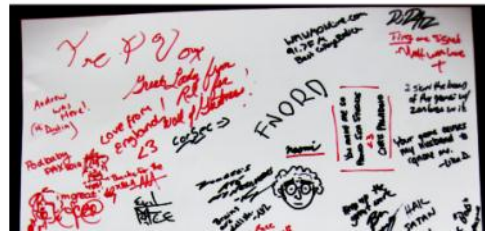
PAX's! (three of them)

- Cheaper (but not cheap!), *maybe* indie-friendly
- Gamer-oriented
- Strategy: merch, schwag, kiosks



PAX East 2010

- ZOMBIES unexpected success pushed justifying cost
- 20x10 at PAX East in Boston
- Special PAX-tailored demo
- Wall of Greatness
- Best media pickup of all PAX's?



PAX Prime 2010

- Shipping is a nightmare
- Blood pack schwag is disgusting
- Syringe pens are a hit
- Demoed first story level



PAX East 2011

- Weeks before launch: *pressure!*
- Stuck in literal alley behind some headphone people
- Demoed full game
- Victim of a growing pond?



OXM UK

- Awesome: one page print mag writeup
- N'awesome: fried dev kit
 - Something about universal power adapters and voltage

Plushie Bribery

- Big launch push
- 48 hour sewing marathon
- Sent 11 Dishwasher plushies out to big review sites
- *Michelle is amazing*



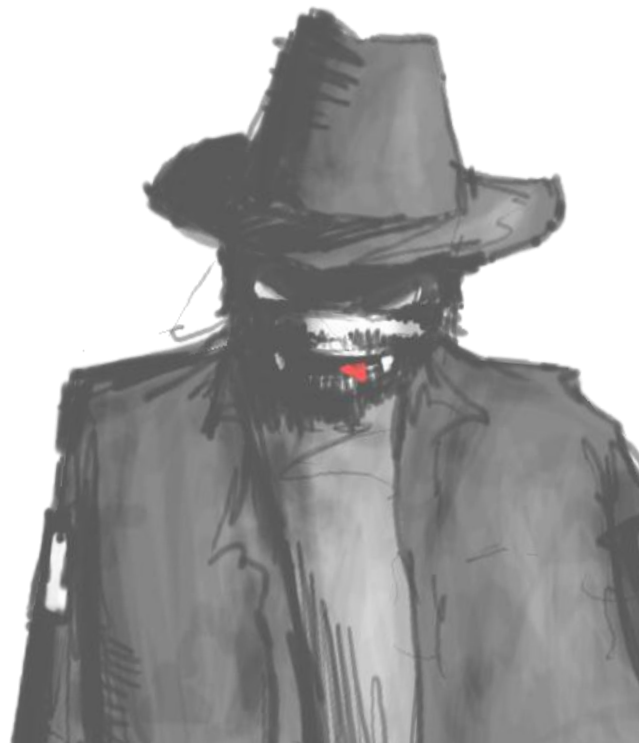
Publishing and launch

- Self-funded, total design freedom
- Slot 2 on dashboard at launch for two weeks
- Promoted in Xbox newsletter



Postmortem: What went right

- Overall quality explosion
- Better tools
- Better XBLA XNA integration
- Indie marketing blitz
- Awesome launch



Overall Quality Explosion

- First game made entirely as a full time indie dev: so much to prove!
- Screen-filling gore accentuates intense action



Better Tools

- Faster creation of maps and character content
- Prolific animating!
12,000+ frames over nearly 40 models



Better XBLA XNA integration

- Dead Samurai was an e4a guinea pig
- Vampire Smile is an e4a *elite* guinea pig
- Fewer e4a-caused hitches, better preparation on the part of Microsoft on recognizing and getting said hitches waived

Indie Marketing Blitz

- More fun than making the game? *Nearly*.
- Gained a ton of pickup
- Bittersweet: At PAX and on forums, general sentiment is “why am I only just now hearing about this?”



Awesome Launch

- Scary: initially 7 slot on Spotlight
- XBLA rescued: moved to 2 slot, stayed there for two weeks
- #2 top XBLA for two weeks



Postmortem: What went wrong

- The uncanny valley of charm
- Variety took a backseat to polish
- Platformer Child Angst Syndrome
- Crushing: Cert failure

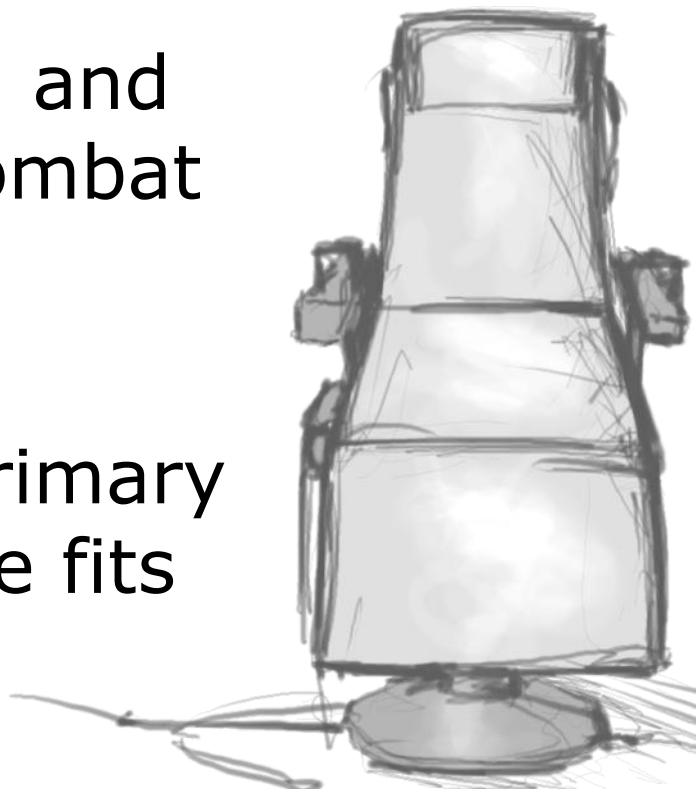


The Uncanny Valley of Charm

- Dead Samurai had that rough “student game” charm
- Vampire Smile is more polished, but not industry vet indie studio polished
- Sympathy versus expectations?

Variety Took a Backseat to Polish

- Major emphasis on creating and polishing super fast-paced combat experience
- ... but not much else to do
- Two main characters + 9 primary weapons = too much one size fits all combat

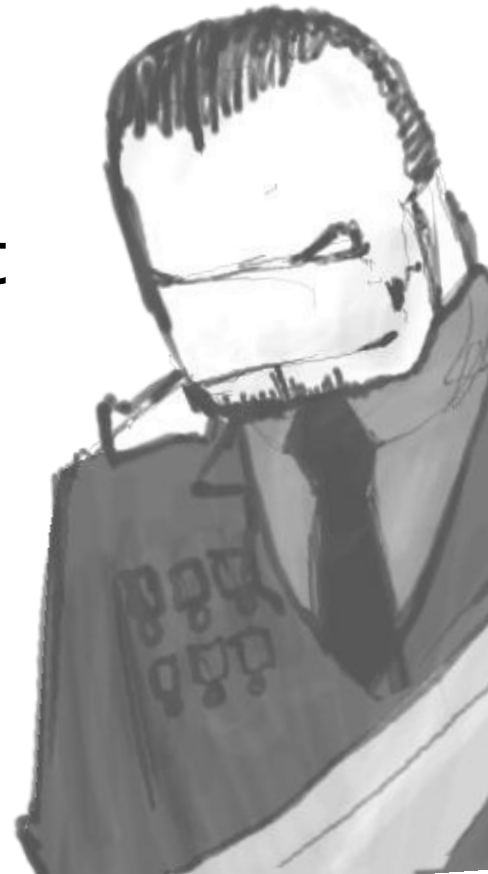


Platformer Child Angst Syndrome

- Growing up with Ninja Gaiden and Castlevania inspired irrational hatred of evil platforming
- Warp mechanic kills platforming challenge
- Overcompensation?

Crushing: Cert failure

- 3 XNA-related: can't run off MU, can't detect corrupt save file, can't show storage selector with only 1 device connected
- 1 my fault: rich presence not correctly updated for client in multiplayer game



Conclusion

- 2 years dev time, on and off
- 1 dev, 1 marketing coordinator
- 120k+ units
- 81 on Metacritic!



Post Launch

- Merch
- Fan love
- Soundtracks



Neither Here Nor There: Merch

- Punk Rocker's dream?
- Not practical, but that's okay:
- *It is amazing that people want to wear shirts with my game on them*

(That's actually me)



Fan Art: The Art Unicorn

- ska-studios.com gallery
- Facebook gallery
- Great way to connect
- Flattering, humbling, *hugely motivating*



Fan Art: The Art Unicorn



Fan Art... wait, what?



Bandcamp Soundtrack

- Powered by tips
- Mostly free downloads, some stupidly generous tips
- Added more soundtracks (ZP2KX, ZOMB1ES, Time Viking) as requested



Ska Studios: Where Are We Now?

- 8 years of obscurity
- 4 years of awesome
- More years of awesome to come?



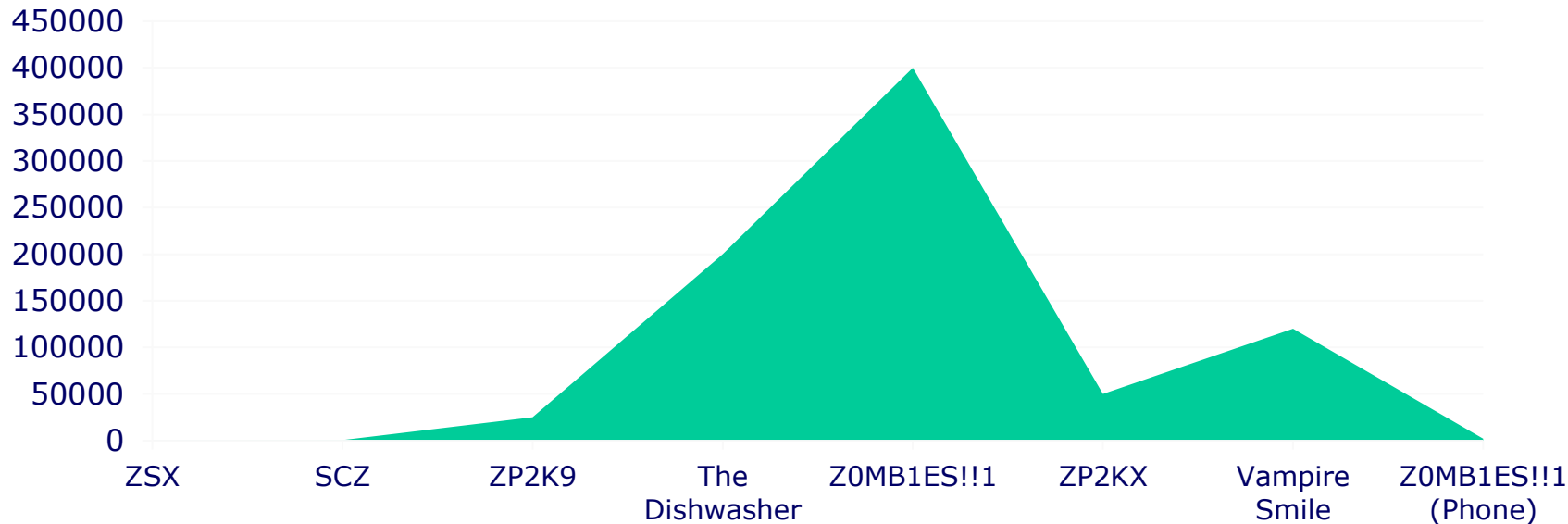
Uber Timeline

- First “game” was Zombie Smashers X (PC, 2000)
- Survival Crisis Z (2004) has a weird cult following
- ZP2K9 was first 10,000+ selling game



Career Trajectory/Postmortem? ;)

Units Sold



Current Project: Charlie Murder

- Return to roots?
- Hope I learned something! But...



The Future: Dishwasher 3?

- Fans want a third
- Microsoft wants a third
- I want a third
- ...trilogy?





Thanks for Listening!