

GAMING THE KICKSTARTER CAMPAIGN MACHINE

Crowdfunded games aren't a cakewalk for developers – even successful ones. We find out why

WRITTEN BY **KHEE HOON CHAN**

One of the strangest games to go viral on Kickstarter was *Soda Drinker Pro: SipStarter*, whose lofty promises of letting players digitally quench their thirst garnered so much attention that it exceeded its target by at least 16,600%. The campaign's success allowed its developer, Snowrunner Games, to secure a sponsor that gave it more resources to, in its own words, "Make all of the stuff we are working on 1000% better!"

With the campaign's unexpected success, Snowrunner Games launched *Soda Drinker Pro* two years later to much acclaim. "Manages to capture the full experience of drinking a soda," one Steam reviewer complimented breathlessly. "I don't know why I bought this," remarked another.

Such attention is why Jason Thor Hall, founder and game director of Pirate Software, crowdfunded its RPG *Heartbound* via Kickstarter. "The reason I did it was to cause a stir for the game, to get the news media to pay attention to us," says Hall. "At the end of the day, I was mostly using Kickstarter to hack the news."

Pegging its Kickstarter goal at the relatively modest figure of \$5000, Hall reveals that this isn't enough to make the game with; what he wanted was to meet the goal within 24 hours. Not only did the studio achieve that, but it also raised \$19,272 – almost four times the original goal. And at Christmas 2018, the Early Access version of *Heartbound* was released. It was, by most definitions, a Kickstarter success story.

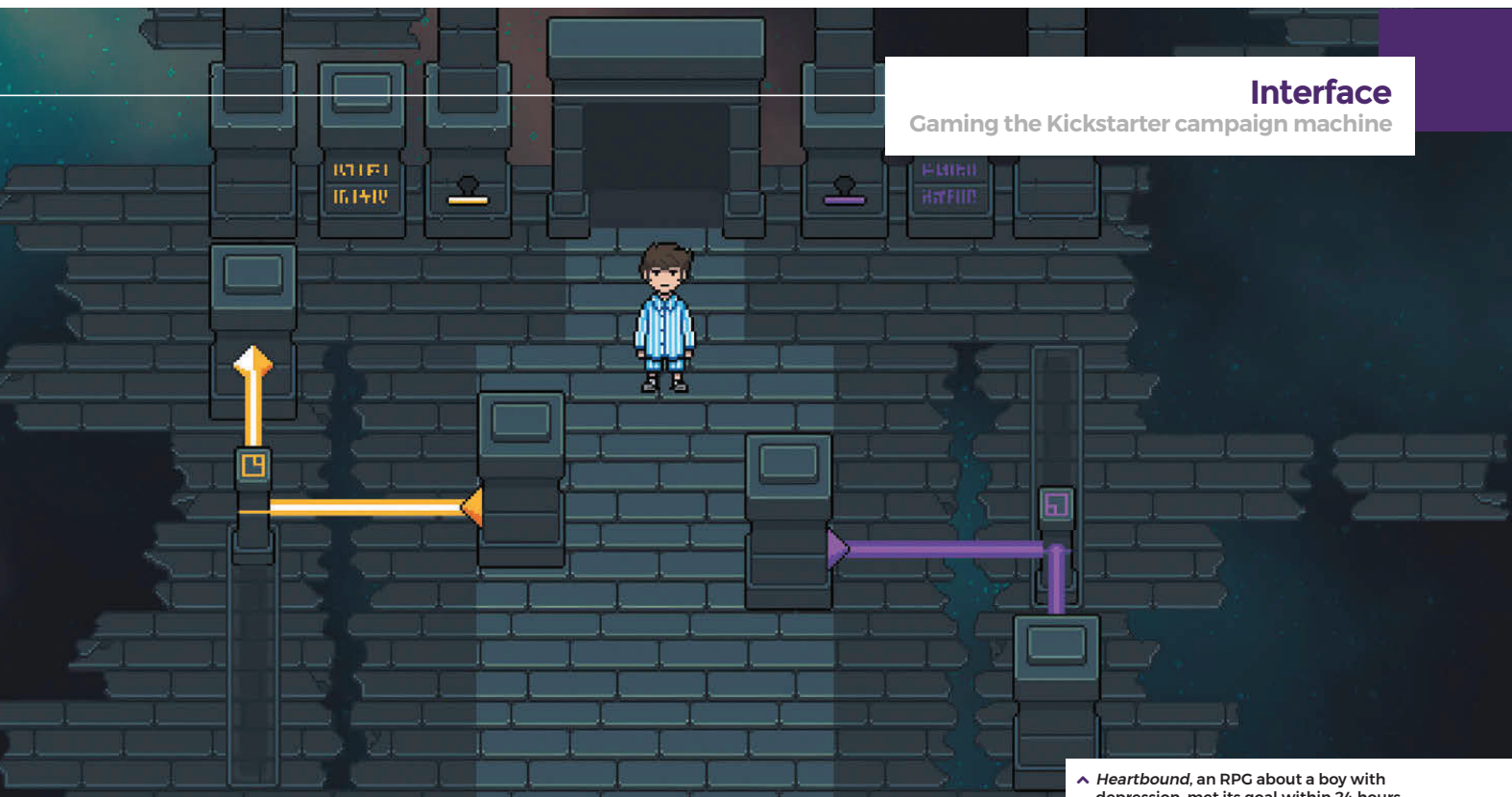
But making a Kickstarter campaign is almost a science. Having a single, spectacular idea isn't enough; you'll need to consider how to translate that into a tangible product, complete with backer rewards that won't detract from development. Even after the goal is met, more challenges crop up – from managing shipping costs to narrowing the game's scope. All these are compounded by the already high costs of game development. So rather than just raise funds, many developers also use Kickstarter to reach out to their communities. "It's got the largest community size, and it's the most noticed by the media," Hall says of Kickstarter. "Generally you don't hear about Indiegogo campaigns that succeed really well unless it's, like, some ➔



▲ Publishers often requested that Nightdive adopted a different art style, or implemented a new feature in its demo, in exchange for the promise of more funds for the studio's *System Shock* remake.

Interface

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^ *Heartbound*, an RPG about a boy with depression, met its goal within 24 hours.



KICKSTARTER Vs INDIEGOGO

Indiegogo charges a 5% platform fee on campaigns, regardless of fixed or flexible funding goals. It also has a post-campaign fundraising programme called InDemand, which allows developers to continue raising funds after the campaign. The difference lies in whether they've first crowdfunded their project on Indiegogo. If so, the fee remains at 5%; if not, it's 8%. Indiegogo also charges a 3–5% payment processing fee. Due to Kickstarter's all-or-nothing funding model, it charges a platform 5% fee only if a project is successfully funded. Like Indiegogo, Kickstarter also charges a 3–5% payment processing fee.

astronomical figure. People pay attention to Kickstarter more than they do Indiegogo."

TESTING GROUND

For Tom Eastman, President of Trinket Studios, Kickstarter was also a litmus test for an unorthodox cooking game. Back in 2014, the studio released two mobile games called *Color Sheep* and *Orion's Forge*, but wanted to work on a more ambitious title. Lacking the necessary funds, it turned to Kickstarter.

Through a puzzle mechanic, *Battle Chef Brigade's* players can cook up a variety of dishes, judged in a *MasterChef*-style contest.



The result was *Battle Chef Brigade*, a brawler-cum-puzzle game about hunting monsters and cooking mouth-watering dishes. Again, Kickstarter was chosen not only because of its successes with games, but also its fixed funding model, which helped identify how viable its idea was. "Generally, it's also a good way to fail fast, where if no one likes your idea, then you don't work on it anymore, you just move to something else," says Hall. "That was appealing to us, too."

To its surprise, Trinket Studios exceeded its initial goal of \$30,000, getting more than three times that amount with a final total of \$100,344. That's when the pressure of producing a game that's much grander in scope – and more than what it'd initially planned for – suddenly sunk in. "It was going to be a small game during the pitch, and then it grew into something that was way larger than that budget – even with the higher amount that we got from Kickstarter, which ended up resulting in a longer development time, and us needing to get a publisher for additional funding," says Eastman. "We could have made a smaller game, but it was an opportunity to make something larger that we were really proud of."

One example was character animation. While it originally kept it simple, it wound up committing to detailed animations with more frames, and had to hire more contractors to cope with the workload. Another issue was the game's playable characters. Initially working with a more vanilla story, the studio's promises of multiple playable characters didn't seem like a stretch. Yet the pressure to flesh out their individual stories, in light of the additional funds,



▲ *Guns of Icarus* was Muse Games' most successful Kickstarter title, gathering \$198,741 from 4632 backers.

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loomed over the team. "That was almost entirely us feeling the pressure from Kickstarter and our own imagination over [the expectations that] we need more features on the box or something to satisfy people at launch," Eastman says. It's easy to see how projects can spiral out of control from additional goalposts that developers themselves would put up, so as not to disappoint their backers.

PUBLISHERS AND PRESSURES

Imagine the stakes for Nightdive Studios, then, whose *System Shock* remake campaign inhaled \$1,350,700 – at least 13 times *Battle Chef Brigade's* total. The success took Nightdive utterly by surprise.

"At the time, we were only just a team of developers," says Stephen Kick, the studio's founder and CEO. "We didn't have a community manager. We didn't have people dedicated to just answering questions about our community." The number of backers – and the sheer amount of money involved – intensified the stress and its own expectations over the project. "We had, I

think, four or five people that donated \$10,000. And then we had 10,000 people that donated \$35 for a digital copy of the game, and every single one of those people matters regardless of how much they donated. The weight of that hit us all at once."

Then the publishers came knocking, and the campaign's immense success swiftly propelled *System Shock* into the limelight. "It was really exciting for us to have that kind of attention," says Kick. "Of course, the first things they begin to promise you are that you could build a bigger, better game, your backers are going to be happier, you're going to make more money, that type of thing."

By dangling promises of more support and funds if the team could prove it was capable of producing a blockbuster title, the publishers made incremental demands on the *System Shock* demo, ever-increasing the complexity of managing the project. But the promised funds never came. Nightdive Studios was ghosted by the very publishers that pursued it, who stopped answering emails and ceased ➔

CROWDFUNDING ON



Fig's crowdfunding models are a little different from Kickstarter and Indiegogo. There's the classic rewards-based crowdfunding option that both use, and the other is investment crowdfunding. Say you choose to invest in a game; you purchase Fig Game Shares, which aren't company shares, so developers still retain full ownership of their company and intellectual property. The more shares you buy, the more dividends you'll earn from game sales.

However, Fig is pretty selective about the games it features on the platform, and only run one or two campaigns at any time.

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FRESH OUT OF FUNDS

"I knew, going into the press release that I put out, that there was going to be backlash of varying degrees," Stephen Kick explains. "Nobody likes to hear that the game that they donated their money to is struggling. But in reality, it's something that I think every game development team faces at one point or another. We just reached a point where the project was no longer sustainable."



^ *Hamsterdam*, which featured a hard-hitting kung fu expert called Pimm, was Muse Games' fourth Kickstarter campaign.

all communications, leaving the studio with only empty promises. And this is after Nightdive Studios had ramped up the team to develop a better demo. "They left us with a giant, expensive team to develop a game we didn't budget for," Kick recalls.

Having burned through the bulk of funds raised through Kickstarter just from trying to meet these expectations, Kick felt he had to put the project on hiatus to assess its next moves.

"You have to be willing to find a publisher that wants you to work on the game you're envisioning, and the game you want to make"

SATISFYING BACKERS

The fear of disappointing backers piled on the pressure for Muse Games, a team that's no stranger to Kickstarter campaigns. Known for its steampunk shooter *Guns of Icarus*, Muse had been tapping on Kickstarter to partially fund its games – including *Hamsterdam*, an arcade brawler released last August. Its CEO and team lead, Howard Tsao, pointed out that backers have specific assumptions about the games they support, and when these expectations aren't met, they may feel misled. "Some people look at a Kickstarter campaign almost like a contract deal," says Tsao. "So when they think that a specific item doesn't go exactly to what is written, [they might] not be as understanding."

Game development is also frequently in flux. Keeping exactly to what's being promised in a campaign, especially when the

development process spreads over a year or two, is extremely challenging. Take *Hamsterdam*, which was originally slated to be released on the PlayStation Vita. But because developing the game for the console was so tedious, the studio had to drop it from its release platforms. This was a tough call for Tsao, who said some backers were displeased. "In some instances, we just have to give the backers a refund."

Backer rewards were another conundrum; balancing what's viable versus what could attract potential backers is a struggle. For one thing, many developers agreed that physical rewards can mess up an already complex fulfillment process. "I think if we were to do a Kickstarter campaign, we would probably not do physical rewards, or we would partner with another company earlier to make all these things," says Eastman. "It was a lot of work to do physical rewards as it added a lot of management time."

Kick also received similar advice from Red Hook Studios, the team behind *Darkest Dungeon*. "We've got a big box collectors' edition that contains a manual, a SteelBook case for the disc, a figurine, a pin, and custom artwork," Kick tells us. "We also offered a limited number of resin statues, custom laptops, and a launch party we have to host. It's going to be totally manageable and we're going to fulfill those rewards, but there's a tremendous amount of work that goes into designing that stuff, manufacturing it and distributing it."

THE TOOLS FOR CROWDFUNDING

While developers found the Kickstarter tools for fulfillment fairly rudimentary, they think



it's adequate for smaller-scale campaigns.

"Kickstarter organised what they called 'backer reports' really well, which is when people give me their addresses so I can ship them things, or emails so I can send a code," says Hall.

"Kickstarter was great for that. Anything beyond that, Kickstarter will not help you with." For campaigns with tons more backers, like *System Shock*, third-party services are indispensable; managing it alone is a logistical nightmare. "Because of the scope of our project, and the fact we had over 20,000 backers, we opted to go for something like BackerKit, because it's a lot of information to handle," says Kick.

One persistent concern that Hall has about Kickstarter, however, is the locking in of pledges; for *Heartbound*, Hall says a quarter of the backers didn't pay for their rewards. Some even pledged a steep amount like \$1000, and then opted not to pay when the campaign concluded. This loophole had sunk another studio's campaign before: 2Awesome Studio's *Dimension Drive*. In this case, a €7000 pledge was found to be fraudulent, which caused Kickstarter to retract it at the campaign's final half-hour. Had the bogus pledge gone through, it's not hard to imagine the huge problem it would have caused: the studio would have been €7000 short of its target, but still expected to deliver the game.

GETTING KICKSTARTER ADVICE

Unforeseen circumstances will inevitably beset game development at some point, and that's why the developers we spoke to emphasise the importance of constant dialogue with their backers. "Part of it is communication with

KICKSTARTER: FOR EARLY ADOPTERS?

"Kickstarter has migrated a little bit towards pre-ordering and getting exclusive content early," says Howard Tsao. "When we first started Kickstarter, it was made up of a small but passionate community out looking for indie projects. So we've just been using the platform ever since, before we launch a project, to try to drive awareness and get early adopters into the game."

people... and if people are really dissatisfied, working with them through the process. I feel like people are generally willing to listen," says Tsao.

And as for Nightdive Studios, the team has since resumed development on *System Shock* – and helped put to rest some of the community's worries (check out Wireframe #31 for more on the game's progress). Looking back at the game's turbulent Kickstarter history, Kick was grateful for the community's support, some of whom have volunteered to moderate its Discord channel, or even joined the team to aid with development. The thorny publisher issue taught him a valuable lesson, too. "You have to be willing to find a publisher that wants you to work on the game you're envisioning, and the game you want to make, because as soon as you start compromising, there's no telling what lengths they're going to make you go [to]," Kick says. "And at that point you're on a slippery slope, you could end up burning through your funding to try to appeal to a publisher and end up with no deal.

"I'm just so grateful that our other team at Nightdive was able to release a couple of games during that time, which enabled us to keep everything going," he continues. "So it could have gone the other way. And at the end of the day, I'm so happy we're still making this game." 🙌



▲ The \$900,000 goal set for the *System Shock* campaign was carefully calculated..

▼ Due to *Battle Chef Brigade's* expanded scope, orc chef Thrash's backstory is being fleshed out further.

