

Tony Hawk loved video games. He was a self-described “arcade kid.” It’s not hard to imagine that what reeled him in is the same hook that has caught most players over the years: the ability to exist in a separate world for minutes, hours, or however long your cache of quarters can hold out. You can die and come back, lose and become the hero once more in short order. Video games can be brutal in their difficulty while simultaneously offering grace as they allow you to try and try again. Those quick releases of dopamine your brain gives you, especially while playing more fast-paced, action-oriented games, probably don’t hurt either.

It’s not unlike skateboarding, which can be unforgiving in its difficulty, but immense in emotional, physical, and even spiritual payoff. Once, as a ten-year-old, I spent hours attempting to learn heelflips in the driveway of my childhood home. Standing in place on my skateboard, I kept repeating the same simple motions: step on the board’s tail with my back foot to make its front end pop up, then jump and slide my front foot up and off the front edge of the board. Theoretically, those movements done in concert will result in a heelflip. But they hadn’t, even though I’d done everything I thought I’d needed to do, having decoded the step-by-step instructions to the trick by playing and rewinding pro skateboarder Steve Olson doing a switch heelflip in the Shorty’s Skateboards video *Fulfill the Dream* countless times.

Still, I kept putting metaphorical quarters in the machine, even as frustration mounted and my focus began to slip. Then on one attempt, I jumped and kicked my lead leg straight forward, not in the up-and-out motion of Olson’s that I’d studied so closely. As a result, the board shot up into the vertical position, my beloved toy now a skewer. First, I felt a white heat and then heard laughter as our neighbors across the street witnessed me thoroughly popsicle¹ myself on my skateboard. I ran inside, scared and shocked, to ensure I hadn’t severed anything in that tenderest of regions. Not an hour after I’d confirmed all would be okay, I was back in the driveway, quarters in hand.

It could be described as urgent, that incessant need to get back up and try again. To regain composure, push through the adversity and embarrassment to keep progressing. To prove to yourself and your neighbors that they wouldn’t be laughing long once you’d finally mastered your trick (even if they would bring up your popsicling multiple times in the coming years). It’s a somewhat twisted measure of how bad you want a thing. There’s no set limit to the suffering you can put yourself through, and there’s no guarantee you’ll succeed. What you’re bleeding for is fractions of seconds and a feeling of satisfaction that, if you’re lucky, sits with you for a few hours or days before you need to go back out and earn it again. But the most twisted part of it all is that it’s *fun*.

In the early 1990s, pre-*Pro Skater*, a PC developer approached Tony Hawk about making a skateboarding video game with Hawk as its face. This game ran on a crude engine with clunky keyboard commands and was a generally unwieldy product. But there were issues beyond playability; the developer eventually encouraged Hawk to take their idea and pitch it to various publishing companies, but, “it just came up against a lot of hesitation, a lot of negativity. People just said, ‘You know skateboarding is not popular; why would a skateboarding game be popular,’” Hawk recalled in *Pretending I’m a Superman: The Tony Hawk Video Game Story*.

The rejections were frequent and damning enough that the project was soon canceled; this was the first failed attempt at building a video game around the image of Tony Hawk. However, there was hope in this loss; the developer told Hawk that even though this project didn’t stick, he

¹ *A cursed, self-explanatory visual.*

was now a known entity in the video game industry. If the idea of a skateboarding game ever resurfaced, Hawk's brand recognition would make him a shoo-in as the person to front it.

As foretold, not long after the PC project tanked, Nintendo invited Hawk to their offices for a meeting — that ultimately went nowhere. But he got back up, regained composure, and eventually, Take-Two, the owner of Rockstar Games (publisher of the *Grand Theft Auto* and *Red Dead Redemption* series), would find their way to him. In 1998, they had started working on a skateboarding game of their own and felt Hawk would be the perfect name to attach to it.

He liked what they were doing. The developer (Z-Axis) was creating something close to a skateboarding simulator, a game that translated the bodily techniques and physics that skateboarders employ in real life to the buttons of a video game controller. This simulation could be as brutal and frustrating as the real thing, its learning curve tremendously steep. And in an added effort to make the game more realistic, if your character bailed, it could lead to broken boards or bones, which would force you to restart your runs.

While these were all novel concepts, Hawk was beginning to feel that Rockstar's game would be too challenging to master and would drive away potential players. Any game with his likeness attached had to be accessible and fun right off the jump. Because for Hawk, this was about more than just making a video game; it was the opportunity to introduce an entirely new generation to skateboarding.

Like the PC developer had predicted, Hawk was now a known and viable name in the gaming industry, which led to some competition for said name. While he was still in talks with Rockstar, Hawk received a call from Activision. The storied video game publisher had heard that he was working on a title, but they had one of their own that they'd like to talk to him about. It was being worked on by an upstart development company called Neversoft. Their small team had been given the opportunity to work on the untitled skateboarding project after winning substantial favor with Activision for saving a struggling game that had been spinning its wheels in development for three years.

That project was a third-person shooter called *Apocalypse*. Initially, it aimed to be a “virtual buddy” game, emulating the buddy movies you'd see in the theater,” said John Spinelli, the game's early art director, in an interview with *NEXT Generation*. Your buddy? That would be renowned scientist Trey Kincaid, played by action star du jour, Bruce Willis. Your goal? To stop a mad scientist, the Reverend, from bringing about the apocalypse (obviously) via the four horsemen that he has cooked up in his lab. Nu metal, trite religious references, and hokey sci-fi helped tie this powerfully '90s ensemble together.

However, the developers at the time were unable to get the “virtual buddy” AI system to function in a way that would allow you to team up with Bruce to shoot rocket propelled grenades at aliens without significant gameplay issues. Eventually, Neversoft was brought in and given six months to finish the job, a timeline leading to the most lucrative season of the year: Christmas. Their team quickly scrapped the buddy system, slapped Willis's likeness onto the main character's body, and edited the voiceovers the action star had recorded. It required a substantial paring down of lines since Willis's character was initially meant to be a mere sidekick, leaving their new hero with limited, stilted dialogue. Willis's character would infamously go on to shout inanities like “trick or treat,” “strap one on, it's time to jam,” and “yada yada yada” while in the midst of decimating alien hordes. Despite those hiccups, the team at Neversoft, in Herculean hunched-over-keyboards fashion, was able to crank the game out just in time for the holiday season of 1998.

Ultimately, *Apocalypse* became more of a punchline than a blockbuster, but it was still a serviceable game that helped recoup the money Activision had sunk into it over the years it sat mired in development limbo. This success led Activision to offer Neversoft the skateboarding project. Initially, there was some dissent among the team; many of them worried (and rightfully so at

the time) that skateboarding just wasn't popular enough to carry the interest needed to make an impact in an already crowded video game market. But Scott Pease, a creative director at Activision who worked with Neversoft on the series, had grown up skateboarding. He'd been steeped in the skateboarding games of yore, like *720°*, *Skate or Die!*, and *California Games*, and was confident in the project immediately. Neversoft got to work.

First, they built a demo level, recycling much of the same code from *Apocalypse*. Enough so that the main character in the demo was still Willis, with a futuristic machine gun strapped to his back as he piloted a skateboard from rooftop to rooftop. It was a start, but the team still needed a hook, a name to attach to the game that would help it break through the noise and add a sense of legitimacy to its brand. So they got on the phone.