



## From obscure Game Boy title to indie darling

The *Shantae* series has been delighting gamers for two decades. To celebrate the franchise's recent anniversary, we sat down with series creators Matt and Erin Bozon

Written by: Paul Cecchini

When it comes to indie gaming success stories, few share the rich history of the *Shantae* franchise. Since its low-key debut on the Game Boy Color in 2002, the 2D platforming series starring a hair-whipping half-genie has become a multiplatform fixture of the indie scene, with five games under its belt and a regular stream of re-releases and merchandise. Even 20 years later, its influence continues to grow.

At the centre of it all are Matt and Erin Bozon, the husband-and-wife team who have been breathing life into *Shantae*'s world from the beginning. Erin created the character and gameplay concept back in 1994 with the hopes of it growing into a franchise that could expand to comics, TV, and other merchandise. She collaborated with soon-to-be-husband Matt, who helped flesh out *Shantae*'s world and colourful cast of characters, as well as create backgrounds and monster designs while she crafted the early 2D animations. "It was a slow process of showing companies

the demo, getting their feedback, and going back to the drawing board," says Erin. "A lot of work for no pay!"

The title was eventually greenlit for development by WayForward, a former educational games software startup transitioning to handheld and console game development. The Bozons had worked at WayForward previously, alongside programmer Jimmy Huey, who'd been involved with the Bozons' original *Shantae* pitch. The small team set out to turn *Shantae* from a potential Super Nintendo or PC title into one for the Game Boy. "We loved traditional paper animation," Erin says, "but changing over to the Game Boy's pixels was still a great way to capture the charm of *Shantae*'s dances and animal transformations. But it was challenging, since we had to fund the game with other (licensed) titles. The team worked during the day to keep the lights on, then switch over to *Shantae* once the sun went down."

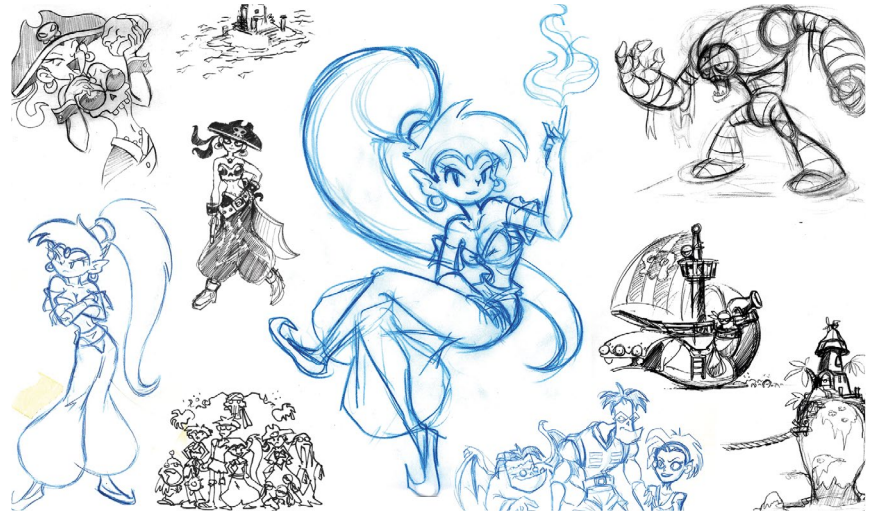
"It was just the three of us for most of development," adds Matt, "but towards the end, we were able to add a few more folks to help."



◀ Matt and Erin Bozon have helmed the *Shantae* series from its inception. Erin designed the character in 1994, and Matt helped flesh out the world and supporting cast.



✓ A handful of early concept art pieces for the original *Shantae* game by Matt Bozon. He would help his soon-to-be-wife Erin develop the character designs, world, and concept of the series.



## Humble beginnings

*Shantae* takes place in Sequin Land, a colourful fantasy world comprised of monsters, robots, and other strange creatures, following the titular half-genie's journey to protect her quaint village of Scuttle Town from threats (predominately the notorious pirate Risky Boots) as part of a 2D Metroidvania platforming adventure. This first game revels in the tongue-in-cheek weirdness of its world, where zombies who need coffee to stay sane live alongside merchants who capture girls and slap fish-tails on them to turn them into 'counterfeit mermaids'.

"Shantae is pretty different from other video game heroes," says Erin. "Belly dancing and hair-whipping her enemies gives the whole thing an unusually quirky tone, but it sure helps her stand out. The secondary characters have a lot of depth, too. I feel like any one of them could be someone's favourite character, or someone they could imagine being friends with in real life. *Shantae's* universe offers a lot to play with and is fun to escape into, whether you're a player or a creator."

"Over the years, one of my main roles has been to write the stories and dialogue for the series," says Matt. "I insert a lot of my own humour into *Shantae*, which is based on a love of eighties weekday afternoon and Saturday-morning cartoons and toy lines, and Carl Barks's *Scrooge McDuck* comics. I was also influenced quite a bit by *The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening*. That game came out early in my career, and it taught me how offbeat and oddball a game's dialogue could be, and how to get a player invested by sprinkling in a bit of extra charm and emotion. The humour of that game doesn't just sit on top of the game like some funny localisations. It's woven into every aspect: the situations, the music, the quests, the

setups and payoffs. Then it shifts in tone from whimsical and goofy to sad and sombre, maybe a little terrifying.

"Nowadays I think of *Shantae* games being like live stage plays or magic shows; the audience is active, and there's a semi-tangible exchange between the entertainer and the audience. This is a big part of what makes *Shantae* come to life."

## Fighting against the odds

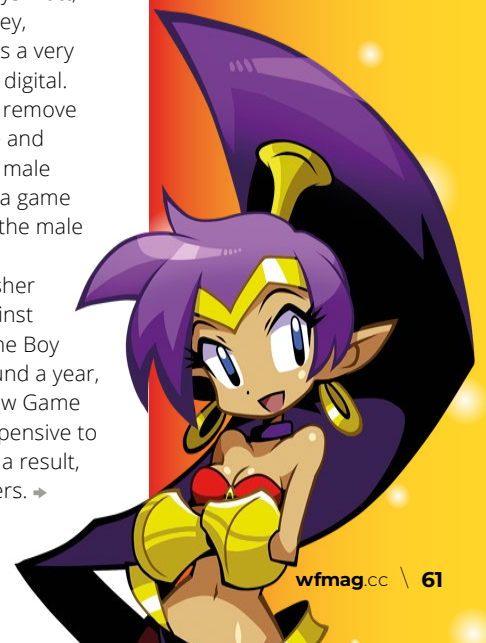
The concept seemed solid, but there was one big sticking point.

"We had to answer to publishers," says Matt, "who would ultimately control the money, manufacturing, and marketing. This was a very different world before everything went digital. Oftentimes publishers would ask us to remove Shantae (the character) from the game and replace her with a popular TV star or a male hero to sell more copies, or to make it a game for girls. Always it was asked, 'Who will the male audience play as?'"

Even after eventually finding a publisher in Capcom, the odds were stacked against *Shantae*. It was now 2002, and the Game Boy Advance had already been out for around a year, drawing gamer attention away from new Game Boy titles. The game's cartridge was expensive to produce, so few copies were made. As a result, *Shantae* was overlooked by many gamers. ➔

## Cakecom

"We were all so excited to sign with Capcom and get the game out into the world," recalls Erin Bozon of the first *Shantae* game. "I ordered a *Shantae*-themed cake, and remember the tiny team gathering up to celebrate around it. Bigger things were yet to come, but we were so happy in that moment."

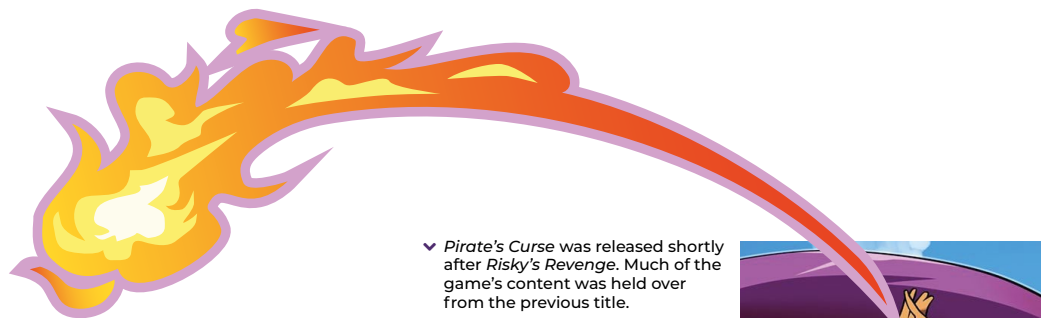


## Risky business

"We had more confidence going into *Pirate's Curse*," Matt Bozon recalls. "Once the game shipped, we were able to port the game to consoles and start reaching new players all over the globe. Pixel games were starting to be more widely associated with indie gaming, rather than feeling like being a mere handheld port. It didn't carry the same stigma of old technology that *Risky's Revenge* did at that time. So that worked in *Shantae's* favour, too."



▼ Shantae's fight against the seven sirens takes her across a sprawling island filled with creatures old and new.



▼ *Pirate's Curse* was released shortly after *Risky's Revenge*. Much of the game's content was held over from the previous title.



That wasn't to say that those who were aware of it didn't recognise its quality. "Two of Nintendo Power's reviewers gave *Shantae* perfect 5/5 scores," recalls Matt. "This was huge for me, since I was a Nintendo Power kid! It seemed like we had a winner, despite the low sales numbers. Gaming press started calling *Shantae* the Game Boy's swansong, which was so cool. We loved that system so much."

"These were the first fan letters we'd ever received," adds Erin. "People mailed us their original fan artwork. Later we even saw some cosplay! It was rewarding knowing that we were connecting to players and earning fans."

Attempts were made to keep *Shantae* going. A Game Boy Advance sequel called *Shantae: Risky Revolution* was worked on, but no publishers would bite. New *Shantae* ideas were conceived for then-current consoles and handhelds, including the short-lived N-Gage.

"We would have loved to work with Capcom again," says Erin, "but they were more interested in GameCube at the time. Other GBA publishers were looking for licensed kids or movie brands by then, and *Shantae Advance* had basically timed itself out."

But as the years went by, technology advanced. Soon, smaller game developers like WayForward would have a whole new world of publishing possibilities open to them.

## New opportunities

Nintendo spearheaded this paradigm shift with its DSiWare service, which allowed developers to release smaller gamers digitally without an outside publisher. "With digital distribution, WayForward was able to become its own publisher and call the shots for once!" says Matt. "This was just what we needed at exactly the right time."

*Shantae's* true sequel, *Risky's Revenge*, was initially designed as three separate, bite-sized episodes: *Shantae Overworld Adventure*, *Underworld Adventure*, and *Skyworld Adventure*. Shantae would lose against her nemesis Risky in the first title, fight her way out of the underworld in the second, and save Scuttle Town from its fate as an airborne mechanical fortress in the third. Again, time and advancing technology would prove problematic, as DSiWare was soon to be replaced by the Nintendo 3DS.

"When we saw the tides beginning to change, I opted to fuse the stories into a single adventure," says Matt. "We had no time to make a final boss, so we created Nega-Shantae – a colour swap of Shantae – to give the game a conclusion." The unused material would be reworked into the game's 3DS follow-up: *Shantae and the Pirate's Curse*, which directly continued the story started in *Risky's Revenge*.

Everything was pleasantly falling into place for the *Shantae* franchise. Digital distribution was exploding. WayForward hit development early in the life-cycle of the Nintendo 3DS. They had control over the game's publishing, allowing them to take the series beyond Nintendo handhelds to consoles – and many new potential players. "It was still new to many





people," says Erin. "We were also starting to see more fan internet culture and social media. Before that, it was mostly print magazines, trade show feedback, maybe the occasional letter in the physical mailbox."

*Shantae* was truly becoming the indie darling the Bozons always hoped it would be, but their next title would put things to the test. Did fans enjoy the series enough to help fund a fourth game via Kickstarter?

### Kick off

Long story short, they did. *Shantae: Half-Genie Hero* smashed its target goal of \$400,000 with a final amount pledged of over \$775,000. "Going in, I was a bit apprehensive," Matt admits. "I've always enjoyed keeping my games a secret and then doing a big reveal at the end. I wasn't sure if I'd be able to stay motivated knowing that fans would have expectations from day one. But the more we treated the campaign like another way to entertain and interact with the audience, the more fun it became. And the audience was a lot bigger than we thought!"

"I was excited to see hand-drawn animation return to *Shantae* since the original pitch," says Erin, "but it's a slower and more complex process than pixels. It took a lot longer. But the animation department at WayForward had just finished their work on *DuckTales: Remastered* and were ready to bring *Shantae* to HD."

*Half-Genie Hero* changed up its Metroidvania roots for a chapter-based story structure. The game would be expanded through additional story modes via DLC covered by stretch goal funding. "When designing the campaign and the game, we didn't know our total budget," says Matt, "so I designed a game that could expand or contract in scope. If we hit the minimum funding goal, we'd have enough cash to create a beginning, an end, and at least a couple of middle episodes. The number of little story arcs we could add to the middle would depend on backers and funding."

With the total funds gained, players could play the entire game as Risky Boots, Shantae's friends, and even Shantae in new outfits, complete with new dialogue, gameplay, and story beats in various 'what-if' scenarios. "I wanted to make sure that they weren't merely cosmetic," says Matt. "Each would have completely unique gameplay."

### Present-day Shantae

It wouldn't be long before Shantae returned for her fifth and most recent outing: *Shantae and the Seven Sirens*, where she explores a mysterious sunken city in the franchise's familiar Metroidvania style. In another milestone for the franchise, it was the first *Shantae* title to feature an animated title sequence and cutscenes by Studio Trigger.

This brings us to today, 20 years after *Shantae's* humble Game Boy debut. The entire franchise is now widely available on modern consoles. As Erin initially wanted, *Shantae's* reach has expanded into the mainstream. "Sometimes indie devs will reach out and tell us that our games inspired them to become devs," says Matt. "While it does make me feel old, I still love to hear it. Extending a hand to them just like the previous generation of devs did for us is what it's all about, and I hope that they'll want to invest in the next gaggle of creative people, too."

Looking back, what would the Matt and Erin of 20 years ago say if they could see where *Shantae* is today? "I don't think past me would believe future me," says Matt. "Then we'd fight, and someone's timeline would get messed up. Huh, maybe this is how I got an old man hairline at the age of 20. We're more excited than ever to make new *Shantae* adventures. *Shantae* fans are the best!"

"I think I'd be shocked at the number of loyal and supportive fans there are," says Erin. "I'd tell myself that it's a slow journey but worth every step! We'd love to continue telling *Shantae* stories. We hope it never ends!" <sup>W</sup>

◀ Animal forms have always played a part in Shantae's adventures. In *Risky's Revenge*, she can transform into a mermaid.

### Multiregional

"The idea of launching on every platform in many regions, in many languages, was daunting," Matt Bozon says of *Half-Genie Hero*. "Up until that point, we'd only launched on a single Nintendo handheld, in English, with ports coming after the game was done. In this case, we'd be releasing DLC, free updates, all kinds of stuff. I had no idea that we'd end up releasing over 100 versions of the various game content before we'd reach the end! And, while pitching the game, *Pirate's Curse* was still in development, so for at least a short while, we had to pull double duty."



▲ The most recent title, 2017's *Shantae and the Seven Sirens*, featured her first encounters with a gaggle of half-genies just like her.

◀ *Pirate's Curse*, the story of *Risky's Revenge*, as Shantae fights off an invasion by Ammo Baron, who claims ownership of her town.

