

# T H E M A K I N G O F . . .



## H I D D E N F O L K S

How two creatives collaborated to build an interactive game of hide-and-seek – and what they found

BY JEN SIMPKINS

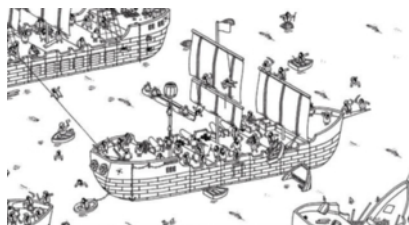
Format Android, iOS, PC, Switch  
Developer/publisher Adriaan de Jongh, Sylvain Tegroeg  
Origin The Netherlands  
Release 2017

Curiosity might kill the cat, but it can do wonders for videogames. *Hidden Folks* is a game about poking things to see what happens. As in the Where's Wally books, you search a detailed world for a specific character or object – here, the process is elevated by interactions, as you open doors, pull up blinds and cut away bushes simply to see what may be hiding behind them. It's hardly surprising, then, that *Hidden Folks* is a product of its creators' own curiosities. Game designer **Adriaan de Jongh** makes a habit of visiting the Gerrit Rietveld Academie's graduation expo each year because "they're famous for teaching art from a more conceptual level, so it's just wild. Most of the time I'm incapable of understanding it, so I enjoy it a lot." During a visit in 2014, one particular exhibit caught his eye: a row of glass globes with sculptures inside, and behind them, black-and-white line art showing lively scenes of industry. It was the work of illustrator **Sylvain Tegroeg**. "I'll always remember seeing Adriaan's head passing by, and then coming back," Tegroeg says. "And then we started to talk."

De Jongh was fascinated. "They were these amazing little worlds. The first thing that I did when I saw them was push my head into them and really look at all these little details, all these little things that were happening," he says. "I sort of jokingly told Sylvain, 'We should make a game together'". The joke very quickly turned into a prototype, a two-hour thing hacked together from illustrations that de Jongh had downloaded from Tegroeg's website. "The very first thing that came to mind when thinking about his artwork in a game way was that I wanted people to really experience his little worlds," de Jongh says. "It was a very small step to go from, 'How do we make people look at your stuff closely?', to, 'We should make a searching game so that people *have* to look at it.'"

De Jongh emailed Tegroeg when the prototype was finished – "Obviously I didn't tell him that I stole all his art from his website!" – and the two met. Long-time videogame player Tegroeg was immediately on board. "I was super happy, because at that period of time, animation was the next step for my illustrations," he says. "I always felt this attraction of making it feel alive."

Thus, *Hidden Folks* began to take shape. The two attended conferences, gamedev events and Unity gatherings for about a year, figuring out



New additions, such as the recent beach update, are about offering more visual variety than anything mechanically different. Consistency is key to keeping the game accessible

how to hone their concept for a game into something with wide appeal. It was also during this time that the groundwork was laid for how the two would operate as a team. Game Oven, the studio de Jongh had helped found, had recently closed. The experience had left him with a determination to work as a collaborator, rather than as part of a studio. On *Hidden Folks*, de

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Jongh and Tegroeg would remain collaborators: no founding a company, no pay (at least initially), and equal ownership of the new IP. "I had seen what happens when you hire people who then don't actually own something," de Jongh says. "One of the reasons that we closed Game Oven was I had stumbled upon people who gave it 100 per cent, but what I realised I needed was their 110 per cent. There are a lot of people in the world who say they want to make something good, but to actually own it and *fight* for it – that's the next level."

*Hidden Folks* was to be defined by Tegroeg's own monochrome, minimalist yet intricate art style; the first order of business, then, was to figure out how to add the drawings in the game and preserve their quality. Tegroeg would start to riff on paper, filling sheets with characters, objects and scenery which could be scanned into the computer. "The first drawings I did were

on really crappy paper," Tegroeg says. The printer paper would soak up the half-millimetre fineliner pen's ink, or leave blank white dots in drawings; he soon moved onto using Bristol paper. "The actual scanning was a thing that we needed to figure out," de Jongh says. "Sylvain mostly did, but halfway through making the game, the scanner broke. It was one of those shitty scanners you buy for like, 30 bucks. So he bought a new one that was a lot better, but the image quality was very different! So he got rid of the good scanner to buy the exact same shitty scanner again! Which I laughed so hard at."

**Normally, Tegroeg would** simply draw illustrations as a connected whole. However, *Hidden Folks*' animated and interactive elements required a deconstructed approach, with the artist learning to split characters and scenery into individual sprites, filling pages with buttons and switches, or the arms, legs and heads needed for the character generator. And then there was the question of optimisation. With each level – or 'area' – made up of hundreds of different images, de Jongh had to ensure that loading the game wouldn't crash smartphones. That was where sprite sheets came in; each area required about four sides of A4 filled with stuff, so loading an area meant a device only had to load those four images. "It's not super technically hard what we did, because from the start we thought about making these optimised images, making the game from these building blocks," de Jongh says. "In terms of graphics, not everything can be unique, but in terms of placement, we do have to make it unique for it to look like a distinct area."

City, forest, snowscape, factory: whatever the setting, Tegroeg would begin by determining the size of an area, placing four objects in each corner and filling the space with larger illustrations before zooming in to add tiny details. Layering was the next crucial puzzle to solve, with everything in *Hidden Folks*' quasi-isometric worlds needing to sit on its own plane, so that players could move elements and discover what was behind certain objects. "I tried a couple of things, and it was just too hard," de Jongh says. "So I decided to just go for the simplest thing we could do, which is manually layer everything." It took a week or so for him to spin up a tool that would allow Tegroeg, who was unfamiliar with Unity, to move his illustrations onto the correct ►

## THE MAKING OF...

plane. "In hindsight, it might have not been the greatest idea," de Jongh laughs. "But any other alternative may have been as much work."

Fortunately, the art side came naturally to Tegroeg, who was comfortable with the style he'd spent years honing. "It's never easy," he says. "There are always things to discover, even in that style." But there was no doubt that Tegroeg's talent was a driving force behind development. He could draw every object in perfect perspective, no grid paper needed. "This is literally Sylvain's brain fucking going haywire," de Jongh says, his eyes lighting up. "It's incredible. Sometimes if he needs to draw straight lines, he'll draw guidelines in pencil. But he doesn't really require it. If I tell him to draw a car, he will just – poof – do the car, in that perspective. It's fucking mind-blowing." Most of the ideas for area (and sub-area) themes came from Tegroeg, who would draw whatever popped into his head for various environments, inspired by "a mix of things – my own experience with family travelling, or with other games, and also visual culture." De Jongh's role was to provide more game design-focused feedback: "I'd say, 'I love this little sub-area here – can you make it like, ten times bigger? So that we can actually have a clue pointing at it. Once we'd go into discussing the area, and placing the targets, then we'd try to shape the area around those targets.'"

### Meaningful interactions were

the focus: almost everything that players touched should help them find what they were searching for, whether it was poking repeatedly at crops to have them 'grow' to reveal an item – or sliding up on tent flaps to roll them up. "That's kind of a cheat," Tegroeg laughs. "In real life, you wouldn't do that! But it worked out, interaction-wise. With lots of things, we had playfulness between reality and the interaction." Not everything had to be about objectives, with some things added for the sake of pure fun. But anything that threatened the game's relaxed vibe had to go, including timed areas involving finding a certain number of targets. "We cut four or five of those because we realised it was just not going to work," de Jongh says. The first area that came together enough to be deemed 'finished' was the camping area, about a year and three months of trying to figure out what 'finished' meant. "It's a lot about the mix between static and interactive, and it's also a lot about how you guide people into it," de Jongh says: playtesting was extensive.

## Q&A

**Sylvain Tegroeg**  
Illustrator

### Colour is a common tool in game design. Were you ever tempted to add it?

That's something we discussed at the beginning of making the game. My art style was black and white. I wasn't comfortable with adding colour. I like to work with colours, but I find it really difficult – I don't have as much experience with it as drawing in black and white, so I'm a bit reticent about it. If we had added colour, it would have maybe felt too much like *Where's Waldo* – even though it's now a really obvious reference! I think if there was colour, there would be a huge change in the art style but also in the way the game would play.

### What did you learn from the process of making *Hidden Folks*?

How to make a game. I had all this gaming experience, thinking, what's the trick? And now when I'm playing games, I see the strings behind it. And working with a game designer like Adriaan – as a product designer, that's something I was always eager to do. As a freelance designer, you work with a client, and you don't have this partnership. I learned a lot about making compromises: things that you would love to be in the game, but actually they can't, because there's a way a game has to be.

### Hidden-object games are very popular as a genre. Why do you think that is?

Sometimes I'm wondering if it's not just voyeurism. Sometimes people interact with things just to be like, 'Oh, what's inside that closet or that drawer?' They just want to have a look. They are just curious. There are so many little stories and little things happening, and your head is just like, what's happening? You just want to know!

But conserving *Hidden Folks*' light and airy feel sometimes took an extraordinary toll. Soon, a business model needed to be decided upon. "I had made premium games up until then," de Jongh says. "Even though they were critically acclaimed, we barely made the money to be able to run a studio. With that in the back of my mind, I was like, 'Maybe we should think about making *Hidden Folks* free to play.'" He was determined to try, but found money-motivated aspects creeping into many aspects of the design. "It was a very depressing time. It got to a point where I just didn't want to think about the project, and where we both weren't motivated to work on



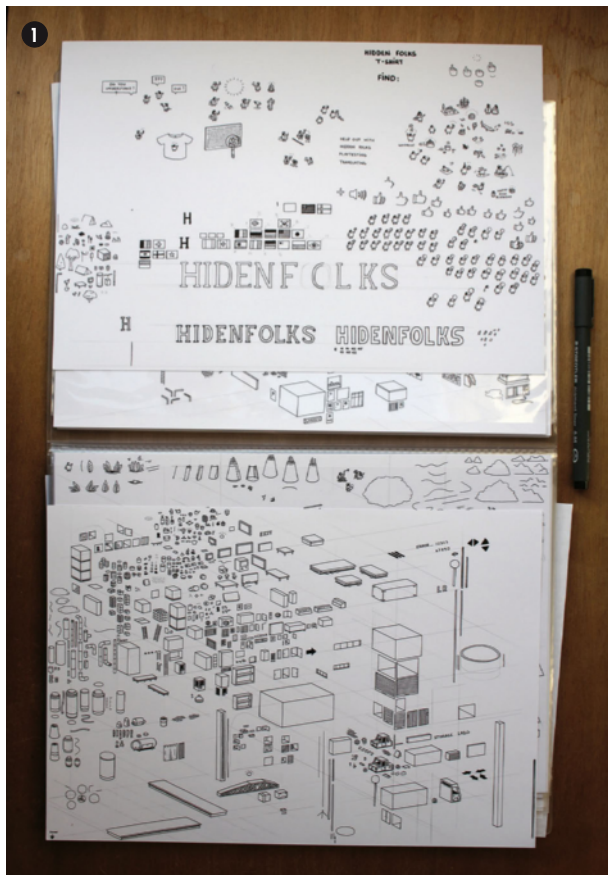
it any more. It took us a couple months to decide, hey, you know what? Fuck freemium! Let's focus on making a fun game first. It's going to be premium, and if we ever find something else that will work as a freemium game, then sure – but let's forget about the whole business model thing."

For de Jongh and Tegroeg, *Hidden Folks* was a personal project – business came second. But success followed: *Hidden Folks* was a triumph born of earnest artistry and collaboration. And therein lay the difficulty. "Sylvain put his heart and soul into this game," de Jongh says, "and that's obviously what I signed up for, and also what he signed up for. But what you also must understand is that if Sylvain draws anything right now, there will be some people who see nothing but *Hidden Folks* in that." Tegroeg's art became accidentally synonymous with the shared IP. "There were some tough conversations between us about what is part of *Hidden Folks* and what isn't," de Jongh says: we can hear the emotion in his voice.

"That was very, very hard. This is why people will make companies, and hire people, and not be collaborators – this is one of those things."

Tegroeg adds: "It was like we were giving away the whole art style for the game. At the beginning, it was hard to accept that. We had a lot of discussions about how we could approach that on a professional level." De Jongh describes Tegroeg's art style as "his handwriting, basically – I can't disallow it. And that's where a lot of the tough feelings for him came from: 'Adriaan is actively disallowing me to use my own creations anywhere'. Whereas for me it was like, 'What the hell, man, you're making good money because of my marketing and all the effort we put in together'. So that was a very tough situation for us to get out of. This stuff is complicated to talk about, because it's so nuanced, and it was close to the heart." But a compromise was reached: Tegroeg's art style remains his alone, and as long as he doesn't use it in any other searching games, both parties are happy.

A final, extraordinary show of sportsmanship and solidarity, then, in the face of a complex issue. Now, with a total of six team members, a Switch release and the recent beach update, *Hidden Folks* may still be growing, but at its core it will always be two curious collaborators – de Jongh, who spotted a row of strange glass globes and thought to turn back, and Tegroeg, who saw the chance to develop his art and make his first game – and what they found in each other. ■



1 Moving clouds and lifting blinds is key to finding targets in the city area. De Jongh: "The blinds have a very specific pattern, so you know if there's a thing like that, you can drag it open."

2 Early sprite sheets from the beach area, which was the latest update to the game.

3 One of Tegroeg's 'Idea Globes' from his graduation project. The background art was far denser and busier than that of *Hidden Folks*.

4 Tegroeg takes 20 to 24 hours to fill a side of A4 with sprites. "It feels quite fast, if it's full of details. I've done bigger sizes, A3, in 36 hours."

5 Game sounds were made entirely by mouth. "We'd go to Adriaan's place, and scream into the mic for the whole afternoon," Tegroeg laughs, "and hope the neighbours wouldn't complain"

