On turning an idea for a game into a game

Alex Hague and Fred Benenson discuss the origin and evolution of their game Pitch Deck*.*

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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 4278 words.

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You have an idea for a game. What do you do next?

Fred Benenson: *Pitch Deck* was my first published game. I'd taken a game design class in grad school, so I knew that you could just get a deck of cards and try your idea out with some friends. The game design part and the play testing came in once we had a basic concept of the rules, and that kind of thing. That process had been scurried away in my head for a decade, so when I had the rudimentary idea of a game where you'd have to improv terrible company ideas, I went from there.

I thought, "That would actually be fun." Obviously there's a lot of demand and fun around that space right now. I know the Cards Against Humanity guys, and they did well with that. I thought, "I could probably make a social party game, too." Then I thought, "Who should I talk to?"

Alex and I had met each other about a year earlier, and just hung out at XOXO, where Alex was demoing his game, Monikers. After that, we stayed in touch. I emailed Alex: "I have an idea I want to pitch to you." He came over, and he had a much better take on the idea. From there, it just evolved. That's the *I've got a friend who made a card game* way of starting a game. Alex can probably slip into the other version of it, which he went through.

Alex Hague: Taking something from idea to product is a super long process, but there's something really great about that beginning moment, when you're just sort of pitching someone like, "Hey, I have this idea."

Fred had this idea about combining disparate ideas by merging startup companies to make something absurd and unexpected. I've played so many of these improv type games that have a similar hook to them, but none of them really spoke to me because there's not something particularly contemporary about them. This idea felt super topical. There seemed to be an amazing space for satire and commentary within the startup world. There was this satire on one side, and then also this game loop that existed out there in a lot of other existing party games, so it was the question of, how do we use these in tandem to make something special? We wanted to design the game around fun rather than around a type of social experiment, or something you would play in a critical theory class or something.
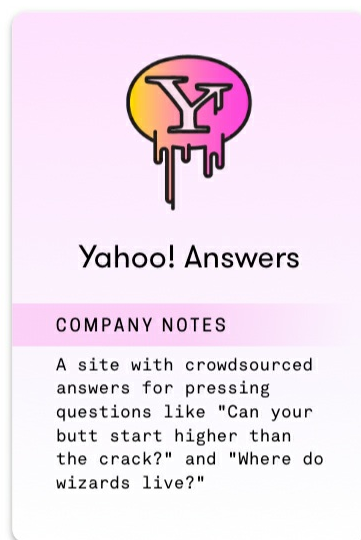
Can you talk about game testing?

Alex: The classic advice you'd get from a lot of people smarter than me is, "Take the feedback seriously in terms of what people are saying *isn't* wrong, but discard most of their suggestions about how to improve it." This is because while they're responding to some part of the game that they're not finding fun, they're not in the weeds enough to really know what the issues are.

Fred: You have to think of it like you're the doctor who understands the underlying issue, and this is really patronizing, but the play tester is somebody who's coming to you saying, "Hey, it hurts when I do this." So you have to be like, "Oh, would this work, or would this work?" You have to really debrief after the play test with whoever you're working on these types of issues and be like, "Do you think when they were saying *this*, they really meant *that*?"

We constructed a survey based off of some other play test survey I found somewhere. It was a Google form, and that enabled us to just send the Google form to everyone who came to the play test, and have them fill it out. That was useful sometimes because it gave people an organized way to collect their thoughts. Other times, you can just read the room.

Stepping back a little bit, in terms of the hardest parts about play testing, it's also just the logistical and organizational factors. You're essentially inviting people over to do

work for you, because with a game that requires a lot of social interaction, that's a dynamic that you can't just simulate yourself. So, you've got this really interesting real-world constraint. It's probably similar to how a musician can practice and practice and practice, but unless they're performing in front of other people, they don't really know how they're coming across. It's kind of a similar thing with testing out a game.

Figuring out a way to grease the wheels of play testing is a good tactic. I just kept inviting people over to my house, and buying beer and pizza. So it was like, "If you want to hang out after dinner and play a game, come on over." You make that ask a little less intense, but then you also just have to have patient friends.

Alex and I were talking about this recently. In the early days of play tests with *Pitch Deck*, we were basically asking people to go up on stage and bomb—like the way a comedian would bomb on stage. You're asking somebody to experiment with this thing where you don't really know how it's going to go, so this person ends up talking for two minutes about some horrific startup idea, and we're like, "Oh my god, how do we end this?"

You need to have some forgiving friends, and you should definitely tell them that it's a work in progress. Things are going to get awkward, but it's a really fun thing to be a part of, because you can see how the game evolves. That was the feedback we got from people. They were like, "I really liked seeing it evolve over time." Over six months, they'd come to one or two play tests, and they'd see the differences in the game, and that was interesting for them, too.

Alex: There's a uniquely big ask, making someone test the party game, because like Fred was mentioning, you are basically making someone bomb, and it feels bad to do. With *Pitch Deck*, someone's putting themselves out there, and the way you've written the card or the rule you've implemented, you aren't sure if it's going to be good or bad, but it's something you need to test. Just having people that are game to do that is such a crucial part of the development process of the game, and I think it's a step that's underrated in terms of when people are giving advice for how to design a game. Just have varied games, forgiving friends, and play testers who won't mind leaping into your project with abandon.

It's a party game, so you have to make it feel like a party without it feeling awkward. When you had people playing it for the first time, did they react differently than you'd imagined, or did it go according to what you assumed?

Fred: I had a friend who worked in Silicon Valley, so I was like, "Oh, you should try this out." He immediately jumped at the chance to do it. He was perfect. It didn't click with everyone else immediately at first. We didn't know what the rules were going to be. We were just like, pair these up and do your best, and we had friends on the verge of being traumatized by how awkward it was.

Alex: There were those folks who could play the game even when it was bad at a really high level, and so a lot of the challenge for us was, "How do you create the hand holds for people that aren't as good at improv, or didn't know the sort of tech-satire world as well? How do we build that into the game rather than requiring each player to have that skill set already?"

Fred: There was a really important piece of critical feedback we got early on, where somebody told us, "I don't like this game because I feel like I'm on the spot, it's just incredibly awkward given my disposition to do something like this." We were like, "Oh, *this* is an Achilles heel of our game, and we need to put in some cues that'll help get people's juices flowing, so they don't feel unprepared."

We think we succeeded at that by adding some silly hashtags on the cards. They're just hints that set the mood a little bit better, which we found allows people to get in the right headspace more easily. We realized that we had to make sure people knew that this is an improv game, and that improvising is part of the fun—that they can keep something really short and it can still be great.

The game was made—that's one success. What would you consider the next success?

Fred: Alex, do you want to speak to that, because I think you have more realistic expectations? It was the first time I'd created a game, and I didn't know what to expect. You came into it with actual expectations.

Alex: To me, part of feeling successful is, "Did we make the thing that we wanted to make?" When you look at it, are you like, "Oh, this was the thing that it needed to be when we set out to do it."

When you're making a game, you're competing for people's time—not only with other board games, but also with movies, or just hanging out and talking. So it's like, "Does the game offer something above that? Does it offer some sort of special experience for people, even if they only ever play it once? Will it make them think about things or learn something about their friends in a new way?" If so, then it is a success.

The ways of judging the more internal successes of the game involve asking questions like, "Does it do things in a way that other improv-type games don't? Does it take the core idea of a party game—to match a couple funny concepts together—and make someone add a little bit of extra creativity to it? In playing the game, do you learn something about your friends, and about what they find funny or what their attitudes towards the weird capitalist dystopia of Silicon Valley is?"

The other side of it is more about the number of copies you sell, and that kind of thing. For that, you can compare the game to the top-selling party games. But from a broad perspective, these don't ask a lot of players, which would be my critical view of them. I would never think that this type of game would be a number-one seller, because it requires a lot of work on behalf of players, and games that traditionally use improv mechanics have never been crazy high sellers, compared to other party games out in the world. So yeah, I think measuring success is more about feeling like you made one of the most interesting versions of a game in a particular genre, while giving it a unique character that didn't previously exist.

Fred, now that this has worked, do you have a second game in mind?

Fred: I had so much fun working on *Pitch Deck* with Alex that I was like, "I just want to give this game thing a shot." It's not exactly a career change so much as focusing in a way that feels very natural to me. I've always loved video games. I've always loved game games. The reason I came up with *Pitch Deck* was that I took a game design class at ITP, so I was like, "Hey, is this one of those moments in life where you're getting a little birdie saying, 'If you can make this work, man, this is something you should give a shot.'" I realized it was this combination of creative work, where you get to make a lot of highly artistic decisions about a thing, and technical work, where you have to really think through the kind of logical consequences of how different rules play out. It's very similar to programming. So, I was like, "Okay, I want to give it a shot."

Alex and I are actively talking about multiple ideas at the same time. We have another game that we're prototyping. I want to see how far I can take this game design thing as an outsider who likes to make weird objects. Alex is more of an insider who has more of a track record. It's a fun partnership, and I want to see where it goes.
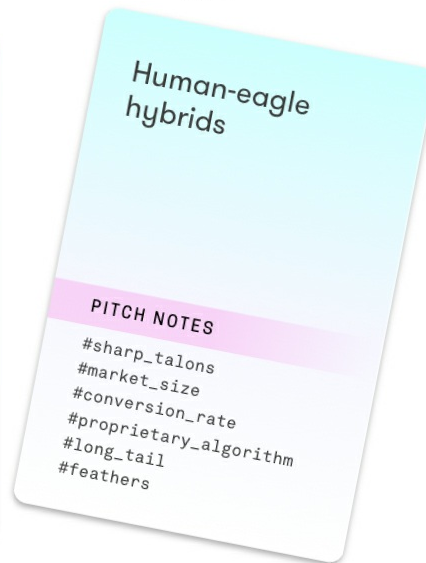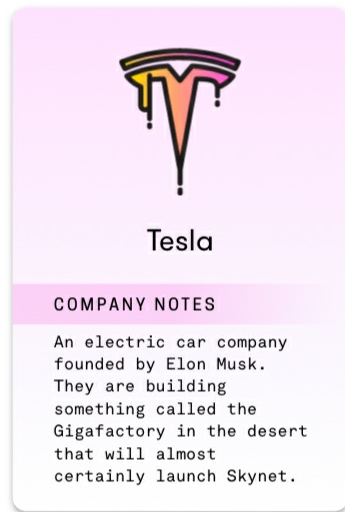
How did you guys know when *Pitch Deck* was done?

Alex: I think when we realized that everything we were still testing was stupid. There was a point where the rules had cohered and everything was like, "What if we add a voting mechanic?" It was just like, "How do we wring the last little bit of fun out of this?" There were just several play tests where it was like, "Nope." We changed this and that and this and that, and the original version of it was always better.

But there's no actual finishing. You've just got to walk away at some point, when you think it's strong enough that it can stand on its own. We know that like 5% of the cards are weaker than we'd like, but you could work on it for a decade and that would still be true. At some point, you just have to be like, "Okay, people are really having fun with the way these cards interact, and we've come up with an interesting system of rules and mechanics around it, and it's fine. It's time to call this thing finished."

It's like   for

Tesla

COMPANY NOTES

An electric car company founded by Elon Musk. They are building something called the Gigafactory in the desert that will almost certainly launch Skynet.

Human-eagle hybrids

PITCH NOTES

#sharp_talons
#market_size
#conversion_rate
#proprietary_algorithm
#long_tail
#feathers

Fred: In the beginning, I remember thinking, "Okay, do we put the company cards on the table first and have the other cards in people's hands?" We thought about, "Maybe there are two modes of play, and it switches halfway through." There are just all these arbitrary decisions to make, which at some point you have to just decide on, because if you don't, everything's going to be wide open. It's actually really challenging to know, "Okay, the piece of paper can't be blank for the entire time. We have to make some decisions." Once you do that, those become the core of the game. Then you're just continually uncovering the dynamics of those early decisions you made.

Then in terms of the editing and that kind of thing, the part that I was unprepared for, or rather, the part that I was most surprised by, was how much you could measurably make the game better by just putting in the hours and editing it. So while Alex says, "Oh, yeah, there's only going to be 5-10% that we'd love to edit out," that's not including all of the stuff that was in the middle belly-fat stage of the game that we trimmed out over months and months.

There was definitely a point of diminishing returns, but it's not like a computer program, where you just need to figure out the logic and then it will work as intended. It's like, no, you can continue to refine and get a lot of mileage out of making editorial decisions. I had kind of forgotten that.

Alex: Yeah, and there's this highest-level aspect of that, where it's just a matter of identifying what *really* makes your game fun, and what it is that's different than other games. Maybe it's a complicated idea that you can't even quite explain, but you just have played it enough that you know what part of the game is really fun. If you use that as a structuring element around this large editing process and creative writing process, as long as you're moving everything in the direction of that, you have this mental benchmark in your head about what it will look like when it's done. For us, I don't think it was ever anything that was formally written down, but we internalized it after a couple months.

The design is such an important part of it. Even if you have the most amazing idea in the world, but it's flat visually, it's going to be hard to get people to play it.

Alex: We found a number of designers on Dribble, which is a great way to go find great designers. They're all professional people working at reasonable rates, and we were able to basically hire a designer without ever meeting him. I don't mean to diminish his contribution, but the fact that there's this great website where you can preview people's work and it matches with an internal aesthetic… It's easy to overlook how cool that is.

Fred: We found some designers and some illustrators for the guide by placing an open call on Twitter. People just DM'd us links to their design stuff that we looked through.

Alex knew about a site called Printer Studio, which is one of these crazy online platforms for print-on-demand things. They just have every possible card size and card finish. You upload a PDF and then they print and ship it to you within a week. We did a lot of prototyping that way. We probably went through six or seven different versions of the game, where we were getting one-off prints to try out. They're not cheap though, that's the one trade off.

But still, you're getting to play with a play-test deck that feels like what the real cards will eventually feel like, and it makes such a difference. When you look at the old versions of the cards, they're just not as fun as the final versions, and you can tell in people's reactions. Being able to get a prototype deck that looks like what you want it to look like quickly is such a huge boon to play testing, in my opinion.

You guys made a Creative Commons version so people can download it and play it?

Fred: Yeah. I used to work for Creative Commons before I got the gig at Kickstarter, so I was always the person going door-to-door being like, "Creative Commons is great." Then, years later, I knew the *Cards Against Humanity* guys had done it, and then Alex had mentioned to me that he had done it with *Monikers*, and I was like, "Whoa, this is a really cool trend within games that I was totally oblivious to." Alex was just operating with the assumption that we would CC license it, and it was actually his suggestion to do it. I was like, "Yeah, of course this sounds good to me." That was when he explained to me the whole world of "print and play"—giving people a PDF to download your game—which was really cool and exactly what Creative Commons was designed for.

Alex: I think *Cards Against Humanity* was the first game to do it. I just remember seeing that and being like, "Oh my god, everybody should do that if they can." Working in a party game space, it's also just a gut check: have you made your product good enough that people will be willing to buy it? It's kind of a way to measure yourself, to be like, "Can the packaging and the illustrations and everything be delightful enough to get people to actually buy the thing?" If you tie yourself to the math or whatever, and do that, you have this additional challenge that I think ultimately makes you tougher in terms of doing all the polishing work to make the product itself really good, while also making it available to anybody who doesn't want to pay $25 for a game.

Fred: When I was working at Y Combinator, I sat down next to these founders who were working on a game startup, and they were telling me about how they were thinking about making some software to help card games. I said, "Oh, I'm working on a card game." And they were like, "Oh, what's it called?" I said, "*Pitch Deck*." And they said, "We've played that." I thought, "Huh? It's not out yet. How is that possible?" They said, "Oh, we did the print and play."

I was like, "Out of all the hundreds of people for me to sit down next to right now, I sit down next to two people working on a game startup, and they've *already* played my game because I licensed it under CC and put up a PDF." How amazing is that?

When you're at the tail end of getting the thing out into the world, and you're talking to people about it, and people ask, "Oh, is it out yet?" It's so cool to have a PDF with a legal license attached to it that you can point to and say, "Yeah, go download it."

Alex: There's such an incredible flourishing of table top and video games happening right now. I think it's important for everyone to explicitly share their work, and to be very unguarded about letting people adapt and remix and play in the same space. There aren't very tight patents or trademarks on a lot of social games, and that has created this incredible flourishing of ideas. I feel like people should draw a line in the sand and be really committed to being part of this milieu of game innovation that's happening right now.

It's like   for

Westworld

COMPANY NOTES

A futuristic, Wild West-themed amusement park populated by depressed androids. You can really find yourself in there, you know?

Panic rooms

PITCH NOTES

#secure
#no_downside
#stealth_mode
#nda
#fancy_preppers
#oxygen_supply

Why do you think there are so many games happening right now?

Fred: I can make a very specious social argument, which is that people are rediscovering the value of interpersonal offline time in different ways, and I think that games present an easy way to do this. I definitely noticed that in my social circles, where it's like, "Oh, we don't have to drink. You can just come over and we'll play a game." It allows us to have a thing that we scheduled that is relatively easy. If you accrue a board game collection, it becomes a fun thing to have in your pocket as something to suggest to a friend. I remember there was a time, it must've been 10 years ago, where you'd be like, "Hey, I have this cool board game," and you'd be at a dinner party. People would be like, "Really? You want to play a board game? Now?" And you'd be like, "It's actually really fun." Then when you'd sit down to play it, people would be like, "This is great," and they'd ask to come over and do it again.

Do you imagine that the game will actually inspire any real startups?

Fred: We always joked about that from the beginning. What if we actually start a startup that gets created in the game? Then it was like, "Why don't we take this to the logical extreme and say that we automatically own a percentage of any startup that comes out of the game?" It's actually in the rule book. I had a real lawyer help me with the language, and it basically says, "Please agree to our terms of service. By reading this, you grant unlimited liability corporation, LLC, and Palm Court LLC 10% ownership in the form of preferred stock with perpetual anti-dilution and participation rates of whatever company you happen to found based on ideas generated while playing or discussing *Pitch Deck*."

Alex: There have been people that have wanted to use *Pitch Deck* in business classes, and for corporate retreats. It's somewhat horrifying to hear, but also funny. The fact that people are in on the joke, even at that level, is kind of heartening in a weird way.

Fred: I get these emails a lot from someone that says, "Hi, I live in France and teach business English, in addition to being a speech writer. I'm having great fun with *Pitch Deck*. I think it is brilliant to use it with my students to get them talking and pitching in English. I think the game could really take off in France." We hadn't quite anticipated that sort of thing, but it does have this weird traction in business schools because it's both an ice breaker, and a way to actually talk about business. That's a thing business school professors are looking for, so we've definitely received orders from that angle. It's been pretty entertaining.

Alex: If they're MBA programs where people are pitching "Roomba for Anilingus," that would be pretty out there.

Fred: That's the other good thing about having the PDF online. I'm sure there are lots of people who have checked out the PDF, and they're like, "Whoa, this has *way* too much potty humor for me to bring to class," but then there are other times where people are like, "No, it's great! Come on, we're all adults. This is so much fun."

A non-exhaustive selection of our favorite *Pitch Deck* card combinations:

Fred's:

1. Kickstarter for imposter syndrome
2. Medieval Times for just one extremely rich man
3. SkyMall for the Amish
4. Edible Arrangements for slowly and methodically poisoning someone
5. Blackwater for internet outrage

Alex's:

1. Airbnb for the rapture
2. Hot Pockets for vaccinations
3. Ed Hardy for ghosts
4. FarmersOnly for human centipedes
5. Axe Body Spray for Your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free

Name

Alex Hague and Fred Benenson

<u>Vocation</u>
Game designers