Dedicated Prototyping
For Mobile Game Development

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What I'm going to talk about

- Why we built a prototyping team
- How we built the team
- Job of a Prototyper
- Tips for prototyping
- How it works for us now

Story Time

How We Used To Do It

- Pitch game
- Create high level design doc
- Begin development
- Figure out the details as we go
- Pivot when needed
- Works fine with a small team

But Then We Got Bigger

Dwarven Den

- Larger team
- Tried to use the same old process
- Programmers & artists began development
- Pitch was still being turned into a design
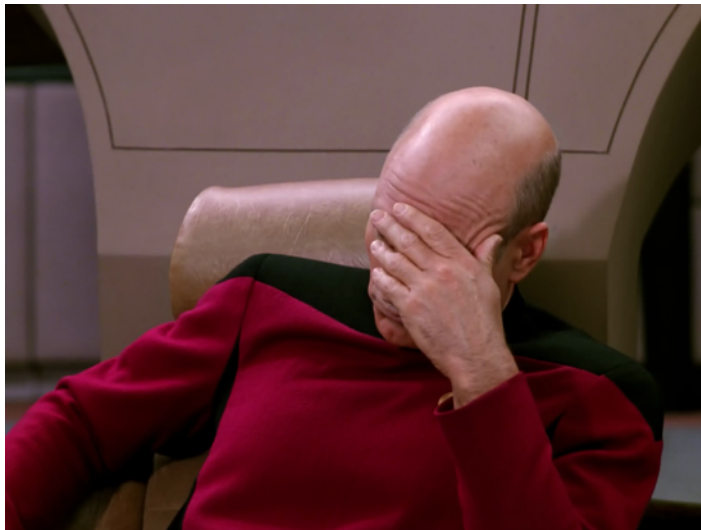
Dwarven Den

- Initial concept had flaws
  - Scope was too large
  - Win/lose conditions were poorly defined

- Slow iteration due to limited programmer time

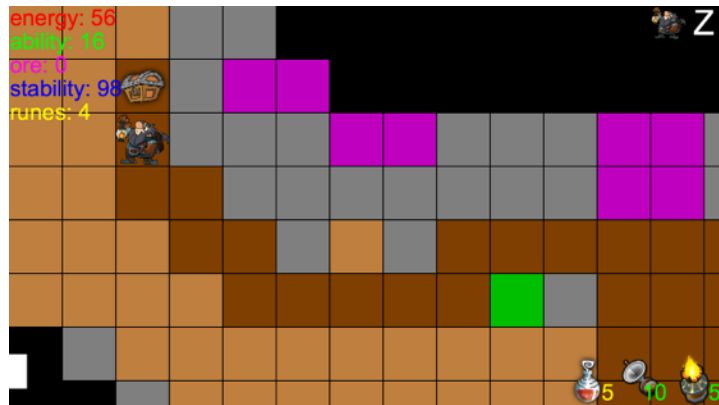- Art got ahead despite rapidly changing design
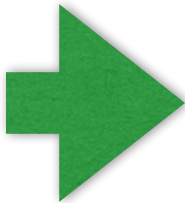
The Realization

Prototyping would have saved us a lot of time

The Solution

Stop production and prototype from scratch

Lessons Learned

- Prototyping needs dedicated time & resources
- Don't green-light without proving the fun

Building a Process

Creating The Team

- Sub-division of the design department
- Managed by a senior designer
- Staffed with technical designers

Prototyping is a Design Job*

- Pairing a designer & programmer can be fast
- A single technical designer can be faster
- The designer can course correct in real-time
- Designers tend to not get attached to code

There are exceptions to this

Making Prototyping a Product

- Having only designers had its issues
  - Lack of visibility from outside department
  - No defined goals or direction

- Needed to make prototyping a first-class citizen

Making Prototyping a Product

- We added a producer!
  - Set goals & milestones
  - Monitor progress
  - Sprints & stand-ups

So What Do They Do?

2 Jobs of a Prototyper

- Creating new concepts
- Developing existing ideas

Creating New Concepts

- Team receives high level goals from management
  - Feature requirements
  - Brands to include
  - Marketing goals

- Team has autonomy to develop around those goals

Developing for Existing Ideas

- Plant prototyper on team
- Attend all meetings and identify unknowns
- Create rapid prototypes to show the team
- 9 times out of 10, a prototype solves any debate

9 Tips from the Trenches

Tip 1: Identify Your Goal

- What should the prototype prove?
    - Mechanics
    - Usability
    - Fun Factor

- Focus <u>only</u> on that goal
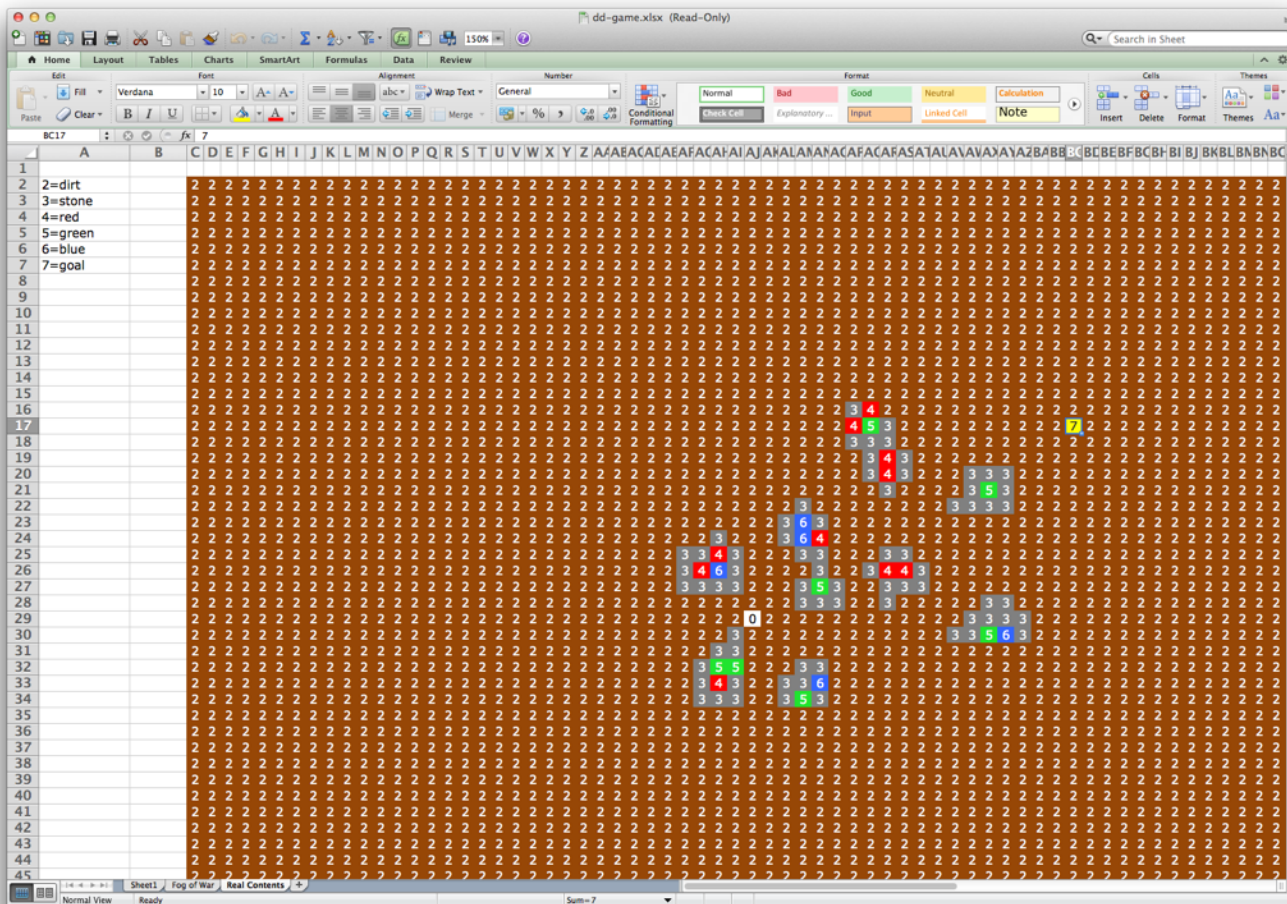   - Don't get distracted trying to make a full experience!

Tip 2: Anything Can Be a Prototype

- Use whatever tools will prove the point fast
  - Paper
  - Toys
  - Excel
  - Unity, Corona, etc…

Tip 3: Breadth, not Depth

- Try every wild variation of an idea
  - Even if you have one you already like

- You won't be able to try those things later

- You may discover something

Tip 4: Always Kill Your Babies

- "Let's just turn this into the real game!"

- Never turn your prototypes into real products
  - Short term gain vs long term loss
  - It's easy to re-make something the 2nd time
  - If your prototype is that good, you're doing it wrong

Tip 5: Prototype in Parallel

- Need to try an idea while already in production?
- Use a separate prototype to hack things into!
- Good for details and balancing

Tip 6: Do Not Polish

- Use intentionally bad graphics
- Beautiful art can make a bad game 'seem' good
- Some visuals may be needed for usability
- Line is fuzzy - be conservative

Tip 7: Get Anyone You Can to Play

- Co-workers
- Friends & family
- College students
- Pester people at Starbucks
- Formal usability study
  - usertesting.com
  - In-house

Tip 8: There is No Fail, Only Try

- The only failed prototype is the one you didn't do
- Every bad prototype teaches you something
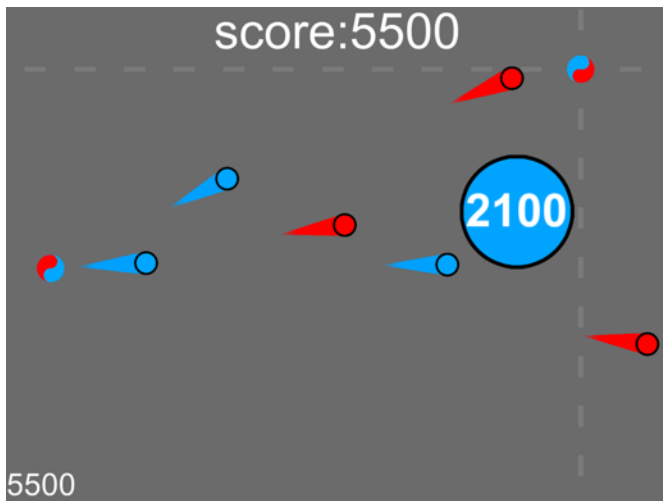- Today's bad idea might fit in tomorrow's good one

Tip 9: ~~Interns~~ Temps

- Find students and grads looking to break in
- Strictly enforced 3-month employment
- Low risk/cost
- Gives inexperienced people a chance
- Good way to find young talent
- Also good for washing whiteboards!

Backflip's Prototype Team Today

The Core Team

- 3 dedicated designers
- 1 Producer
- Occasionally, programmers join the fray

~3 new or revised prototypes a week!

Daily Meetings

- Team plays active prototypes and give feedback
- Problems/solutions discussed
- Next steps set for each one

Blue Light

- Prototype is fun

- Explore variations and additional features

- Develop high-level proposal for full game
  - Feature list
  - Marketing goals

Green Light

- Prototype is solid
- High level plan is ready
- Assign resources
- Begin Pre-production

Fruits of Our Labor

- NinJump Rooftops
- Outworded
- Wits & Wagers
- NinJump Smash
- Ferno
- DragonVale Wings
- Scrabble Pics
- And many more to come…

Questions?

We're always looking for talent!

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