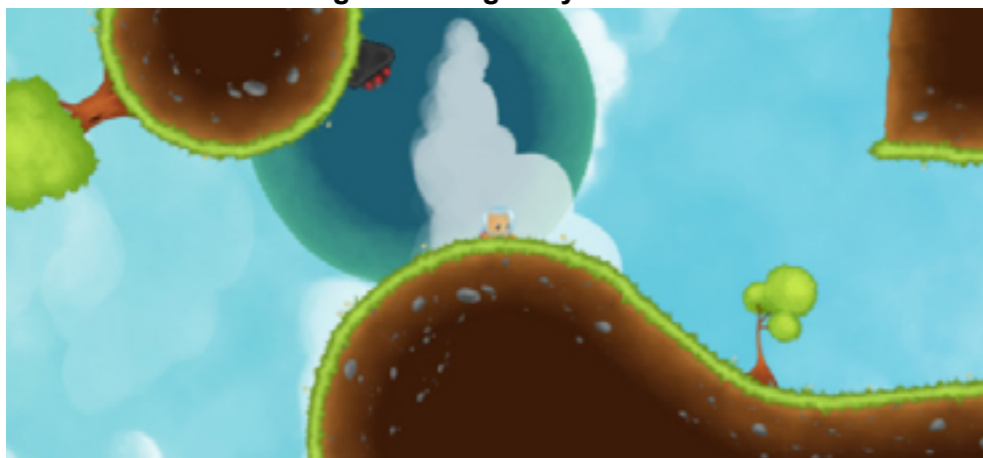


THE FAILURE OF AIRSCAPE: THE FALL OF GRAVITY

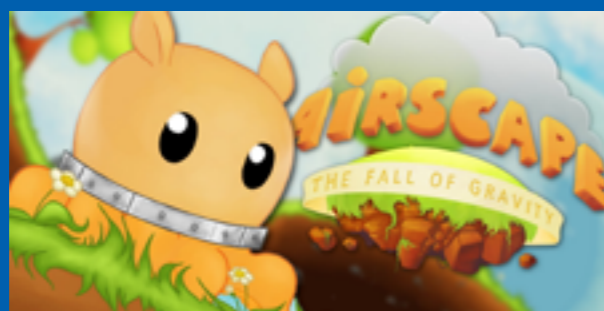
→ We look at the failure of an indie platformer and why “good isn’t good enough anymore”



• Being an indie developer definitely has its challenges and no one understands this more than Daniel West, one of the development team behind Airscape: The Fall of Gravity. “Good is no longer good enough,” says West in his Op-ed for Gamesutra. After boasting an average Meta critic score of around 75%, it would be expected that the game would have sold more than 150 copies in its first 2 weeks. West goes on to try and analyse the unexpected failure of the game even after marketing and hiring a professional PR company: “despite our best efforts, the game (or, crucially, what people saw of the game) simply didn’t appeal to the mass market.” One of the aspects that West attributes the failure of his project to is due to the games aesthetic not suiting that of the high difficulty; with a very calming and relaxing art style combined with a sweeping orchestral soundtrack, it does not compliment the challenging gameplay. “We may also have made a marketability mistake with the fundamental split between art style and gameplay.

Cute, appealing octopuses, orchestral music, and welcoming colours were intended to make the game unique and interesting, but might have alienated the very audience we needed to attract.” West goes on to discuss the oversaturation of the games market in recent years, as it has become increasingly easier for developers to be distributed on Steam. In the past, Steam used to be an incredible opportunity to gain an audience for a game, however now with the recent influx of indie developers as well with a resurgence of remakes and older games being ported to PC,

getting noticed purely by being on Steam is no longer possible. West summarises: “It’s harder than ever to make a game that sticks out. The standard for remarkability, marketing, and luck have increased dramatically, meaning that games need to be bigger, better and have more expensive marketing campaigns to stand out from the crowd” Despite the experience and the discussion that has arisen (from this and other game’s recent failures) of an oncoming indie apocalypse West still ends on a note of positivity: “Indie games will certainly survive. I only hope that the toll on their creators is not too heavy.”



Above: Despite being a game with unique mechanics and interesting gameplay Airscape failed to sell.



Below: The steam Greenlight logo - the method in which many independent developers use to get into the steam store. This was introduced as a method of quality control.



Creating a popular game has always been difficult. But with the failure of many games, that would be classed by many as at least good, it’s beginning to beg the question as to whether this may be the end of the previous ‘golden age of the indie.’ “I have watched numerous games that would have been top sellers in prior years launch to almost no effect,” laments Erik Asmussen, developer of Disco Dodgeball, after being asked his opinion on the potential event horizon ending the indie scene.

“IT’S HEARTBREAKING to see that happen, and always makes me worried when quality games don’t get the success they deserve.” However, games not doing as well as expected is not a new concept. Despite the overwhelming success of past indies such as Super Meat Boy, Braid and of course the indie goliath Minecraft, the indie scene has continued to perpetuate this idea of hit or miss - predominantly indies being a miss. Indie games tend to fall into a spiral in one form or another. Some spiralling to greatness with a continual overlap of media presence and hearsay generating sales from an audience who are interested - creating successes like Minecraft. However, more often than not, there is a complete lack of attention given to indies. No one wants to cover a game no one is talking about. Leading to no coverage of the game and so, therefore, nobody is searching for it. This creates a continuous loop of disinterest, which is far too often the case. Games that are considering innovative are often pushed to the side in favour of triple A games, or drowned out by the current flood of sandbox survival games (often never leaving early access). Many games in recent years have found themselves commercial success with the help of YouTube to gain attention with →

→ unique ideas such as Surgeon Simulator and Goat Simulator; capitalising on the odd nature of their concepts to get the attention of some of YouTube’s gaming giants. When asked about how he felt YouTube impacted the sales of his game Asmussen said “I’d say that’s probably been the biggest driver of awareness and players. Certainly was more impactful than any press I had (including PC Gamer and Wired). I think having millions of people aware of the game before it launched led to a good amount of traction during launch week, which in turn led to greater featuring and helping things snowball.” Bringing us again back to this idea of a spiral. Attention begets attention. Many have criticised Steam in recent years regarding its quality control procedures to which

Above: Steam while being the biggest contributor to the online game marketplace many have criticised its quality control procedures and oversaturation of new indie titles being added to the store.

steam responded by introducing the Greenlight system - introducing the notion that indie games could get onto Steam easily without a publisher. With the voting system allowing for a game to show it had an audience for their game before release. However, this led to a new wave of games being added to Steam and combined with the ‘recently added’ section being saturated with games that were released years ago, it’s no surprise indies have trouble getting attention through the Steam store alone. “Although

“The quality bar for “good game” has risen, so the vast majority of indie games don’t really sell that well”

Joost Van Dongen, indie developer



(A DEVELOPER'S PERSPECTIVE)

→ Joost Van Dongen shares his views on the “indie apocalypse”

• While some are marking this as the end of days for the indie developer, others in the industry see this more as an evolution of the gaming scene. One such person with this belief is Joost Van Dongen, one of the lead developers behind the indie Moba Awesomenauts. In an interview with

Dongen he said in regards to the idea of the end of the indie era: “I think really good games still have a good chance of selling well. This hasn’t changed that much.” He went on to discuss the idea of the bar having been raised in terms of what is considered a ‘good game.’ Dongen expects a move towards

hobby indies rather than professionals concluding: “I wouldn’t say this is an ‘indie apocalypse’ as that suggests the end of indie, but the move from professional indies to hobby indies is pretty shocking to many, I expect.”

Greenlight gets a bad rap, I think it’s a very helpful test of how marketable your game is and good practice for getting people excited about it. Basically, if you can’t get people to vote for your game on Greenlight, then you probably won’t have much success getting people to buy it,” Asmussen told us. As someone who is well versed in the intricacies of the Greenlight process, Asmussen makes a good point. “Before Greenlight existed I was pretty bitter about favouritism in the industry, but I think now having gone through it and watching many other games go through it I think it’s a relatively fair filter,” he concludes. Perhaps, if more developers went down this route and Steam was more rigorous with its selection process - through a similar methodology then there would be less saturation in the marketplace. Although of course, perhaps it’s just luck if a good game does well, as Daniel West outlined in his Gamesutra article. This was also touched upon in YouTube games critic John ‘Totalbiscuit’ Bane’s video in March titled ‘The Failure of an Indie Platformer’ relating to West’s article. In the video Bane discusses the idea of the ‘indie apocalypse’ and his opinion on West’s thoughts behind the game’s failure stating “You can never guarantee, not matter how hard you try, that there is going to be an audience and that they’re actually going to care.”