Production Case Study

2025 – Vertical Slice Development

Project Overview

Project Title: 2025
Genre: 2D Narrative Puzzle Game
Development Duration: 5 Months
Team Size: 6 (Design, Engineering, Art)
Role: Producer & Art

Objective: Deliver a polished, playable vertical slice demonstrating the core gameplay loop, systemic narrative mechanics, and visual identity to validate direction for future development.

As Producer, I was responsible for pitching the initial concept, overseeing production planning, facilitating sprint cadence, coordinating cross-disciplinary workflows, tracking milestones and dependencies, and maintaining visibility across the team.

Production Framework

The team operated under a lightweight Agile framework structured around weekly sprints. My responsibilities included:

- Maintaining and prioritizing the production backlog
- Defining sprint goals aligned with vertical slice exit criteria
- Tracking cross-discipline dependencies
- Facilitating sprint planning, standups, and retrospectives
- Monitoring milestone health and delivery timelines

To reduce ambiguity, I centralized documentation including sprint objectives, task ownership, playtest summaries, risk notes, and milestone roadmaps. This ensured clear accountability and real-time visibility into project status.

Milestone Planning & Execution

The vertical slice was structured into three primary phases:

Phase 1: Core Systems Implementation

- Core puzzle and redaction mechanics
- Player interaction systems

- Initial UI framework

Phase 2: Content & Systems Expansion

- Level and article iteration

- Art direction alignment

- Audio integration

- Scoped, sourced, and integrated an external grammar engine system to support dynamic narrative puzzle generation

Phase 3: Polish & Validation

- Performance optimization

- UX refinement

- Grammar engine integration validation

- Structured playtesting cycles

- Bug triage and stabilization

Each phase included defined exit criteria to prevent scope expansion beyond vertical slice objectives.

Cross-Disciplinary Coordination

Weekly sprint reviews included:

- Build demonstration and progress review

- Blocker and risk identification

- Dependency assessment

- Backlog reprioritization

This cadence surfaced issues early and enabled resource reallocation during high-risk milestone periods, improving deadline reliability.

External Contractor Management

To support systemic narrative goals, I identified the need for a modular grammar engine to dynamically generate puzzle variations.

I coordinated between internal engineering and an external contractor, with responsibilities including:

- Defining technical scope and gameplay requirements

- Establishing implementation milestones aligned with sprint cadence

- Tracking integration dependencies

- Reviewing progress against acceptance criteria

- Maintaining documentation to ensure long-term internal maintainability

The system was successfully integrated within the vertical slice timeline, enabling repeatable narrative variation without destabilizing milestone delivery.

Production Challenges & Solutions

1. Scope Expansion Risk

Challenge: Feature ideation began exceeding the defined scope of the vertical slice.

Action: Facilitated a scope alignment session with discipline leads to redefine minimum viable slice criteria. Re-prioritized backlog items and deferred non-essential systems.

Result: Preserved milestone integrity while maintaining core gameplay quality.

2. Design–Engineering Dependency Bottlenecks

Challenge: Gameplay iteration slowed due to unclear implementation requirements.

Action: Introduced structured feature briefs outlining intended player outcomes, technical constraints, and acceptance criteria to reduce ambiguity between disciplines.

Result: Improved clarity across teams and reduced iteration turnaround time.

3. Playtest Feedback vs Timeline Constraints

Challenge: Early-stage playtests surfaced high-value UX issues during time-sensitive development phases.

Action: Categorized feedback into critical blockers, polish improvements, and future roadmap items to protect milestone stability while improving player experience.

Result: Delivered a stable, refined vertical slice without compromising delivery schedule.

Playtesting & Feedback Integration

Coordinated 5+ structured playtesting sessions with defined testing objectives and observer documentation. Each session concluded with synthesized findings and backlog updates, ensuring structured iteration rather than informal feedback tracking.

Risk Management Approach

Ongoing risks were monitored throughout development, including:

- Feature creep

- Resource bandwidth constraints

- Sprint spillover patterns

- Third-party system integration stability

- Build performance prior to playtests

Risks were surfaced during sprint reviews to allow proactive mitigation rather than reactive correction.

Process Reflection

Key production takeaways:

- Defined milestone exit criteria prevent scope instability

- Structured documentation reduces friction between creative and technical teams

- Clear dependency tracking prevents bottlenecks

- Early risk identification improves milestone reliability

If scaled to a larger AAA production environment, I would formalize cross-pod dependency tracking, implement structured risk logs with severity ratings, and expand milestone reporting cadence for leadership visibility.

Outcome

The team successfully delivered a polished vertical slice demonstrating:

- Viable systemic gameplay loop

- Dynamic narrative variation supported by grammar engine integration

- Cohesive visual identity

- Stable build performance

- Clear roadmap direction for future development

As Producer, my focus remained on maintaining clarity, enabling cross-disciplinary execution, and ensuring delivery momentum across all phases of development.