



November 4, 2013

### Agenda:

- Article of the Week—*Thomas Was Alone's Bithell talks getting criticized in public (Gamasutra)*
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Checkpoint Presentations/ Peer Review—Today!
- Info-gathering and recap

### Article of the Week

## **Thomas Was Alone's Bithell talks getting criticized in public** by Leigh Alexander (Gamasutra)

[http://gamasutra.com/view/news/180599/Thomas\\_Was\\_Alones\\_Bithell\\_talks\\_getting\\_criticized\\_in\\_public.php](http://gamasutra.com/view/news/180599/Thomas_Was_Alones_Bithell_talks_getting_criticized_in_public.php)

*Thomas Was Alone* creator Mike Bithell says getting feedback on your work and actually implementing it is an essential skill for game makers. A few weeks ago at GameCity, he decided to quiz professionals in the areas of promotion, art, design and more on what his game could have done better -- and he did it in public.

"I was talking to the organizers about doing a postmortem, but honestly, I was a bit scared. I didn't really feel I'd be benefiting the audience, and it kind of felt a bit self indulgent," Bithell reflects. *Thomas Was Alone* is his first indie game, an action puzzler about a rectangle searching for friends. It's received a warm reception since its release this past June on PC and Mac -- and it's just come out on Steam last week.

"Getting others to criticize your work, and listening to that criticism, is one of the most important skills a creative can have," he says. "And while indies do this a lot among ourselves, sharing builds and writing lengthy emails to each other, I didn't feel it was something that was very public. People see a finished game, and assume that was the work of a few geniuses. That's rarely the case."

So rather than do a postmortem presentation, he thought of doing a series of lunchtime Q&A sessions with colleagues where he shared candid conversations on what he could learn from their feedback on *Thomas Was Alone*.

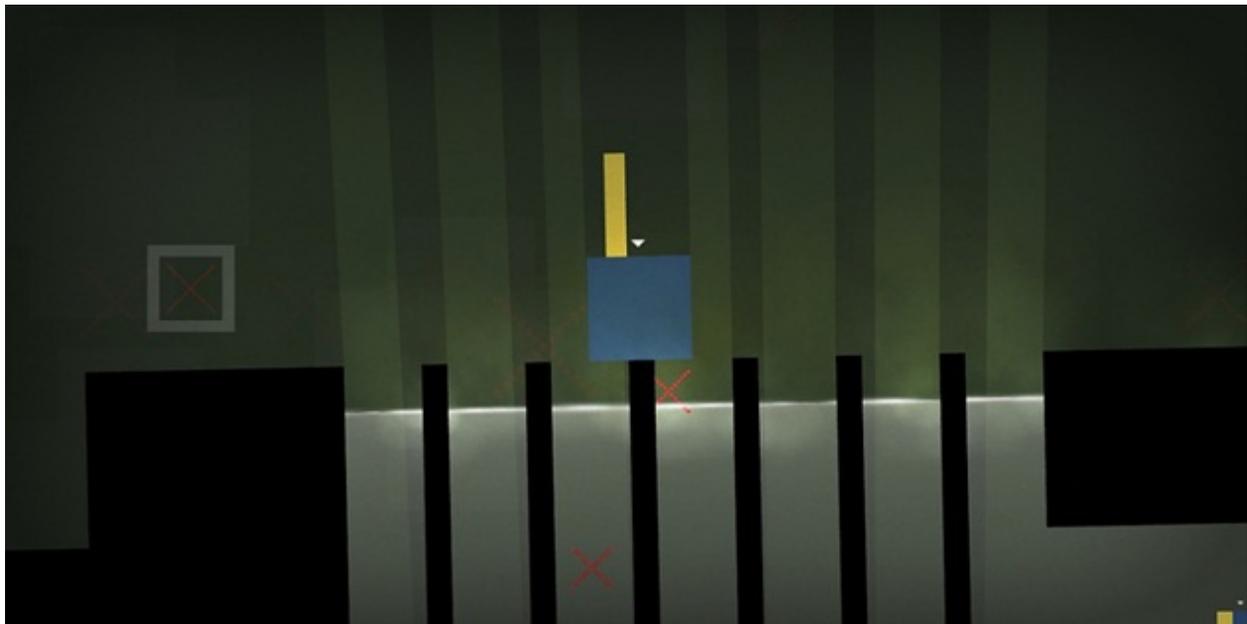
He chatted with Adam Saltsman and Paul Veer about art, with comic and game talents Kieron Gillen and Antony Johnston about writing, and on the subject of promotion and working with the press, with Brandon Boyer (and me, incidentally), among others.

"A village makes a game, and I liked the idea of bringing that out onstage and demystifying the way

game makers talk among themselves," says Bithell.

Yet democratizing one's own feedback before a live audience is a brave thing to do -- let alone to be so positive and open about it. "It was terrifying," Bithell admits. "Opening up in front of a room of strangers is really hard, and literally asking people to tear holes in a massively personal work put me in a personally risky position."

But he's found being as honest as possible has been the best way to build a community of supporters around his work as an indie. He's gathered a lot of friends and fans via social media that have given him the confidence to continue sharing, since he can trust they'll respond to things they don't like about the game with useful criticism rather than attack.



Doing a public feedback session was an incredibly useful format, he says. On the subject of promotion, where he talked to Boyer and I, he found a major takeaway: "I massively underestimated the importance of the 'first 10 minutes' in indie," he says.

"I work in social games where that's a core design principle, but I'd not transferred that thinking to *Thomas*," he says. "I wonder how many players I've lost at the demo stage because of the game's intentionally gradual introduction."

"There were some interesting trends, pacing definitely. Attention to detail," he adds. "It doesn't diminish my pride in the game, but it does give me a lot to think about. This is my first indie game. It's hopefully my worst indie game."



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The indies Bithell admires already have strong feedback processes. "It's really important indies don't lose their vision or compromise their goals, but there's a difference between that and using playtesting to achieve your goals better," he suggests.

"I think a game designer's job is a service to players, so putting your game in front of players and peers ahead of time can only help the final game deliver."

"And don't be afraid of criticism after release. *Thomas* has a 79 Metacritic, so it's not a bad game by any means.. but it's not perfect -- nothing is. Admitting that your work is imperfect is challenging in private, and terrifying in public, but I think it breeds a humility that can only help the work."

In the wake of *Thomas*'s Steam release, Bithell says the game is "far from over with," and additionally he's excited to share the learnings from his feedback session into his next project. "I've got some ambitious ideas, and I can't wait to share them," he says. "And then, in a couple of years, to tear them apart onstage at GameCity!"