

Hipster Whale CEO talks Apple Arcade, Crossy Road Castle and industry challenges

Clara Reeves takes an honest look at being a woman in gaming, and how Crossy Road Castle is a beacon of positivity in an uncertain time.

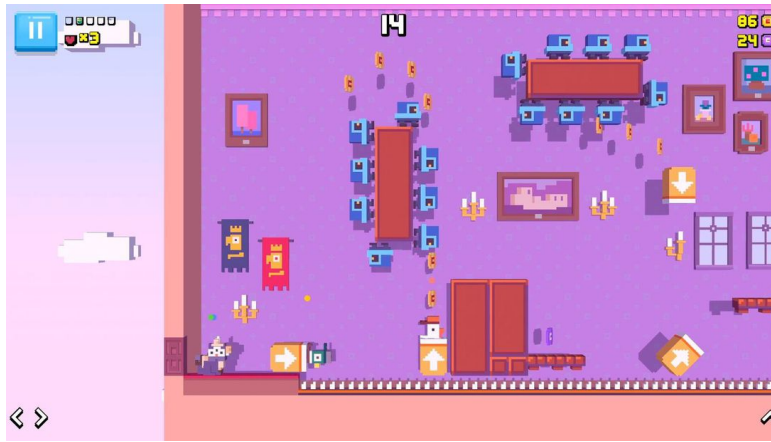
Clara Reeves, CEO of Melbourne-based video game studio Hipster Whale, fell in love with programming when she realized it could be an art form. Reeves, who would go on to oversee Hipster Whale's popular game Crossy Road in its move to Apple's mobile gaming subscription service, Apple Arcade, never grew out of her childhood passion of building structures out of Legos and pursued a degree in fine arts.



"I was always mesmerized by games, but it took me a long time to say 'Hey, someone makes these things. Maybe *I* could make these things.'" Reeves said.

After Reeves learned to code, she decided to explore gaming. Reeves enrolled into a postgraduate program in computer science. She was undaunted by the steep learning curve and the lack of other women in her course.

"I really loved it," she said. "I was Harry Potter at Hogwarts, learning how to cast magic spells."



Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, Hipster Whale

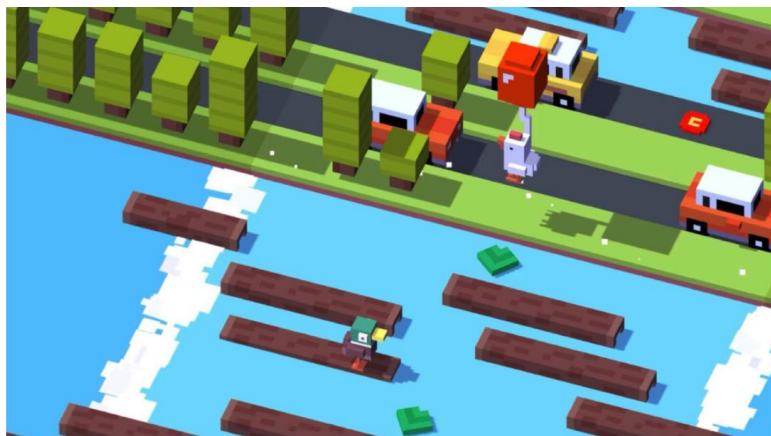
Before coming aboard Hipster Whale, named for a funny napkin drawing that snowballed, Reeves held positions at Atari and Krome Studios, which both served as a launchpad for her career.

The managers at Atari challenged and shepherded the ambitious Reeves.

"Even though I didn't realize that's what they were doing at the time, was what formed my career in producing and product leadership," Reeves said. "I try to do the same mentoring for other people now, where I see opportunities to do so. It's so important."

At Krome, Reeves navigated a bustling 400-person studio, where she got a peek behind the curtain at the business of games, and how the relationship between the creative and financial aspects of a project isn't always smooth sailing.

"There were so many talented people there, the projects had such tight timeframes and budgets though, that often the creative aspirations had to take a back seat, and it was very draining," she said. "At the end of working at Krome, I decided I could probably have the most impact in a business role, but with a focus on the creators and creative being strongly realized."



Not your Mario's infinite runner

Hipster Whale was created by Matt Hall and Andy Sum in 2014. Reeves joined in 2016. The studio's first release was Crossy Road, an arcade-style video game where there's no time to look both ways. The game's nostalgic 8-bit style was prime for team-ups like 2015's Pac-Man 256 with Bandai Namco, and 2016's Disney Crossy Road, which brought iconic characters like Mickey Mouse into play.

Read more: Crossy Road Castle reimagines Super Mario Bros. as a multiplayer extravaganza on Apple Arcade



The Crossy Road Castle spinoff made the jump to Apple Arcade, Apple's \$4.99/monthly mobile gaming subscription service that launched in fall 2019 and now includes access to a catalog of over 100 games. Until Crossy Road Castle arrived, the games joining Apple Arcade were exclusive to the platform.

"I think right now we could all use some positivity and a short escape from everything, and Crossy Road Castle is definitely going to give people that," Reeves said.

Reeves said the spinoff game was a concept for a while, and Apple helped the project become a reality. Reeves noted the importance of having more platforms where different types of games can exist. This gives developers and gamers more options, she said.

Everyone enjoys a different gaming experience, but Reeves said a great way to enjoy Arcade's Crossy Road Castle is to play in multiplayer mode with your immediate family or roommates, if you're able to, since most people in the US and in other nations impacted by the coronavirus pandemic are practicing social distancing. Reeves said the team is working on an online multiplayer mode as well since it's not practical for people to see each other in person at the time.

Read more: Angry Birds CEO on the success of the franchise and what's coming next

It takes a village to run a castle

If Reeves noticed a lack of women in tech when she pursued her computer science degree, she noticed it to another degree when she was working in the field and decided to become a mother.

"Working with mostly guys, I'd not seen someone in any of my workplaces go through being pregnant, taking a long chunk of leave, returning to work, while managing career and family," Reeves said. "I didn't personally know any other women in my industry who had gone through that and could talk to me about it. At the time I felt very alone and it took me a while to work out my identity as both a game developer and a mum."

Reeves said she now has found a larger network of "dev-mums" (aka developer moms), and looks at games through her unique lens of motherhood. Her kids were the first to test Crossy Road Castle, she said.

When it comes to development, Reeves said that diverse perspectives are important to ensure that technology like games represent, empower and support everyone -- especially because of how embedded tech is in our everyday lives.

"If girls and women aren't part of making tech, then we'll have tech that doesn't take into account the perspective of half the human population," Reeves said.

Crossy Road Castle is being featured in the App Store today, in honor of International Women's Month.

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