

Leadership, emotions and moving forward: The story behind the turbulent Wildman Kickstarter

Chris Taylor, CEO of Gas Powered Games, launched a Kickstarter that would eventually kick him around in ways he never anticipated. We got his thoughts concerning the launch of Wildman, layoffs, and what he learned throughout.



Author's Note: This interview was conducted before Chris Taylor announced the cancellation of the Wildman Kickstarter. While some of the information is now outdated, it still provides an insight into Taylor's mindset leading up to the cancellation and the journey from beginning to end of a tumultuous Kickstarter campaign.

Chris Taylor was exasperated. The Gas Powered Games CEO's latest efforts brought him through an emotional roller coaster that has now come to an end. Within five days of launching a Kickstarter campaign for his latest "evolutionary" game Wildman, he laid staff off, released an emotional and public video about the layoffs, re-hired key staff, and talked to any press that would listen about Gas Powered Games' trials and tribulations.

The tone of those press interviews slowly changed as the Kickstarter went on: the raft of interviews that he did to advertise the Kickstarter launch were full of optimism and excitement,

but just two weeks on – while the optimism hasn’t quite faded – the mixed emotions he’s feeling have clearly taken their toll.

Brutally honest

Speaking to him over Skype, the fatigue in his voice was clearly audible. He was saddened by the decision he made about his staff, but was happy he could give them the best send off possible. More importantly though, he learned lessons; lessons that will shape the way he deals with issues publicly, lessons about honesty, and lessons about the industry. But for a man who experienced heavy lows in the past few weeks, he still remained in amazingly good spirits.

Before launching the Kickstarter it was business as usual for Gas Powered Games. Wildman was a full-blown concept and Chris Taylor spent time looking for partners who would be willing to back his “evolutionary” project. But he had staff to pay and a business to run, and after cancelling some late-in-development projects months prior, something needed to happen. But publishers weren’t budging.

“Business as usual in the videogames industry means that it can take many, many, many months and you can hit one little bump and have to go another month. Who pays the salaries on all your staff while you’re waiting that extra month? You got 30 people. 50 people. Who’s gonna pay for all those people? Well, they’re not. And so you have to pay for it,” Taylor explained. “You have to have that money sitting in your ‘war chest’, which is more like a cookie jar that you’ve scraped money together in, and the thing is that that model is so hard I figured ‘You know what, we’re gonna keep talking to people anyway,’ but by November, we decided that we’re going to have to, in parallel, start working on a Kickstarter campaign.”



There's a conviction in Chris' voice as he explains the scenario. The welfare of his staff were clearly his top priority and making sure they were taken care of, by getting funds, was part of that. He wanted them to feel secure and inclined to stay with GPG.

"We started working through November to December, we launched it in January and guess what happened during those two and a half months? Almost every single publisher we talked to gave us some standard cliche answer that they're going through a reorganization, or they have a new direction they're focusing on, or they're thinking about mobile now, or Christmas sales didn't come in quite the way they wanted to so they're gonna have to wait a little while now to see how things go in the Spring."

The Kickstarter was more than just a way to fund Wildman and his struggling company. It was a way to move out of the hard model that virtually put the company under in the first place. It's a model he may have to live with a little bit longer since the Kickstarter didn't go through, but that won't be the end of the world.

"The fact is, if those conversations go well, we may end up back in the model we came from," said Taylor. "And that wouldn't be the end of the world, in fact, we would be grateful. We would be grateful. You have to look at it that way."

Unfortunately, no matter how well the Kickstarter did, it wasn't going to save anyone from layoffs; it was always more a case of when those layoffs would actually happen: "There was no way that Kickstarter was going to hit the kind of numbers to sustain the full team. And that's why I had to do the layoff."

Almost everyone at Gas Powered Games was laid off, but the staff saw it coming. Taylor wanted to give everyone a choice that he felt was best for them under the uncertain circumstances. It was either stay with GPG and see if the campaign finished with the funding, or be laid off now with the certainty of severance and PTO. Taylor decided to lay everyone off so that they could get the most money from the situation and if they chose to stay, they could. To his delight, some did.

"I had to make some decisions about bringing some people on, so what I did was I had a couple of them I had to make a financial commitment to, but the others, basically I said 'Do you guys want to eat PTO and eat your severance?', in other words 'Do you want to come on board and take a risk with me now that you've had the weekend to really think about it and then look at the number on the Kickstarter and decide if that's sort of a risk you want to take?'

"And of course, I was delighted to hear they were willing to do that. This agreement, by the way, goes week by week. It is not something where they've signed up like Davy Crockett at the Alamo where they're going to fight to the death. This is not the way the world works."



Knowing the number he set for Wildman wasn't going to serve the financial needs of the team, why did he start it in the first place? When I asked him if he was naive about Kickstarter, he laughed. He knew he messed up, but he wouldn't describe it as naive, *per se*.

Ignorance, not naivety

"If naive is synonymous with lack of experience and no prior knowledge, absolutely! Isn't that what naive is? Naive almost sounds worse than just being dumb. No. Ignorant. Dumb is different than ignorant... a smart person can be ignorant. I don't know how to do brain surgery, right? So you're not going to hold that against me. This was an ignorance thing. This was a not fully comprehending what Kickstarter was.

"People have said to me 'Chris, Kickstarters are not supposed to fund the whole game. Kickstarters are supposed to give the game a kick start. Y'know, like a motorcycle. A kick start, right? And then the engine starts turning over on its own, after you kick start it. It's not supposed to fund the whole project,' and I thought about that and I went 'Man, they're absolutely right.'"

Taylor's first emotional plea, the video where he revealed the troubles facing GPG and the make-or-break nature of Wildman, displayed a frankness we're not used to seeing from developers. Taylor had done his best to mask the true depth of his unsaid feelings, but even with edits, it was obvious his sadness was overwhelming him. Asking backers if he should kill the Kickstarter or continue was an honest question to people who could be giving money into a project that wouldn't see the light. Was it too much to put the future of Gas Powered Games on the shoulders of backers?

"Y'know, that was an unfortunate part of shooting a video at the end of a very long, stressful day and not thinking it all through. It wasn't the intention. Part of me was secretly hoping that they would all say 'no' and it would all be over then and there. Because it kind of felt like something that needed to die," Taylor admitted.

While most of the reaction “was so overwhelming and everybody was so overwhelmingly positive”, Taylor was aware that some people felt the video was just a way of generating attention for the Kickstarter.



“I realized there was a sentiment that started to grow in a minority of the press that said ‘Chris, you’re staging a media trick to raise this money.’ That hurt. A lot. That was probably the most hurtful thing that I could read, but I understood it...”

In hindsight, the drama could have been avoided with a bit of transparency at the launch of the Kickstarter. Few knew what was really happening at Gas Powered Games. It wasn’t until Taylor talked to the press where he admitted that GPG could shut down if the Kickstarter didn’t go through. Withholding that information until giving it to the press dramatized that initial statement, which let things escalate to that video. He was honest, yes, but it felt like that honesty came a few days too late.

“Would I put out a video like that again in the future?”, Taylor said, immediately answering himself. “No. Whether it was right or wrong to do – it was too emotional – the complexity from being honest and open, being an open book, laying yourself out in front of the world; the consequence for that kind of honesty was too costly.

“I think that that’s what I’ve learned,” Taylor continued. “I’ve learned that people don’t really want to see the under-belly, the ugly emotional under-belly of a professional working in the games industry or anybody.”

However, it’s this sort of honesty the industry needs and many fans desire. It’s uncommon that a CEO of any company would let their fanbase know what’s going on in such a candid manner, Kickstarter or not. If anything, most CEOs would have someone else make the announcement. But Taylor is close to his team and he desires to be honest with them, fans, and backers. He understands he can’t manage the project on his own. It’s vulnerability from a position of leadership that people aren’t used to and that’s what makes it so refreshing, and why people were still willing to back his project – even if it didn’t make its goal.

Even when I spoke to Taylor, it seemed that the writing was already on the wall for Wildman’s Kickstarter campaign, and for him the thought of it not making its goal felt like a thought he didn’t want to entertain, but one he had to prepare for regardless. I could hear the fight for hope in his voice, the need to focus on the positive side of things.

Positive outlook

“I’m in this position where I made a decision, then I made another decision, and now I’m going to have to make a final decision. And I’m going to have to live with that and sleep at night, and I think I can,” said Taylor. “But I cannot regret the last wonderful 15 years I’ve spent with these incredibly talented people. Nothing that happens to Gas Powered Games is ever going to take that away. That’s not going to get closed down. The history doesn’t get re-written.”

Those critical of his emotional transparency have clearly altered his outlook, and he seems far more wary about what he says now. It’s not enough to stop him speaking openly, but it’s enough to make him feel the need to follow-up that anecdote with a disclaimer of sorts.

“If I’m so devious that by telling you this story of my last 15 years that people think I’m tugging their heart strings some more, look, there’s nobody dying here, there’s no sick mom that needs a heart transplant, I’m not being evicted out of anywhere. I’ve gotten on [chats] and I said to people ‘If you’re uncomfortably over-invested, well-meant, but please dial back your pledge. You don’t have to go to zero but dial your pledge back from 100 down to 50. Do something that puts it back into perspective, what you feel comfortable with.’”



With the Kickstarter having failed, publisher support may be the only thing that can now save Gas Powered Games from folding. Taylor has put his own stock into saving the company in the past, but he's not willing to do it again.

“I was going into this [Kickstarter] after all the projects were cancelled last fall, I said to everybody around me who would listen ‘Guys, I’m not doing it again. I did it 2007, I did it 2010, I did it when the company was founded in 1998, I don’t want to do it anymore. I don’t want to risk everything I have to run this company anymore. I’m tired. I’m worn out. I can’t do it.’ Everybody, I believe, respected me for saying that and doing that.”

He hasn't made the best decisions, his ignorance of Kickstarter led him to deal with an emotional see-saw, and the Wildman campaign failed, but there's still respect to be had for a person – a CEO – who's willing to be vulnerable and honest with his fans and take risks. Wildman may go

down in history as just another failed Kickstarter campaign, but to Chris Taylor and Gas Powered Games, it was so much more than that.