

Prototype 5: Homecoming, Core Loop

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Finding a core loop from an existing game and boil it down to the core, that was the outset of *Homecoming*. Looking at large complex games such as *Civilization* and *Heroes of Might and Magic* they have a lot of systems and loops, but what we felt was at the core of the experience was the exploration. Searching through yet undiscovered lands to find resources and fight off enemies, in order to maintain your home. While the improvement of a home base certainly is compelling, it felt too far from the core experience of exploration to include in the loop and we were left with a loop reminding us a lot of the loops from rogue-like games such as *Darkest Dungeons* and *Faster Than Light*, driving us towards a game of managing a group of units and barely scraping by.

The main loop we would then build our prototypes from consist of three steps:

- Exploration
- Conflict
- Resolution

This relatively simple small loop allowed us to focus on creating a compelling experience based on these three steps and then later expand on what each step could be. The 'Exploration' step is pretty straight forward and actually not that far from that of *Civilization*. Moving from tile to tile discovering more of the map as you go (as seen on Figure 1).



Figure 1: ingame image from homecoming.

What is more complicated is the 'Conflict' step, covering whatever challenge one might face and could contain loops in it self like a combat loop for example. Lastly the 'Resolution' step represents the reaction to the different outcomes of the conflict step. We also kept in mind the resources found during exploration used to improve or recover your troops.

Before implementing the digital version of the game, we put together a paper prototype to figure out if it actually provided a compelling experience. We created a tile-based map of post-its representing different terrain types, and decks of post-it cards representing randomized conflicts or 'events', we also created a handful of soldiers for the player to manage. What we ended up with was actually a compelling experience in terms of simple exploration. It was however a very unwieldy game to play, requiring a dedicated game master to keep track of everything.

Moving to digital did alleviate most of the trouble of managing the game, as well as help make the game feel less random by hiding the dice rolls in the code. Our first iteration of the game was focused on providing compelling exploration, as well as make choices that mattered in the events. The feedback we got suggested we focus on investing the player in their squad, making them care about them and create a compelling experience that way. Thus we turned our focus on the squad members.

Caring about your squad and be sad when they die. That is the feeling we want to instil in the player. This is no easy task however. Our initial effort was to make the player construct the squad themselves from a selection of potential recruits as well as writing back-stories, giving the player reason to care. This however clashes somewhat with the event-system, since the chosen squad has no actual effect on event outcomes and players notice that.

Perhaps the game would benefit from taking inspiration from a game like *X-com* that somehow manages to make players care. This could be the fact that in *X-com*, the player has a lot of customization options as well as growth for each soldier between missions. This 'investment' from the player could be what was needed in order to make the player go that extra mile to keep the squad all alive.

In conclusion there is definitely a compelling experience at the heart of homecoming. While the game as it is does not necessarily make the player care that much about the squad. There is a core of exploration, that if expanded with resource management and perhaps combat will make the player feel more like a squad commander stranded in the jungle. That combined with heart-wrenching losses of your brothers in arms would give an emotionally rich if a bit depressing experience.