

Foreword by John Davison

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AN A K PETERS BOOK

BUTTONLESS

Incredible iPhone and iPad Games
and the Stories Behind Them



RYAN RIGNEY



Buttonless

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Incredible iPhone and iPad Games
and the Stories Behind Them

Ryan Rigney



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Foreword

Back in 2008 when the App Store first opened, I was attempting to flex my start-up muscles by running a video game website aimed at parents and families. After spending nearly 20 years running magazines and websites like *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, 1UP.com, and the *Official US PlayStation Magazine*, I'd decided it was time to try and do something for people my own age. I was further motivated by having had kids fairly recently—and like any father of young children, I felt the need to talk about them ceaselessly and mold all kinds of decisions around the fact of my fatherhood whenever possible. In an attempt to shore up my slowly eroding gamer “cred,” I was also appearing on a popular weekly gaming podcast that was aimed squarely at fervent, hardcore gamers.

As you can probably imagine, insights about video games gleaned from one of these professional environments didn't necessarily translate all that well to others. Though pretty progressive in the grand scheme of things, gamers don't deal with change as well as you'd think, while families tend to roll with whatever is of the moment. The gaming “establishment” loves Nintendo, PlayStation, and the Xbox—but more significantly, it loves what it finds comfortable and familiar.

Mario Kart is comfortable and familiar. *Halo* is comfortable and familiar. Controllers with four face buttons and two analog sticks are comfortable and familiar. What *isn't* is the idea that a company like Apple could come along and somehow threaten the establishment with a *laissez faire* attitude about supporting games while providing a completely different user experience and infrastructure.

I was vigorously berated at the time by my cohosts on the podcast and by the gaming community at large for suggesting that *maybe* we should take the iPhone more seriously

as a game platform. I was admonished still further for intimating that perhaps Nintendo's stranglehold on the portable games market might be under threat. "It doesn't have any buttons," came the retort. "We don't want to play 'serious' games on a touch screen, it will never work," I was told, in spite of the fact that the DS has a touch screen. "Mobile gaming stinks," was the general sentiment, thanks to years of atrocious cell-phone games dictated by carrier stacks. This was before *Angry Birds*, of course. Before *Cut The Rope*, or *Anomaly: Warzone Earth*. It was before 2D Boy ported *World of Goo* to the iPad, or game-design auteurs from the 1980s and 1990s realized that the platform was absolutely *perfect* for resurrecting ideas that had lain dormant for decades.

What many people at the time underestimated was the killer one-two combo of portability and convenience. The Nintendo DS and PlayStation Portable aren't really pocket systems; they're backpack systems that take up far too much space, and require far too much messing around. You're not going to have one about your person at any given moment, and you have to make a conscious decision to leave the house properly equipped—there are chargers, carry cases, and all of the associated detritus and paraphernalia, and then on top of that you have to find some way to carry the games themselves. Bottom line? It's a huge pain. The iPhone changed all that; it's always with you (because it's an essential part of your life, being a phone, email, social, and media device), it's always charged, it's always connected, and it always has access to a wide selection of games. Plus, if you want *new* games, the App Store is just a screen tap away. In my opinion, people are fundamentally lazy (me especially), so something *that* convenient was bound to change our relationship with the entertainment it served.

We've had iOS devices in my house since the very beginning. My kids have grown up instinctively understanding how to swipe, pinch, and touch a glass screen to interact with the game characters they love. Although they've been raised on the classics, and are familiar with the all of the major games platforms, they are instinctively drawn to the iPhone and iPad. Given a choice between the Xbox 360 and the iPad, they tend to opt for the latter. On a recent vacation we packed a bag full of DS games, but they went unplayed for two whole weeks because both *Plants vs. Zombies* and *Swords and Soldiers* were far more satisfying for them when played on the iPad.

We are seeing a generational shift happen right before our eyes, and what's unsettling for many gamers is that it's coming from the last place they ever expected it. The future of games is upon us, and we'll look back on the first few years of iOS games as the experiences that changed our relationships with entertainment.

—John Davison
VP of Programming
GameSpot

Preface

The book that you're holding is the result of a strange obsession. Since 2009, I've spent an unreasonable amount of time and money purchasing, playing, and writing about games for the iPhone and iPad. What began as a hobby quickly turned into a daily part of my life, and before long I had accrued enough experience covering the iOS scene to land a job writing a weekly column about the App Store for GamePro.com.

Over the course of the following year, I wrote about and reviewed hundreds of iOS games. I interviewed many of the most interesting App Store developers, and my growing knowledge about the iPhone and iPad gaming market earned me writing gigs with magazines like PC Gamer, MacLife, and Macworld. One day, while sitting through a cousin's graduation ceremony, it hit me—I could write a book about this stuff.

The 67 games that you'll read about in *Buttonless* were not selected at random. I've purchased and played well over a thousand iOS games, and about a quarter of those were really worth something.

The games that populate this book are not merely good. They're the most interesting, well-designed, notable games on the App Store. Some of them were included because of their inventive mechanics or polished design. Others made it in because of their incredible popularity. But they all have one thing in common—they're worth your time and money.

Buttonless is not just a buyer's guide. Within the following pages, I hope to show you some interesting games that you might not have heard of, but my real goal is to share the stories behind these games. Games are created by people, not machines, and people struggling to create something awesome and original inevitably go through their fair share of trials while creating it.

To learn these stories, I conducted hundreds of exclusive interviews with the people behind the games I selected. I asked them questions about their creative process and the adversities they had to overcome, and pried for funny/interesting anecdotes from behind the scenes. I spoke with dozens of the most brilliant game designers in the world, and they continually surprised me with their insights and opinions about the ever-changing games industry that they've helped to shape.

If there's one thing I learned from those conversations, it's this: on the forefront of the mobile gaming revolution are real people, with stories that are crazy, stressful, hilarious, and (in some cases) heart-wrenching. These people have stories that are worth telling, and that's what *Buttonless* is about. I hope you enjoy it.



100 Rogues

Platform: iPad/iPhone/iPod Touch (universal app)

Price: \$1.99

Developer: Dinofarm Games

Publisher: Fusion Reactions

Released: May 4, 2010

What Is It?

“Roguelikes” are games based on the 1986 PC game *Rogue*. Most roguelikes take place in monster-filled dungeons, and the player’s goal is to retrieve some object of great importance from within the depths of the evil lair. One of the most important characteristics of a roguelike is that once the hero dies, he or she is gone forever. Even if a player has poured hours into the development of a character, getting surrounded by enemies and taking too much damage can result in the permanent death of that hero. Every decision players make becomes important when hours of real-world time can be wasted through simple mistakes.

100 Rogues takes all of the aforementioned attributes and shrinks them into a tiny experience fit for mobile devices. Instead of taking each character you create on an epic journey that can



potentially last for dozens of hours, each session of *100 Rogues* lasts an average of ten minutes. Your chosen character—whether a spell-slinging mage or a sword-wielding crusader—levels up and unlocks new abilities very quickly, and will likely live for only as long as it takes to sit through a commercial break while watching television (yes, iPhone games are the newest thing in mid-TV show entertainment). *100 Rogues* is a new spin on one of gaming’s most versatile genres, and it works beautifully on iOS.

Behind the Game

100 Rogues was not intended to be an ambitious game. The game began as a simple clone of *POWDER*, a roguelike created by indie developer Jeff Lait (which happens to be available on the iPhone for free). Freshman developer Dinofarm Games had been commissioned by Fusion Reactions to make an iOS game, and it felt that it was up to the task. The game was scheduled to be completed in a little over three months. Seventeen months later, the game still wasn’t complete.

But let’s not get too far ahead of ourselves. To understand the troubled development of *100 Rogues*, you’ll need the perspective of Wes Paugh, a programmer for Fusion Reactions who worked on the game. “When I was hired to work on *100 Rogues*, the game had been in development for three months, which was about 85% of the way through the initially estimated schedule,” says Paugh. “The indication was that I was brought on to lend a quick hand with the last few stages of *100 Rogues* and to start a new project after that.”

It soon became apparent that the “initially estimated schedule” wasn’t going to be followed very closely, due largely to the fact that the scale of the game grew continually—no one working on the game had a clear idea of when features should stop being added. According to Paugh, the original designs for the game had essentially been forgotten and replaced with a feature list that required at least eight additional months of development. “It was like designing and building a spaghetti western film set and, when nearly done, deciding to build a functional town instead,” says Paugh.

Statistics

- **Development time:** 18 months
- **Total budget:** \$40,000
- **Times downloaded:** 100,000

Both Paugh and Keith Burgun, the game’s design lead, remember the moment that the vision for the game became clear. Burgun had wanted to include a teleport ability in the game for certain enemy types, and Paugh was able to code it surprisingly easily. Paugh describes this as a watershed moment, in which *100 Rogues*’ potential as a strategically rich game became clear.

“Just like that, the player had a new, uniquely strategic enemy to face, and the game grew from an RPG in which you fought monsters with a bit higher stats each level into a game that required skill and strategy,” he says.

Burgun agrees that it wasn’t until *100 Rogues* had gotten relatively far into development that its final form began to take shape. “As the game’s development went on, its

design started to reveal itself to me,” says Burgun. “This game was to be about tactical decision-making, using skill versus mobs of monsters.” Burgun admits that in hindsight, there should have been a clear vision for the game at an earlier point of development, but that he got caught up in expanding its scope. “I fell into a ‘more is better’ trap to some degree with *100 Rogues*, but it was a learning experience, our first published game,” says Burgun.

The team continued work on the game, but not without their fair share of tribulations. The game’s original programmer had a falling out with the team’s producer (George Morgan of Fusion Reactions), and at one point Paugh took a break from the game to finish up his education, leaving the game with no active programmer for a full three months. “The game would have been canned if not for the grace and sacrifice of our publisher,” says Paugh. “Fusion Reactions was aware of our status as freshmen developers, and was prepared to accommodate the gross schedule slips because it understood that we knew what made a fun game, and would do whatever it took to achieve it.”

Finally, after 18 months of work, *100 Rogues* was released on the App Store. The game was finally in players’ hands, but its troubles weren’t over. In an update released in the fall of 2010, Dinofarm Games/Fusion Reactions inserted an iAd (Apple’s in-app advertising application) into the game’s score tally page, which appears after a character has died. It didn’t go over well with fans. “Many players were absolutely livid that a paid app had an ad in it,” says Paugh. “The accusations of greed were numerous and painful.”

Paugh confesses that he still doesn’t know whether the outrage over the in-game ad was unreasonable. “On the one hand, it was placed in a spot that didn’t interfere with game play whatsoever, only appeared when you lost, and was visible less than 1% of the time when using the app,” reasons Paugh. “On the other hand,” he admits, “as a player, I would have been mad too.”

The ad was removed within a week, but the damage had already been done. To this day, iTunes’ reviews of the game still sometimes mention “the iAd fiasco,” and posters on popular iOS gaming forums like those at TouchArcade.com regularly bring up the controversy as well. So was all that torment from users worth it? “All said and done, I think the ad made us \$1.30,” says Paugh.

Despite its remarkably problematic development process and the advertising controversy, *100 Rogues* continues to sell, in part because it was a huge critical success. Blogs and other game-review sites welcomed the game with high marks, and happy players helped spread the word. Games industry luminary and *Bioshock* creator Ken Levine even told Kotaku.com that he enjoyed playing *100 Rogues* before bed. “People clearly loved the game as much as we did,” says Paugh. “And that’s a great feeling.”

Fun Facts

- *100 Rogues*’ lead designer, Keith Burgun, has played drums for a video game music cover band—Dinosaur Lightning—for over ten years.
- *100 Rogues*’ name is a reference to *100 Worlds Story: The Tales of a Watery Wilderness*, an incredibly obscure NES game.
- Keith Burgun runs an excellent video game design blog called Expensive Planetarium.

With the experience of working as lead designer on *100 Rogues* under his belt, Burgun has this advice to developers: “Don’t make your game unless it is something that absolutely has to be made. Meaning, there should be a game in your mind that you really want to play, but it doesn’t exist yet. That’s a good motivation for building a game.”



Across Age DX

Platform: iPhone/iPod Touch (iPad version available separately)

Price: \$3.99

Developer: Exe-Create

Publisher: FDG Entertainment

Released: February 11, 2010

What Is It?

Across Age looks and plays like a Super Nintendo action-RPG classic, and if it actually had been released in the 1990s, it would have stood toe-to-toe with the other greats of that era. I'd love to avoid comparing *Across Age* to *Zelda*, but there's just no getting around the similarities. Sure, *Across Age* has far deeper RPG mechanics (leveling up, upgrading skills, etc.), and the fact that players control two characters at once instead of just one is certainly a stark difference, but the moment-to-moment combat, dungeon exploration, and puzzle solving reeks of Nintendo's legendary adventure series.

The two-character mechanic that I mentioned is one of the most interesting aspects of *Across Age*. Players can switch between a melee character and a magic-user at any time, and the two can even be split up, allowing for interesting puzzle-solving challenges—including several that force you to send one character backwards



in time to affect something in the present. The game is good about giving players a healthy balance of lightning-fast battles and slower paced puzzle-solving sections. It's designed to be played in larger chunks, but still manages to work as a mobile game thanks to its easy-to-use save system. *Across Age* is one of the meatiest, most interesting RPGs available for iOS devices.

Behind the Game

Thomas Kern and Philipp Döschl have always loved RPGs. Döschl names classic titles like *Phantasy Star*, *Ys*, *Final Fantasy*, and *Grandia* as some of his favorites from when he was a kid, and says that he'd always wanted to work on a Japanese-style RPG. "Every now and then we [Döschl and Kern] talked about what kind of RPG we could create, just to realize that such a project was not doable at that time," Döschl says.

In 2009, Kern and Döschl came across Exe-Create, a Japanese developer that had created *Across Age* for Japanese mobile phones. The two men convinced Exe-Create to work with them and their company, FDG Entertainment, to publish *Across Age* for iOS.

Statistics

- **Development time:** 7 months

FDG did much of the work to redesign the game, changing the menu system, the way combat worked, and even elements of the game's story. Kern also set to work on composing a new soundtrack for the game, which had been one of his childhood dreams (the result is excellent, by the way). According to Döschl, Exe-Create was in charge of most of the technical side of things. It reworked the graphics and altered many of the areas in the existing version of the game.

One of the biggest challenges facing FDG was the language barrier; Döschl has minimal skills in speaking Japanese, and the Japanese team members were equally rudimentary in their English abilities. To overcome this, Döschl had to get creative. One of the things that Döschl wanted in the iOS version of the game was a cinematic for the opening and ending. "We understood very quickly that it would be very difficult and time-consuming to explain what the movie should be like, so we had to find another way," says Döschl. Döschl's solution was to begin gathering a collection of scenes from other RPGs and animes. He cut these scenes together to create a sort of cobbled-together, full-motion storyboard. This served as a reference for the new cinematic that would appear in the game.

At one point in development, Kern got extremely sick and had to leave production for nearly two months. The music was

Fun Facts

- Döschl says that players should pay attention to some of the item-trading side quests if they want to get their hands on Ceska's best weapon—the "rune staff."
- Exe-Create has localized other games for America, including *The Lost Angelic Chronicles of Frane*, published on Steam in August 2011.
- FDG is perhaps best known for its *Bobby Carrot* franchise of mobile adventure games. There are a total of five entries, most of which have been ported to iOS.

almost done at that point, thankfully, but Döschl says that the gap his absence left in the team was significant.

Even after *Across Age* was finished, work on it wasn't complete. Many customers who bought the game from the App Store criticized its combat system, which requires players to wildly run into enemies in order to attack. Both FDG and Exe-Create thought it would be a neat way to avoid cluttering the screen with virtual buttons, but fan response proved otherwise. "We got a lot of requests to change it," Döschl admits. "So we added an attack button." Subsequently FDG continued to listen to players, and eventually the level of difficulty was adjusted to make the game easier and some of the more annoying traps that littered the maps were removed.



Angry Birds

Platform: iPhone/iPod Touch (iPad version available separately)

Price: \$.99

Developer: Rovio Entertainment

Publisher: Chillingo

Released: December 10, 2009

What Is It?

500,000,000. Wait, no. Let me spell that out for you: five hundred million. That's how many times *Angry Birds* has been downloaded across all of the platforms on which it has been released (that's iPhone, iPad, Android, PC, Mac, PlayStation 3, and PSP, for those counting). It's not a "phenomenon" or a "runaway success" or any of those other descriptive buzzwords that people love to use. *Angry Birds* is the most ubiquitous game ever created.



For most of 2010 and 2011, the world was obsessed with Rovio's adorable but vicious avian mascots. You could go to a public place, look around at everyone poking at a smartphone, and (whether child or adult) there was a significant chance that the screen would be populated by those rascally green pigs and a variety of furious birds.

It wasn't always like that, though. I reviewed *Angry Birds* for TouchArcade.com on December 11, 2009—the day after the game's release. No other gaming site had yet noticed the game (no major gaming media paid attention to iOS gaming in those days), so I wanted to spread the word about what I saw as a hidden gem. In my review, I compared *Angry Birds* to *Boom Blox*, an overlooked Wii game created under the direction of Steven Spielberg. Like in *Boom Blox*, players of *Angry Birds* fling objects (in this case, bloodthirsty birds) at structures made of blocks in order to set off a physics-powered chain reaction that results in the destruction of a target hidden within the blocks.

As I later learned, *Angry Birds* actually draws much more heavily from *Crush the Castle*, a free-to-play browser game with noticeably less personality than Rovio's famous title. Regardless of its origins, *Angry Birds* has flung itself into pop culture. Its longevity has yet to be determined, but it sure has arrived with a bang.

Behind the Game

Way back in 2003, a trio of Finnish university students from Helsinki (Niklas Hed, Jarno Väkeväinen, and Kim Dikert) got together and decided to participate in a competition sponsored by HP and Nokia. The competition challenged participants to create a real-time multiplayer game (that is, not turn-based like *Words With Friends*) for mobile phones. The three men won the competition and joined together officially to form Re-lude (which they later renamed Rovio Mobile).

Mikael Hed is the cousin of Rovio cofounder Niklas Hed, and the current CEO of Rovio. He was there in March of 2009, whenever the first ideas for the game that became *Angry Birds* began floating around the Rovio offices. “We were doing work for hire, so our strategy was that it would take a number of titles before we could realistically make one hit,” Hed says.

In order to facilitate the creation of some original games, Rovio began accepting fewer contracts in order to free up some of its own employees. It began holding meetings in which members of the team could propose game ideas. “Many of the proposals that we got were really well thought out,” says Hed. “And then we had this one screenshot of this angry bird character just trudging around on the ground.” According to Hed, everyone in the room loved the bird character, and the meeting devolved into a discussion about how to create a game around the character. “Prior to this meeting we had set up strict criteria to determine which game we would go with, but we threw that out for the angry bird character,” says Hed.

The creator of the angry bird character was Rovio senior game designer Jaakko Iisalo. He had been drawing birds for another Rovio game, but after the positive reaction

Statistics

- Number of games Rovio created before *Angry Birds*: Over 30
- Number of those games you've ever heard of: 0
- Times downloaded (across all platforms): 350,000,000

to his character design, he jumped at the chance to design a new game based around his drawing.

Iisalo freely admits that *Angry Birds* is a product of its time—Rovio had done some research to figure out what sorts of games were popular and found that two-dimensional physics games were big, although they mostly existed as Flash-based web games.

Even after coming up with the idea to make *Angry Birds* a physics game, it took awhile before the famous slingshot was added. Iisalo says that in the beginning, players had to pull the birds in the direction they wanted to shoot. The game’s designers agreed that this control scheme felt “somehow wrong,” so they began dreaming up new solutions, including ones that Iisalo calls “completely weird,” like one that he describes as a swing-type thing that players had to tap and release (I can’t fathom how that would work).

Another element of *Angry Birds* that underwent several iterations was the story. Who are these birds? Why are they so angry at the pigs? “In one of the initial concepts, we had the tiny bird landing on top of the pig, then the pig sneezes (he had swine flu) and the bird falls off, gets mad, and tells his friends that the pig is teasing him,” says Iisalo. “In hindsight, it’s probably a good thing we didn’t go with that!”

Angry Birds didn’t become a worldwide phenomenon overnight. After its release in early December of 2009, it shot to number one in the Finnish App Store almost overnight, but Apple didn’t feature the game until halfway through February of 2010. That was the spark that kicked off the *Angry Birds* revolution—from there the game pushed to number one in the UK, and other countries soon followed.

I spoke to Hed a little less than a year after *Angry Birds* was first released, and at the time Rovio had been able to expand to 23 employees. One of those employee’s sole job was answering fan mail. Hed told me of one email they received from the mother of a 5-year-old boy who loved the game. “[She] sent us some scans and said that her son had drawn a level for the

game, and we actually put the level in the game via an update,” Hed says.

Since that time, Rovio has doubled its employee head count to over 50 people. It has released *Angry Birds* for every platform imaginable (Google’s Chrome web browser, Facebook, Android, PlayStation Network, Mac, PC, and the list goes on), and Bloomberg reported in August of 2011 that the company has been seeking funding that would value the Rovio brand at over one billion dollars.

Everything has happened very quickly for a company that was largely an unknown identity before 2009. Rovio created over 30 unpopular games for various mobile platforms prior to its investment in the *Angry Birds* franchise, and even avid *Angry Birds* fans have to admit that *Angry Birds* fever can’t last forever.

Fun Facts

- Many levels in *Angry Birds* are designed to look like specific objects. Iisalo says that one level looks like a “hamburger meal.”
- The red bird does have a special power to unleash when players tap the screen—Rovio calls it the “war cry” (it does nothing).
- iOS publisher Chillingo claims that *Angry Birds* was “very different” before Rovio brought the game to it and took some of its suggestions for changes.
- Other iOS games by Rovio include *Angry Birds Seasons* and *Angry Birds Rio*.

Considering that Rovio chief marketing officer Peter Vesterbacka has said publicly that the company is “betting everything on *Angry Birds*,” it’s hard not to wonder—where will Rovio be in five years?



Babylonian Twins Premium

Platform: iPhone/iPod Touch (iPad version available separately)

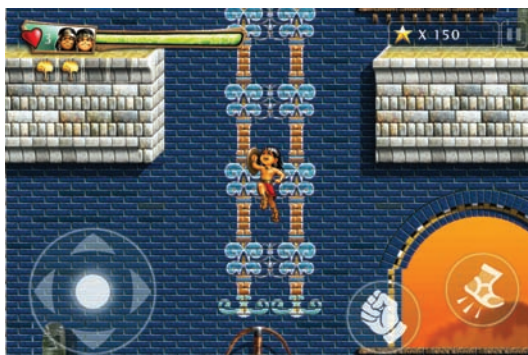
Price: \$1.99

Developer: Cosmos Interactive

Released: April 8, 2010

What Is It?

Babylonian Twins is a defiantly old-school platformer for people who crave a challenge. The game stars a pair of Iraqi princes on a quest to stop an evil wizard from destroying their kingdom. You won't be able to control both princes simultaneously, but you can switch between them at any point. This turns the inactive prince into a stone statue, which players can then hop onto (with the other twin) in order to reach previously inaccessible goodies or areas.



There's something oddly tricky about keeping track of both princes. Many puzzles require you to send the two boys to opposite ends of a level to trigger switches or collect items that will allow them both to progress. Levels are often quite spacious, both in height and width, making exploration and even backtracking a lot more fun than in other two-dimensional platformers in the App Store.