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Meerkatz Challenge... Simples? Not quite...

Meerkatz Challenge is a new puzzle platformer for iOS that features familiar yet challenging gameplay. We talk to Travian Games GmbH about their game studio and about Meerkatz Challenge in particular.

Can you tell us about your studio, who makes up the team and where you are based?

Travian Games GmbH, located in Munich, was founded in 2005 and is one of the leading providers of free-to-play browser-based online games worldwide. The company offers gamers complex and varied game worlds with great depth, keeping players motivated for a long time. But Meerkatz Challenge couldn't be more different from what you'd expect!

The Meerkatz Challenge core team with only five members, two Senior Programmers, two Level Designers and one Game Director is very small and the most of us have been working on big free-to-play online games for years.

What are your game development career histories? How did you get into games development?

Vera Frisch, Game Director of Meerkatz Challenge, started her career in the games industry in 2008 as an Online Marketing Manager for Free-to-Play online games. In 2009, she moved into Game Producing and became the producer for several external social and browser-game projects. Vera is 33 years old and has been working for Travian Games since 2011 as Senior Producer and Game Director.

What type of games do you strive to create?

Travian usually seeks to create online franchise games that generate long term player communities. These games are known for their focus on planning, strategy, depth and complexity.

Meerkatz Challenge is a distinct departure from that. While it does involve planning and strategy, it is a single player game meant to

delight less serious gamers rather than groups of online gamers playing together.

Congratulations on an original and interesting game, what's the idea behind Meerkatz Challenge?

In early 2013, within Travian Games' new games process, our colleague Björn Brinkmann sent an idea to the Game Idea Validations Group for a small single-player puzzle-game with the following notes:

- » Challenging puzzle elements
- » Watching the cute animals is a lot of fun
- » High score list and Star-System

This was the birth of Meerkatz Challenge. If you compare the bullet points with the game we have now, one year later, you will see that it meets these requirements. Vera, took the idea, developed it further and pitched it to management in July 2013. The intention was to develop a game that is fun and has a short development timeline. "I was exhausted spending years on projects, with more or less success, and wished to work on something smaller with a clear outcome", she said.

Meerkatz Challenge looks great, how important is the look of a game?

We had a strong vision how the game should look. Many artists around the world pitched their ideas for the game. Imagine the great animated films such as the Lion King or the Legend of Tembo, with a dash of studio Ghibli, in the shapes and color schemes. The scenes needed a sense of depth and reduced saturation towards the horizon.



The art of any game is critical. And, for this game, no art element was more important than the Meerkat itself. The general appearance of the meerkats needs to be cute and cuddly; you will want to save as many of the little fellows as possible.

Due to the fact that on tablet the characters may be only 200 pixels tall, we needed to focus on the readability in all sizes and on all backgrounds, bright or dark. One of the most important decisions we made very early is we don't want to have human engineered tools for the meerkats: no weapons, knives or army helmets.

After evaluating efforts from studios in Spain, Germany and the United States, we received the concept we felt was ideal from a studio in Slovakia and engaged their services for the project.

Everyone loves meerkats, was that the inspiration for the game?

Well, my initial pitch of the game was about turtles. When I was thinking about the core gameplay I would watch my Greek tortoise running against several obstacles in my flat.

Turtles are adorable and they definitely need help overcoming larger gaps and nasty pitfalls like the foot of my kitchen table :-)

When I presented the idea to my colleagues they came up with some reasonable points, e.g. turtles are too slow and don't live in groups. So we had to find another animal more suited to the game. And if you are thinking about a game for a broad audience it is very important to have a character everyone loves.

Who do you see as the audience for Meerkatz Challenge?

In the past I spent a lot of time at airports and have seen many people, young and old, playing games on their iPads and iPhones, while they were waiting for departure. With Meerkatz Challenge, I wished to create a game which is playable for a broad audience in

situations exactly like this.

As an indie, what advice would you give to aspiring games makers?

I think there is one important requirement every game developer must meet - know your audience.

During the last years we have had more discussions about platforms, monetization and what works on each. From my experience the game idea sadly comes last. On the other hand, I have also seen many projects fail because developers created the game for themselves. They wanted to see their big dream live - but nobody else did.

I studied Business Administration where you learn very early on that you have to find the right audience for your product if you want to make money with it. If you start thinking about a game idea, ask yourself several times; who should play the game and for whom it will be fun in which situation?

You don't create a game for you or for a business model; you create it for your audience. If you don't know who should play the game, how big the audience is and what they expect, you can't understand how successful you will be.

For example, Meerkatz Challenge wasn't a standalone mobile app from the beginning. We thought about a social cross-platform title as well as designing it as free-to-play. At the end we nailed down the core value of the game to these points:

- » Players should have fun in short play sessions
- » The game should be playable wherever and whenever the player wants
- » The fun of each level is planning ahead - no enormous time pressure.

For us, the logical result was that we can deliver this best with a paid mobile app to casual players who are willing to pay a small amount for the full game experience with no technical interruption like a downtime or skill reduction to get them monetized. Everything else is not in our hands. You cannot plan success; you only can do your best to meet the wishes of your audience.

What are the benefits of being an indie and what are the draw backs?

I never worked for an indie but I can tell you the impression of indie development from the perspective of a larger game development studio.

During the pre-production of Meerkatz Challenge I stuck in several meetings with directors who were telling me that the project is too expensive and we should be more indie. The stupidest thing I have heard during this time was, "an indie can develop this project with the quarter of money in the half of the time". Established development studios often only see the success stories and seldom the broken dreams.

Many indie developers I know create their games in their spare time and do something else for a living. They only want to create the game idea and don't care about working long hours, the salary or making sure they have a healthy work/life balance. Creating the game is their passion, their spare time activity and you do not count how much time you spend on a thing you really want to do. But you cannot compare this with an environment where people are employed, especially not in Germany. Work/life balance is important here. You are not allowed to force people to spend more hours on the project than agreed.

I think both sides have their benefits and draw backs. As an indie nobody will tell you "put this feature in the game because I want to have it," but you will also have to deal with how much time you

can invest for your project if you don't have an investor.

Luckily, at Travian Games we have the chance to create the game we want. No director or manager is telling us how the game should look and the Meerkatz Challenge team can act with the freedom of an indie but in a secure employment environment.

Can you tell us about any sharp learning curves that you have had creating games?

You cannot outsource everything - especially not the vision of your project. With Meerkatz Challenge we were in the unlucky position that we haven't had important positions like a game designer or a concept artist available within the company when we started the project. We tried to hire them, but we couldn't find the right people. So we were forced to hire freelancers not located in Munich for many of our needs. To bring everything together and push them all to the same commitment was the most challenging part for me.

As producer, I was used to working with external development studios all over the world, but the team itself was a single unit where everybody knows what to do. We haven't had this comfortable situation during the development and I had to deal with totally new questions and problems. Due to this fact we are more than proud that we have now such a delightful game.

What do you have planned for the future?

Meerkatz Challenge conquering the world! *gg*

Seriously though, we have several plans depending on how well the game succeeds, beginning with continuous content updates, starting immediately after we launch on July 24, until new Meerkatz Challenge apps are created. Travian Games as a development studio is constantly working on new projects and game ideas which will be released in the near future. «



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