Analyzing the Creative Process of Mobile Indie Game RockFlickz

Vicente Martin Mastrocola

ABSTRACT

In this article, we will discuss the game design process and the structuring of the business model for mobile game RockFlickz (Sioux 2016)¹. Created by Brazilian studio Sioux², the game is a casual experience that combines indie music, social network and entertainment in its interface. We intend to present the different creative stages of this game: the main concept, the wireframes and prototypes, the qualitative approach for the beta test sessions, the discussion on how to monetize the experience and the features of the final version, available for smartphones and tablets. We highlight the importance of establishing a business model for this game and how its theme could be a strategic component to advertise and build partnerships with companies and brands of the musical market. We also emphasize the importance of using social networks to launch the game and keep a community of players engaged with this experience.

Keywords

RockFlickz, mobile game, Brazil, game design

INTRODUCTION

Acknowledging the prominence of digital culture in today's *mediapolis* (Silverstone, 2007), the large amount of video game platforms can be considered a privileged space for communication and entertainment strategies of all kinds. In this complex environment, smartphones and tablets lead sales of electronic devices around the world, and offer a rich field to explore gaming initiatives. Mobile media created a ludic ecosystem in which large publishers and small studios coexist; the new ways of digital content distribution allowed a gaming market with big productions and indie experiments to live in the same platforms.

The logical of anytime/anywhere connection, present in mobile platforms, is a turning point for new business models and entertainment products around the world. Inside this scenario, Brazil has revealed itself as a market full of possibilities. As an emergent country, Brazil is a land of contrasts. The country is the fifth largest in the world, has the sixth largest population (200 million people), has 160 million mobile devices with internet connection and ranks seventh in terms of Internet usage³.

It is essential to point out some characteristics of the Brazilian gaming scene, shedding light on the common sense that the game industry refers only to video game consoles or mainstream PC games. This perception is something that specialized media tries to

emphasize, because that seems to be the preference of games' heavy users - although, as seen through research, the casual gamer plays more games and for longer than the hard core gamer, as Juul (2010) says.

In this context, lots of small publishers and studios are rising in the Brazilian mobile gaming scenario. Many mobile powerhouses and advertising agencies are making spaces for game development inside their structures. In our discussion, we bring as an example Sioux Game Studio, whose specialty is developing games for brands (advergames) and indie games in partnership with entertainment companies.

Based on this gaming scenario, we will examine *RockFlickz* and its main features to further discuss the methodological and creative process of this game. We intend to show that even independent games require accurate processes to materialize themselves with quality assurance, relevant fun components and a solid business model for monetization.

ABOUT ROCKFLICKZ

RockFlickz is a mobile game, which uses Brazilian indie rock music in its background. Players must launch vinyl records using a pickup and make combinations of three or more similar colors to earn points and special power-ups. Like in other "match the color" types of games, the more points the player makes, the faster the game becomes. This game fits the casual game category that can be defined as games that are quick to play, with simple mechanics and accessible to players with different ability levels; in this kind of game, the rules and goals must be clear: players need to be able to quickly reach proficiency and the gameplay must adapt itself to the player's life and schedule (Trefay, 2004, 59). In the image below, we present the gaming interface, with its main screens.



Figure 1: *RockFlickz* opening screens and main interface.

Sioux Studio created *RockFlickz* in a partnership with the Brazilian music website Shovel Music⁴. There is integration between the game and the website: independent bands can upload its songs in Shovel's platform and choose to set the song available in *RockFlickz*. Once in the game, the music will be played randomly during a match; at the end of a stage, the player is invited to rate the song in a binary system with "like" and "don't like" buttons. In case of a "don't like", the player will never listen to the song again. In case of

a "like", the song is added to a special playlist, so it will be played again. Also, the "like" choice gives points to the band in Shovel's website, so it has the opportunity to be highlighted on the home page.

After this brief introduction, we will discuss the complete creative process of this game, presenting data and documents used during its development.

ROCKFLICKZ'S CREATIVE PROCESS: FROM THE CONCEPTUAL PROTOTYPE TO THE FINAL PRODUCT

Following the thoughts of Fullerton et al. (2008, 15-16), *RockFlickz* used one very synthetic game design process based in stages: 1) conceptual stage: to define the game's theme; 2) brainstorm stage: to think how the theme will materialize on the gaming interface; 3) Physical prototype/pre-prototype stage: to create a fast pre-visualization of the game using paper, pen and simple components; 4) Layout stage: to establish the initial concepts of the interface; 5) Digital prototype and test stage: with the previous mechanics and first layouts, it is possible to develop a simple version to be played in browser or in smartphones. In this stage, it is possible to start the beta-testing sessions; 6) Production stage: the feedbacks from the digital prototype beta-test sessions are the main information to produce the final version of the game; 7) Evaluation stage: to make the final tests to assure it is error-free; 8) Launching stage: to put the game available for download in mobile platforms (Android and iOS).

It is important to highlight that, during this whole process, the game is documented using specific files (that will be shown in details, ahead) and one business model is discussed to create a monetization strategy for the game.

Conceptual Stage and Brainstorm Stage

Shell (2008, 463) says that a gaming creative process is an ecosystem that unites the game designer and players. The conceptual stage is the first step into that process and aims to define the main idea of the game, basic mechanics, theme and platform. In *RockFlickz*' conceptual stage, the music theme, the "match colors" mechanics and how players will interact with the screen (throwing vinyl records inside a grid) were defined. In this very first step, the initial thoughts about business model and how the game could possibly be a platform for independent bands or artists to show their work were discussed.

After these definitions, comes the brainstorm stage, where many ideas must be generated and discussed to improve the game experience. During the brainstorm it is important to discuss every single idea. In this process, many relevant data will be generated for the gaming structure.

Physical Prototype/Pre-Prototype Stage

Many gaming studios and publishers choose to work with physical prototype even for digital games. It is a fast and cheap method to establish a pre-visualization of the game, to save time and focus on the mechanics and dynamics. A physical prototype, or a pre-prototype, is an element created based on information architecture methods.

There are many definitions for information architecture (I.A.), but one that fits better in this article comes from Rosenfeld and Morville (2002, 4): I.A. is "an emerging discipline and community of practice focused on bringing principles of design and architecture to the digital landscape". Information architecture, in the gaming area, is a tool to help a

developing team carefully plan a project. To use a metaphor, one architect will never build a house without a plan, a map or blueprints – so, a game will never be structured without instructions, plans, rules, prototypes or models.



Figure 2: RockFlickz pen and paper sketches.

In the *RockFlickz* case, many wireframes were used to define the game mechanics. Wireframes are a simple way to define the basic grid of a game, its menu, the main pages, how the player will navigate between the sections and the core gaming elements. Along with the wireframes many sketches were also used to construct solid wireframes.



Figure 3: RockFlickz mechanics wireframes.

It is important to emphasize that the goal of a wireframe is not to limit the gaming structure or the final art/design, but to improve the functionality and foresee possible errors. The main point of this stage is: before the complex codes and final layouts, it's important to plan – in a simple way – how the game works. It is essential to highlight that wireframes are one intersection between the prototype and the final version. It's a tool to

gain time and minimize errors. It's one methodological process that can be used in analogical and digital games.

Layout Stage

Once the game has concept/theme defined and well-structured wireframes with the core mechanics and main screens, it is time to create the interface. Using tools like Photoshop and Illustrator, designers will create graphics, logotype, drawings, buttons, icons and the gaming visual identity.

Schell (2008, 222) discusses that the goal of a good gaming interface is not 'to look nice' or 'to be fluid', although those are nice qualities; the goal of an interface is to make players feel in control of their experience. Complementing Schell's ideas, Perron and Wolf (2009, 66) postulate that one of the essential conditions that drive some of our "interactions with video game virtual environments is that our actions are mapped onto the game system by various technological means, since we cannot physically manipulate the virtual entities directly". By this last quotation, we can understand the importance of a good interface and how it can create an immersive experience to the audience.

As we can see in Figure 1 (page 2), *RockFlickz*'s interface is very simple and intuitive. These features must be used carefully in case of casual mobile games. Few clicks must be planned to guide the player through a fast tutorial and, then, to the first stage of the game. The most important point here is: an interface establishes an answer system between the game and the player, so the "dialogue" must be objective and functional. As Fox (2005, p.2) remembers, even more important than the visual aspect of interface design is the functionality, and a poor interface can ruin the entire video game experience; the game experience will be negative if the user is confused and can't figure out how to navigate the front-end menu or if he can't understand where to find information while playing the game.

In the developing process of *RockFlickz* mobile game, while designers were drawing the interface, the programming team was structuring the code for the digital prototype.

Digital Prototype and Test Stage

A digital prototype is the first step to the final version of the game. With this tool in hand, it is possible to start the beta test sessions receiving feedbacks from selected players. *RockFlickz* was programmed using Unity⁵ game engine because it's a free tool, has native integration for Android and iOS platforms and has ready-made documentation (created and shared by developers in many internet discussion forums) that helps solve complex problems.

Using some interface features, the programming team can create a 1.0 version of the game and send to some chosen players to test. At this stage, it is fundamental to remember that beta-testing processes are not random sessions with random players. It is important to choose a method and understands beta test sessions as qualitative interviews with a qualified target audience.

RockFlickz used an iterative method in order to improve the game experience. Zimmerman (2003, 176) defines this method as "a design methodology based on a cyclic process of prototyping, testing, analyzing, and refining a work in progress". Cote and Raz (2015, 93) emphasize that, in this context, it is always essential to remember that games "are fundamentally interactive, relying on communication between the player and their character, the player and the content, and even players with one another" and it's crucial to ponder that "while games are developed in a studio, at least part of their meaning and significance is created at the moment of play and through the people who play them".

Based on these thoughts, a qualitative interview was created, to apply with the betatesting players after *RockFlickz*'s playing sessions. The idea was to understand strengths and weaknesses to be worked in the production stage, to materialize the game's final version. The qualitative method is one of many ways to understand the creation of meaning and significance in a gaming interface. To conduct a qualitative interview it's necessary to have a good script with clear objects imbricated in the questions. Cote and Raz (2015, 104) teach us how to write a qualitative interview guide adapted for a gaming universe:

1. Create an introductory script to open the interview and remind study goals.

2. Warm-up questions to put the participant at ease and build rapport. Questions like 'How long have you been playing video games for?' and 'What's one of your favorite gaming memories?' are good kick-starting contents.

3. Substantive questions to collect deeper data that answers the research questions. This part is the core of the interview, here the player will give feedbacks about gaming interface, mechanics and other aspects. For *RockFlickz*'s beta testing, the following questions were proposed to the interviewed players:

- 3a) Talk about your experience with the game.
- 3b) Did the game work or not?
- 3c) Did you feel challenged by the game?
- 3d) Are the rules easy, medium or complex to understand?
- 3e) At the end of the first game, did you feel the urge to play again?
- 3f) Did you have fun with the game?
- 3g) Feel free to add any comments about the game.

4. Demographic questions to gather data needed to describe participants.

Forty beta sessions were conducted with almost twenty different players in Sioux Game Studio and in ESPM College, in the city of São Paulo. The last ten sessions pointed some repetitive results, signalizing a good amount of data stored for the production stage. Applying qualitative process with iterative design is a great challenge for the game designing process, but it is an essential component for a better development process. Armed with enough data, it is possible to produce a game with relevant feedback from the players and minimum errors.

Production Stage

The feedbacks from the digital prototype beta-test sessions are the main information to produce the final version of the game. At this stage, *RockFlickz* gained the complete interface, the whole coding information and all the interactive features. The different versions for Android and iOS (smartphones and tablets) were developed in this phase. Parallel with the production, internal tests were made with Sioux team to assure the quality of the product.

Evaluation Stage

Co (2006, 3) says that the evaluation stage is the last chance to correct persistent errors of the game. It is the moment game designers, graphic designers, programmers and project managers must be completely focused on adjusting the product for the launching.

Evaluation stage it is a moment to discuss the final details about the game's business model, a subject that we will discuss ahead.

Launching Stage

To launch a mobile game is not just to upload a file into a virtual store for smartphones and tablets. The true work starts with the launching stage. In a market full of apps and games, it is fundamental to use communication and marketing tools to become relevant to the target audience.

In addition to the partnership with Shovel Music site, for the launching of *RockFlickz*, Sioux Studio used public relations (PR) strategy, ads in social media (Facebook and Instagram) and specialized gaming sites. One website⁶ was created (in Portuguese and English) for the game, calling bands to share their works inside *RockFlickz* interface.

One essential communication piece of campaign in this case is a very objective press release paper, informing the main features and essential technical information from the game. This kind of material is sent to gaming sites, relevant YouTube channels, and digital influencers. Below, we reproduced the full text (used in the website, social media and press release).

Do you want to discover new Brazilian Independent Rock bands? Enjoy playing and listening to Rock N ' Roll? So RockFlickz is your way to hours of fun! RockFlickz is an exciting game that will hold you from the beginning to end! Control a pick -up that throws vinyl discs to score points and advance in the game as you discover new Brazilian Rock bands. The goal is simple, join three or more disks of the same color and try to make the maximum number of combinations, the more colors you match, the higher your final score will be. During your journey you will come face different types of power- ups that will make your game more dynamic and addictive. But beware ... Time is your biggest enemy.

If you are a Brazilian Independent Rock Band and want to spread your work thru the game, all you need to do is access shovelmusic.com and follow the steps on your screen.

Main features: Addictive Game and Free; Languages: Portuguese / English; Age rating: Free for all; More than 50 bands ROCK; More than 5 power- ups to help you; Available for smartphones and tablets; Listen to true Rock and Roll.

After the release of the game, it is essential to monitor the download results and what media channels that are posting about it. Based on these results, it is possible to plan advertising investment, new partnerships or even new business models.

A WORD ABOUT BUSINESS MODELS

In the context of this article, a game must be understood as product. As a product, created by a team with many hours of work, it must have a business plan to monetize all the effort (Mastrocola, 2015). During the whole creative process, since the conceptual stage, *RockFlickz* was developed with a business model aiming to profit and to disclose Sioux Studio in the gaming market.

As a game with a music theme skin, *RockFlickz* offered many possibilities of partnership with bands, artists and websites. In the beginning of the conceptual phase, project managers from Sioux started to contact some partners for the game and the site Shovel Music – one digital space for independent bands show their works – showed interest in sponsoring the game. Shovel Music provided all the one hundred songs to the game's soundtrack and aided in the integration between the game and the site.

RockFlickz is a freeware game. So, to monetize the experience, two main business models were used: ads/banners and in-game advertising. We will discuss both modalities in detail below.

1. Ads and banners: there are a lot of free games with advertising inside its interfaces. It is very common to find a free game with ads/banners during the game experience. In *RockFlickz*, we can find ads but only at the end screen of a match. Fewer ads are used, but the experience of the player is not obstructed in any moment. In this case, it is important to register the game in Apple's App Store and Android's Play Store with relevant tags describing it as a music game. If the tag cloud is well crafted, the chances of the system showing relevant ads - related to the game's theme - are better.

2. In-Game Advertising: Poels and Herrewijn (2011, 1) define in-game advertising as the use of digital games as advertising; the authors still point out that in this context the player lives a brand experience during the gameplay. In-game advertising is not a new strategy that came up with the platforms connected on the internet. As Barton and Loguidice (2009, 195) remember, we can see in-game advertising inside the Pole Position game (Namco 1982), which in its Japanese version featured billboards with the Marlboro cigarette brand. *RockFlickz* game has some strategic areas in its interface ready to support in-game advertising from music instruments brands and brands. At the time this article was being written, Sioux company was negotiating the sponsorship insertion of a Brazilian guitar company logotype on the initial screen of the game.

It is always important to remember that there are many different strategies to create "talkability" and make the game go viral. It's possible to distribute promotional numbers for free downloads to influent people, use social media, *freemium*⁷ model and many other approaches. It is up to the game planning team to choose the best strategy and which fits best in the covered context. There is no ready-made formula. For each game, we will have a different situation and, consequently, a unique context to apply an effective business model.

THE FUN FACTOR

Hitherto, we discussed the game design process highlighting the importance of a business model and the strategic launching of it. However, there is another fundamental component in this context: the fun factor. During the beta-test sessions, despite the technical aspects and recurrent errors, it is important to observe if the players are having fun with the gaming experience. *RockFlickz*'s mechanics are very simple, so it is relevant to project an experience with gradual difficulty that increases with the player's performances and reveals new songs as a reward.

About *RockFlickz*'s mechanics and the fun component, we emphasize that matching games are a great success since the early years of video games. As Trefay (2010, 79) remembers, we like to pattern match – our brains crave it, and games are essentially complex systems of patterns. Jul points out (2013, p.50) that casual games have five components that create a fun experience: the narrative/theme, the usability, the interruptibility, the gradual difficulty/punishment and the juiciness (that we can understand as the positive feedback for every successful action the player performs).

In *RockFlickz*, players throw colorful vinyl records using a classic disco pickup. It is necessary to use dexterity and think fast to match the different color patterns. It is a simple idea using traditional and old fashion music elements but Bogost (2016, p.57) teaches us "fun is the aftermath of deliberately manipulating a familiar situation in a new way".

CONCLUSION

The use of a solid methodology of game design and a coherent business model for mobile platform were key elements in the development of *RockFlickz*. In the three months after the launching, the game earned a highlight in Apple's App Store home page and reached approximately 15 thousand downloads. Specialized Brazilian gaming sites published posts and news about the game. For the first semester of 2017, Sioux Studio is preparing the first pack of upgrades with new power-ups, new songs and interface changes. It is worth remembering that a mobile game always needs to be updated with new challenges to keep the audience engaged.

By discussing the creative process and the business model structuration of *RockFlickz*, we hope to demonstrate how strong is the relationship between players and gaming companies in the contemporary digital gaming ecosystem. We claim it is of utmost importance to use a methodological process, even for small productions. We can see the importance of working with a consistent methodology and it is possible to imagine the iterative process applied in bigger projects. We hope we can contribute with the field of gaming studies and that this article earns future developments and inspires new relevant discussions.

The Brazilian gaming market, as an emergent market, reveals itself as a privileged ambient to observe these game design processes. We welcome the opportunity to present this relevant discussion as a means of contributing to the on-going efforts in exploring the gaming market in contemporary culture.

ENDNOTES

1 RockFlickz game is free to download for Android and iOS platforms.

2 The author works as game designer partner with Sioux Studios. He was part of the team responsible for *RockFlickz* and followed the whole gaming creative process during the first semester of 2016. All the data provided in this article was taken from personal notations and interviews with other Sioux Studio's members.

3 Information taken from the Teleco website, in the URL <www.teleco.com.br>.

4 Shovel Music website can be accessed in the URL <www.shovelmusic.com>.

5 Unity official website can be accessed in the URL https://unity3d.com/>.

6 *RockFlickz* official website can be accessed in the URL <http://rockflickz.com.br/eg-index.html>.

7 *Freemium* is a neologism combining the words "free" and "premium". It is a business model by which a game is provided free of charge, but money is charged for advanced features, functionalities, or virtual goods. *Cut the rope* (ZeptoLab 2013) is an example of freemium mobile game where you can download the content and play ten stages of the game, but if you want the complete experience its mandatory to pay. *Zombie Tsunami* (Mobigame 2012) is an example of how a company can make money with in-game equipment (players are invited to visit a virtual shop to buy scenarios, powers, clothes, etc. with real credits).

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