

Developing Revival

The beginning of a never-ending story

Here's why after 11 years of working in the casual games market, I'm returning to deeper, niche experiences.

Setting the stage (the 90s)

Okay, this sounds banal, but I've dreamed of making games since childhood. The only problem? My father.

He did not see any potential in programming, much less video games. So the natural course of action for a responsible parent was getting me involved in something 'more serious'.

It was the early 90's, a time of great crime and equally great opportunity in Russia. Dad managed to pull some money together and started a company that sold radio parts. I was tasked with the honorable duty of supporting the new business. Not wanting to risk our family's financial stability, I obliged.

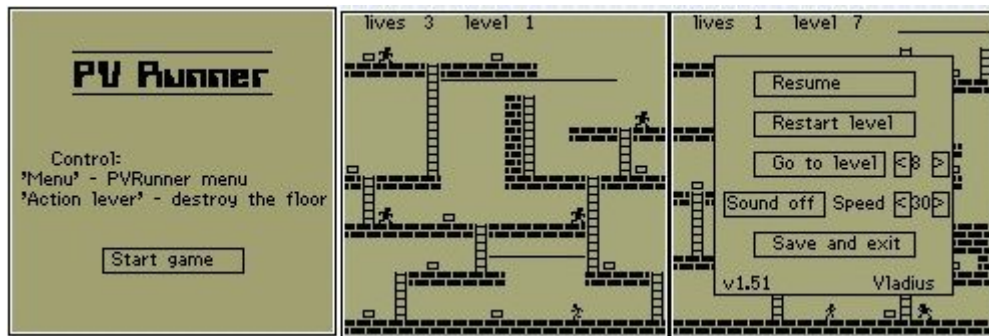
The dream to create never went away, and I sought solace in games. About twice a month I had to commute from Krasnodar to Moscow. A boring, seemingly endless journey from one grey, unwelcome place to another. I decided to buy a gadget to keep myself busy during those trips.



A laptop was too high class of a machine for a budding entrepreneur with no cash to spare. So I got a [Casio PV PDA](#) - a bulky, GameBoy-like device with a monochrome screen and a collection of fairly simple games. More importantly, however, an SDK was readily available for my coding experiments. And away I went, making the most out of the machine's limited memory.

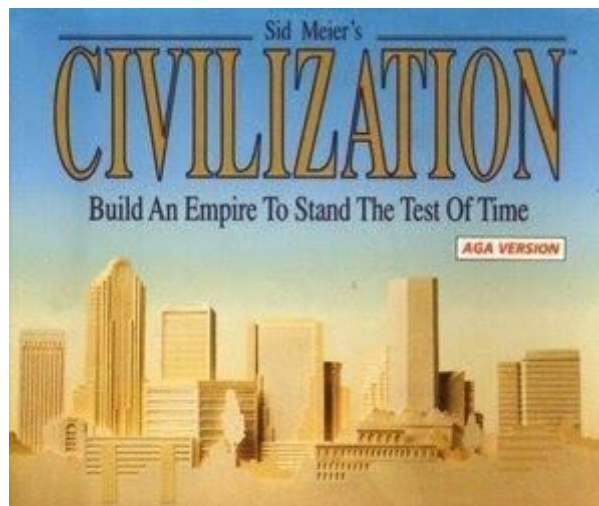
Revival 1 (2004)

One of my first games was a [LodeRunner](http://www.pvranner.narod.ru) clone, the (Russian) website for which is still live: <http://www.pvranner.narod.ru>



Things were fun for a while, as I continued pumping out levels for the game and playing them during my trips to Moscow. But boredom soon settled in. The game had no variety and the levels held little surprise for me as their creator. That's when I thought to myself: "What is the most replayable game I can think of?"

The answer was simple - Civilization! I played that game to death with Vladimir Pinko, my best friend since high school and partner in crime. He would visit me during my working days at the family shop, and when the shift was over, we would shut the place down and play Civ all night. My father didn't believe me, when I told him the reason I frequently came so late from work. He thought my friend and I went out drinking and attended crazy parties.

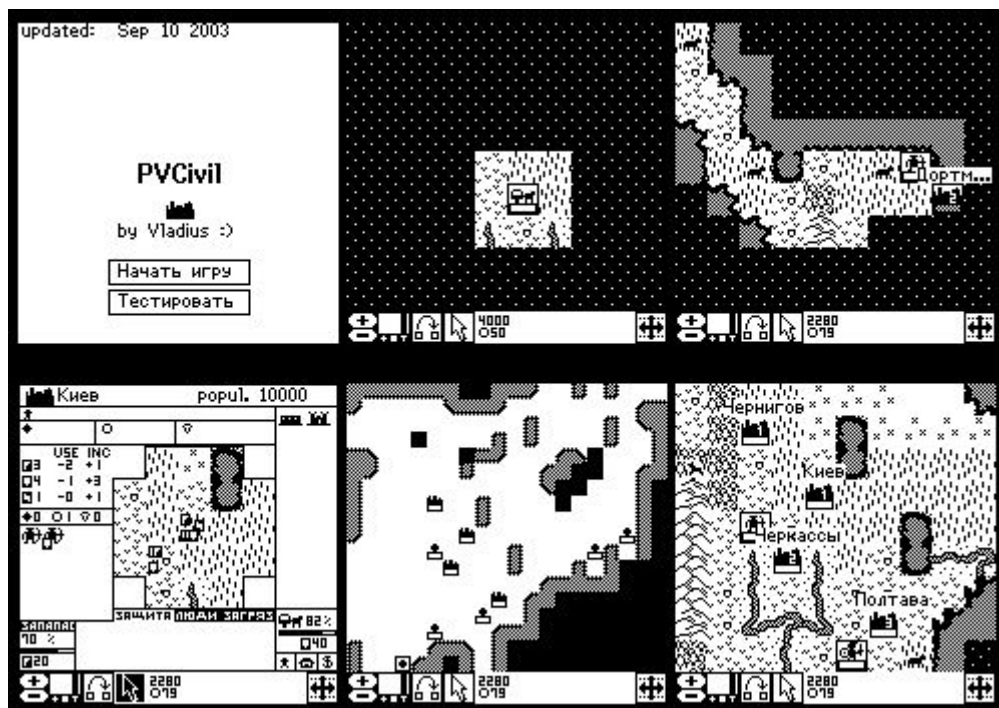


That tagline...just perfect!

Vladimir had way more experience as a programmer at the time, so I got him involved in the development of what later became Revival 1. Our duo didn't want to simply copy the first Civ, so we added stuff that we thought was cool and fit the intended game experience.

Both of us hated the fact that after you launch a spaceship in Civ, the game simply ended. We decided to fix this oversight by adding a story campaign that allowed the player to conquer the first map and move to another planet in the galaxy. That way, we wanted to create the feeling of endless conquest, a never-ending story if you will.

A special unit was also added - an emissary that served as the player's avatar on the game map. Another distinguishing feature at the time - urban buildings (early districts prototype) located around the city center and visible on the game map.



About a year and a half were spent on creating a playable prototype. The graphics were crap because I had to create all of the assets from scratch having no prior experience. Vladimir suggested switching to the [Java 2 Platform](#), so that more modern phones with color screens could be supported. A suitable model of a Motorola phone was purchased for testing purposes.

My father had retired from the family business by then, and I was left alone to lead the company. This slowed down Revival's development quite a bit. Luckily, Vladimir had an acquaintance at HeroCraft - a company that was a part of an actively growing publisher scene in Russia. He pitched the game and both of us sat at my office, fingers crossed, waiting for the verdict.

Revival got accepted! We were in, and at a sweet 50%/50% revenue share deal at that. HeroCraft got a professional to redo all of the art in the game, as well as a musician to create the game's soundtrack. Vladimir proved the magic of networking once again by getting one of his friends that knew English to help with the game's localization. It turned out that this friend was also a total badass when it came to the written word and agreed to rewrite all of the in-game text in his own style, with sarcasm and humour oozing out of every pixel on screen.

The final game build came at just about 100 kilobytes. This was huge as it allowed us to make Revival available for a wide range of phones, including the ones from Samsung that were prone to such limitations. Think about it...a premium Civ-sized game in your pocket in the early 2000s! The game's UI automatically scaled to different screen sizes and you could even play it on a Siemens-55 phone, with a screen of 90 * 55 pixels.



Needless to say, Vladimir and I were proud of ourselves and rubbed our hands in anticipation of all the sweet cash we would make when the game launched. Then the revenue reports came in. For the first quarter after launch, Revival brought in \$1,500 for the two of us. The next quarter we earned \$2,500. From that point onwards, sales began to decline.

HeroCraft still believed in the game and considered this a decent result for a first title from a new team. It didn't seem so to us. Vladimir and I worked on a version of the game for wider screens and with better quality assets, tried a few smaller games in other genres with little commercial success and very quickly decided to focus on making a sequel to our first game.



Revival 2 (2009)

The improvements and new features that our duo had in mind for the sequel were huge.

- Better A.I. and pathfinding. Neither Vladimir, nor I have heard of the A*pathfinding algorithm back then, but we did our best to make enemy factions and units behave in more interesting ways.
- Isometric graphics. Asset quality was also significantly better, with two sets of graphics created for the game - for ordinary (128 * 128) and large (160+ width) screens.
- Procedurally generated maps for different planets. We finally got rid of having to store a planet's layout in the phone's memory.
- A global map with approximately 1000 planets that players could explore and conquer. Player leaderboards that relied on data synchronization through [WAP](#). For each planet on the star map you could browse a list of players that performed the best. And these were real people!
- A better diplomacy system with each clan in Revival getting their own leader and a special icon. Political treaties played a much larger role when compared to the first game.
- A hot screen mode was also implemented, so that more than one player could play on a single device. To this day, I still don't know if anybody used it :)



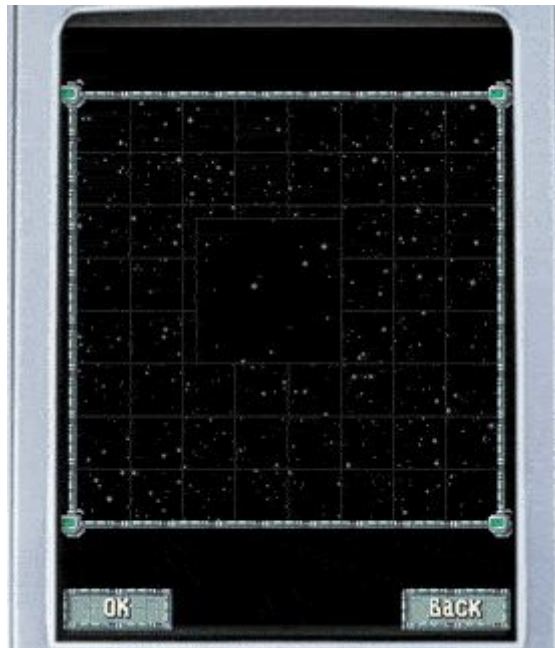
In 2008, when Revival 2's development was wrapping up, two things happened:

1) The family business demanded less and less attention, as I tried automating the various processes as much as possible. The goal was to free up my schedule for what actually mattered - game development.

2) HeroCraft approached me with an offer that I was initially against, but eventually found myself gravitating towards - setting up a HeroCraft subsidiary in Krasnodar, my home town.

The goal was to hire additional staff and start making more casual games for the PC platform. I was hesitant at first, since I didn't want the added responsibility of running a studio and the hassle of getting out of my comfort zone to work on other genres. But...the terms proposed by HeroCraft were great and even if the studio didn't work out, there was little financial risk involved for me or Vladimir. So we hired a few people and immediately got working on a casual game for a very popular Russian TV series.

Revival 2 finally launched in 2009, eagerly awaited by loyal fans that enjoyed the original title. This time, we nailed it! The royalty payments for the first couple of financial quarters were substantial enough, and our team of two felt elevated and full of energy to conquer new horizons.



Patches of grey (2010 - 2015)

This was the last real success story for our team. The next couple of years seem like a haze in hindsight. We were busy making and releasing several titles for the casual games market on PC and mobile. The games were fairly well-received, but none had the fan adoration or revenue that could match our first two games. At best, we broke even. Eventually, our team size started to shrink and so did my morale.

For the next three years the studio was kept afloat by income from Revival 2. While the team was busy working on yet another casual title in a (misguided) attempt to capture what back then was a developing market, Revival fans continued bombarding us with requests to make a third installment. Fan groups formed on various Russian social media sites that, despite staying relatively small, benefited from a continuous trickle of new members over the years. To this day, players help each other out with questions related to gameplay, installing the game on older smartphones and many other things.

In Q4 2018, Revival 2 brought in \$122.32. In Q3 and Q4 2019 the royalty received was \$21.78. The amounts may seem negligible, but the fact that this title is still making money is a testament to the dedication of its fans. But it still makes me wonder - who are the people buying premium games for push button phones these days?

Revival: Recolonization

After some deliberation and a bit of back and forth between us and the top brass at HeroCraft, it was clear that we needed to rethink our strategy and focus on the types of games we actually love to play and seem to be competent enough at making.



For the last 5 or so years, several attempts to begin working on a successor to Revival 2 were made. Whether it was production/scheduling issues or a lack of clarity about the game's vision on any part - things just never worked out! It's like the spirit of the game was getting its revenge for being abandoned by its creators for so long. Okay, I'm dramatizing just a little bit here. But it did feel like it at times.

Development started moving along at the end of 2018, but it still took a full year of pre-production to arrive at the game's current vision. And I'm glad we took our time because, just like with the first game, I didn't want to simply create a clone of the recent Civilization games or modernize just a few aspects of the previous Revival titles and call it done.

If things work out as intended, our team's return to 4x strategies will not only prove that both Vladimir and I still have what it takes to create a deep, strategic experience, but will also solve some core design issues and help reinvigorate a beloved genre.

So what is Revival: Recolonization, I hear you ask? It's a 4x strategy game set in a post-apoc version of Earth, where the world and its rules can change at key moments, creating a deep and highly replayable experience.



The game is currently in Alpha and will be released on PC first. We want to aggregate player feedback and make sure the core vision and associated game mechanics are solid enough before working on the mobile version.

We did our best to preserve familiar elements that fans loved in the previous titles: emissaries as player avatars, progression through several distinct eras, clans (now called tribes) and relationships between them, etc. But we are also trying something new.

Being hardcore Alpha Centauri fans, our team wanted to bring a similar level of freedom when it comes to shaping the game world in Revival. Besides changing the terrain type and climate, players are also able to influence game rules on specific regions of the map via the edict system. These actions, however, have real consequences. The game's antagonist, a rogue A.I. called the All-Mind, will react accordingly.

If this sounds intriguing, go to the game's website to find out more. And if you like what you see, maybe sign up for the newsletter ;)