

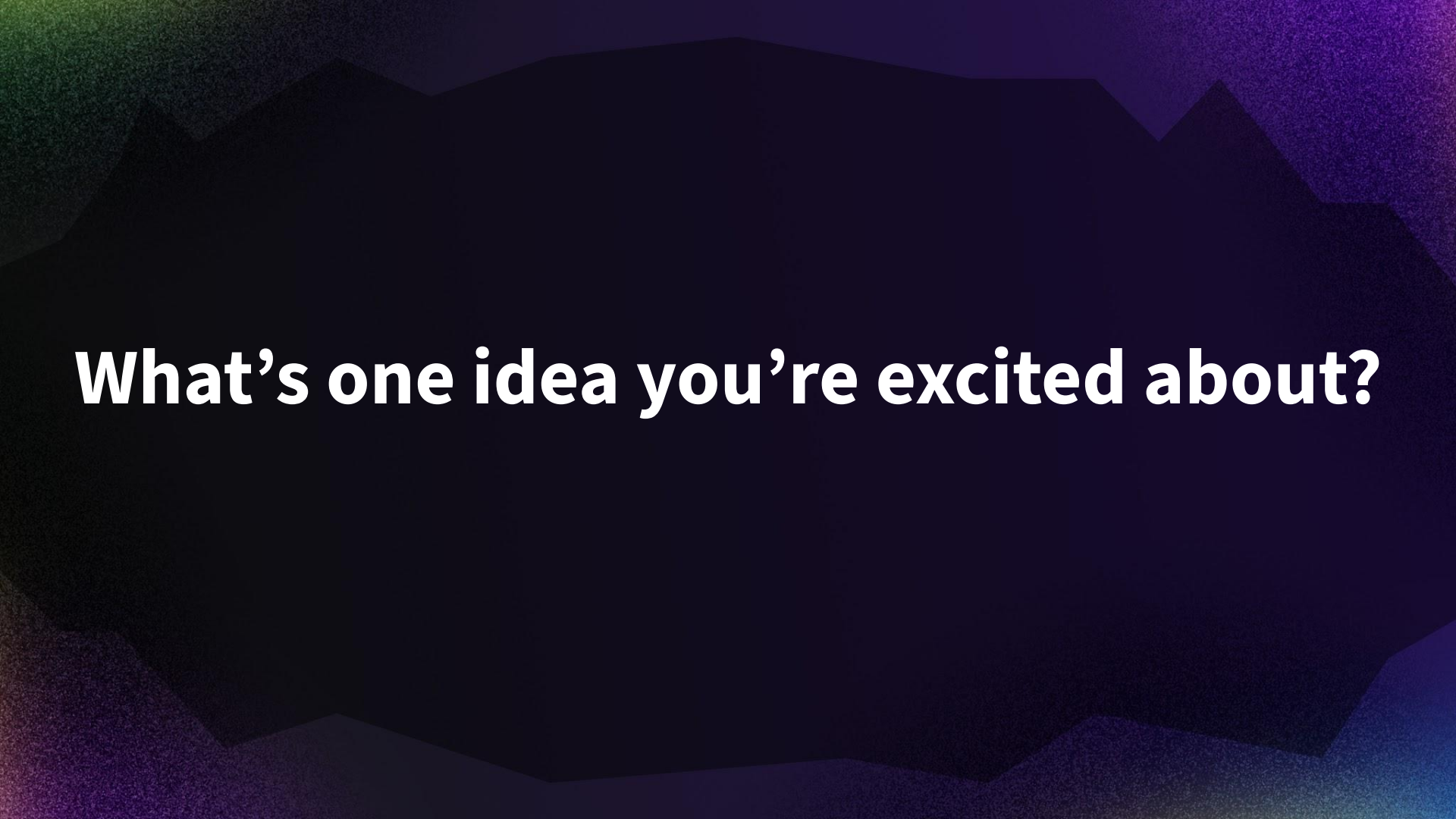
How To Execute on Crazy Ideas Well

Alex Aumais

Product Manager @ Hack the North



Hack the North



What's one idea you're excited about?

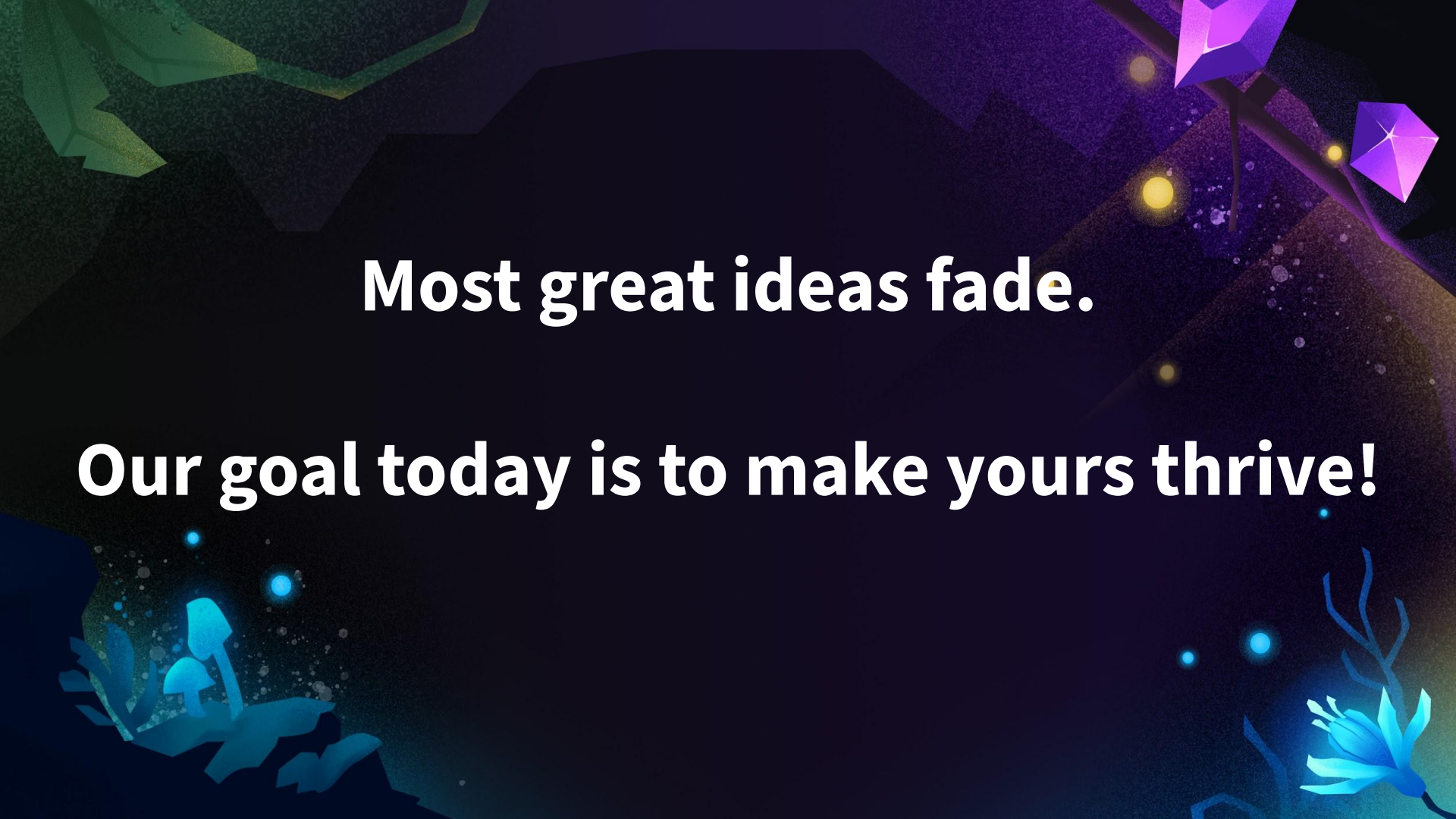
What's ONE idea you're excited about?

Step 1: Write it down in the next 20 seconds!

Step 2: **Tell** the person besides you about it, and hear their idea!

No gatekeeping! Shared ideas survive better than secret ones!





Most great ideas fade.

Our goal today is to make yours thrive!

Who's this guy yapping?



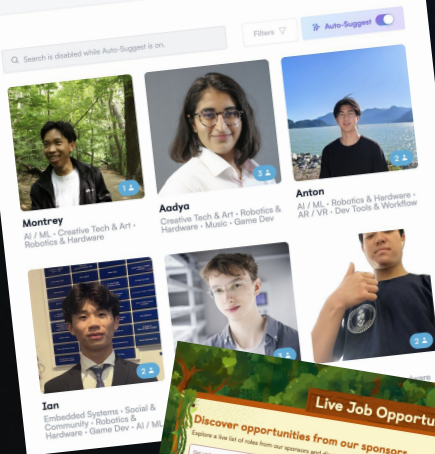
- Hi! I'm Alex!
- I'm from Hack the North! 🇨🇦
- Been an organizer for **3 years**
 - Backend Developer in 2024
 - Backend Lead in 2025
 - Product Manager 2026
- #1 user of the #ideas channel

Search "**from:@Alex Aumais**" in #ideas

912 results found [View full search](#)

Hacker Directory

Hacker Directory



A curated collection of 161 standout
songs from 12 years of Hack the North

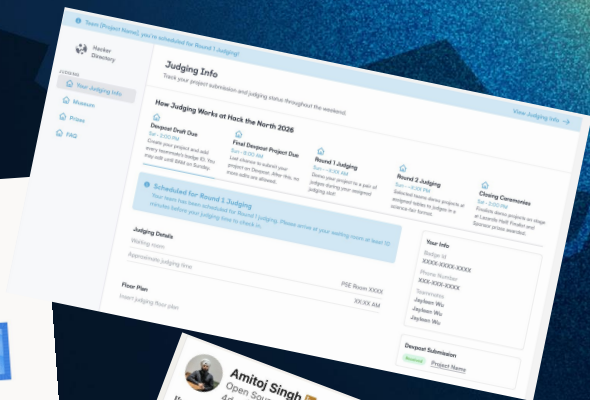
[Explore the Collection](#)

[Email my ticket](#)

Registration email

you@example.com

Use the email from your application.

[Email my ticket](#)

Three gambits in three years



Goose Guide Bot

Ask our AI Q&A Chatbot any questions you have about Hack the North! Made in partnership with Voiceflow.



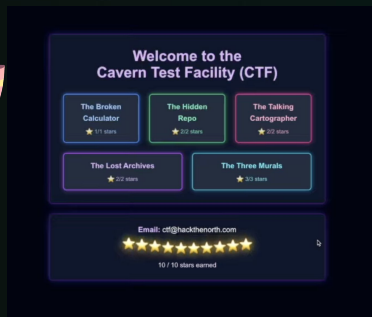
Capture the Flag



???????

CTF and GWR are our running case studies!

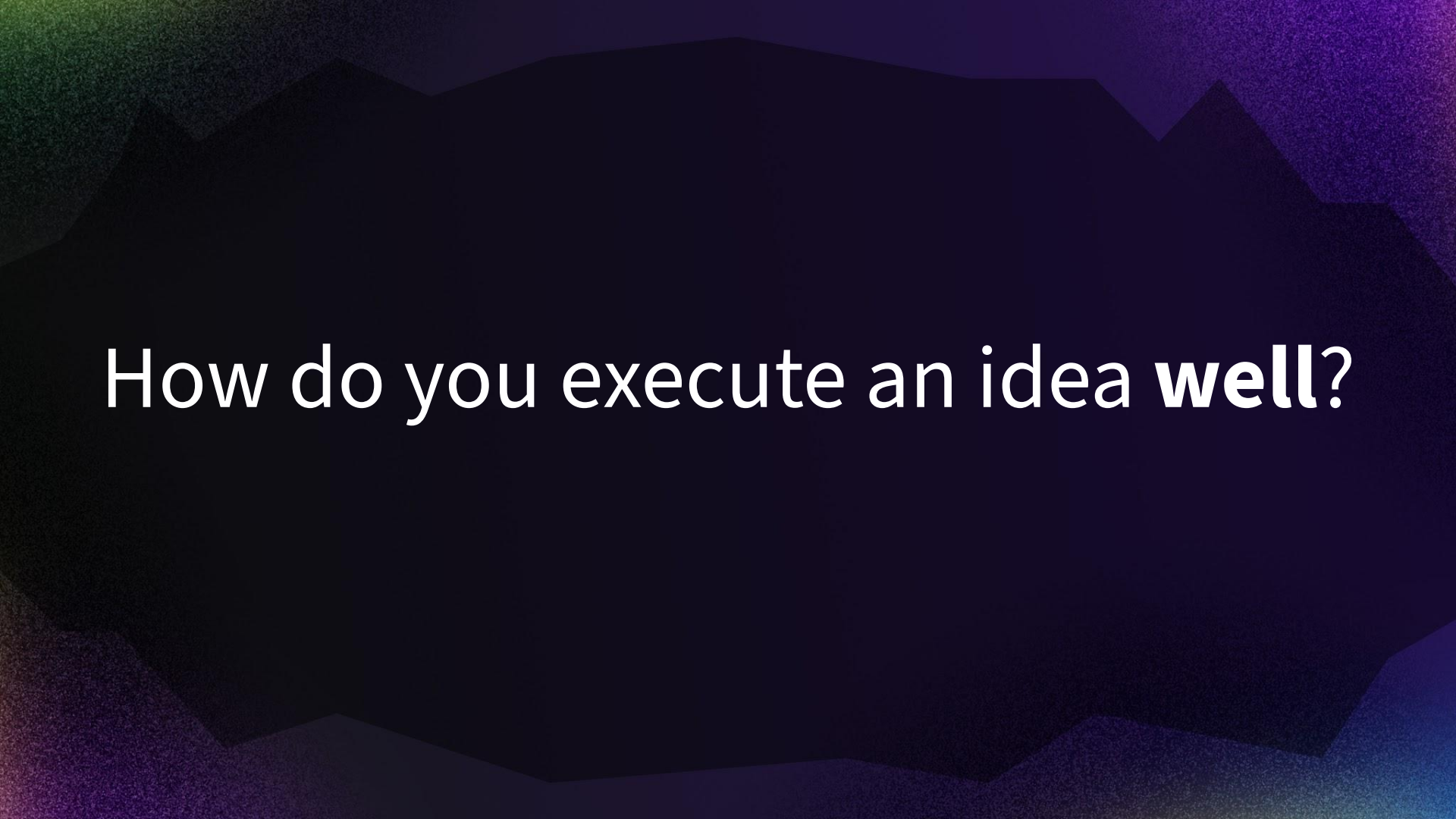
We'll make the concepts discussed concrete via two case studies:



Capture the Flag (CTF)
Software



Guinness World Record (GWR)
Logistical



How do you execute an idea **well**?



Tip 0: **Protect the basics**

The event basics come first

- Food, venue, and safety
- Judging, registration, and ceremonies
- Applications and core logistics

NEED TO COME FIRST

No one will remember your cool idea if registration takes 4 hours.



Optional should never become critical.

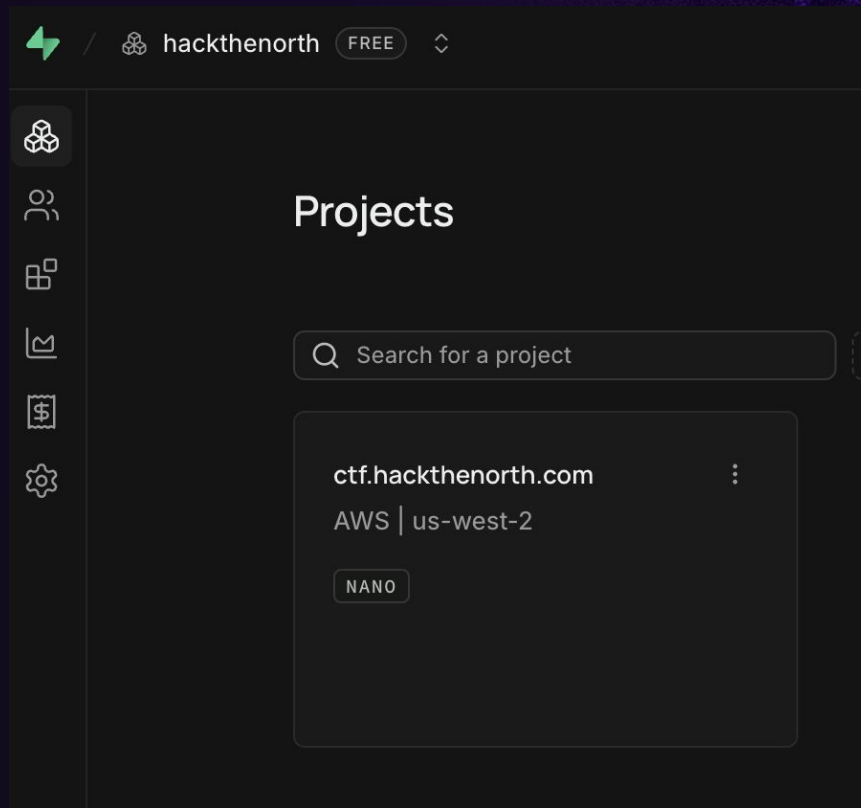
- Don't consume *all* your energy
- Don't become a point of failure for the event
 - Logistically
 - Financially
 - Human capital-wise
- Be realistic about how things could go wrong, and make sure it's ok!

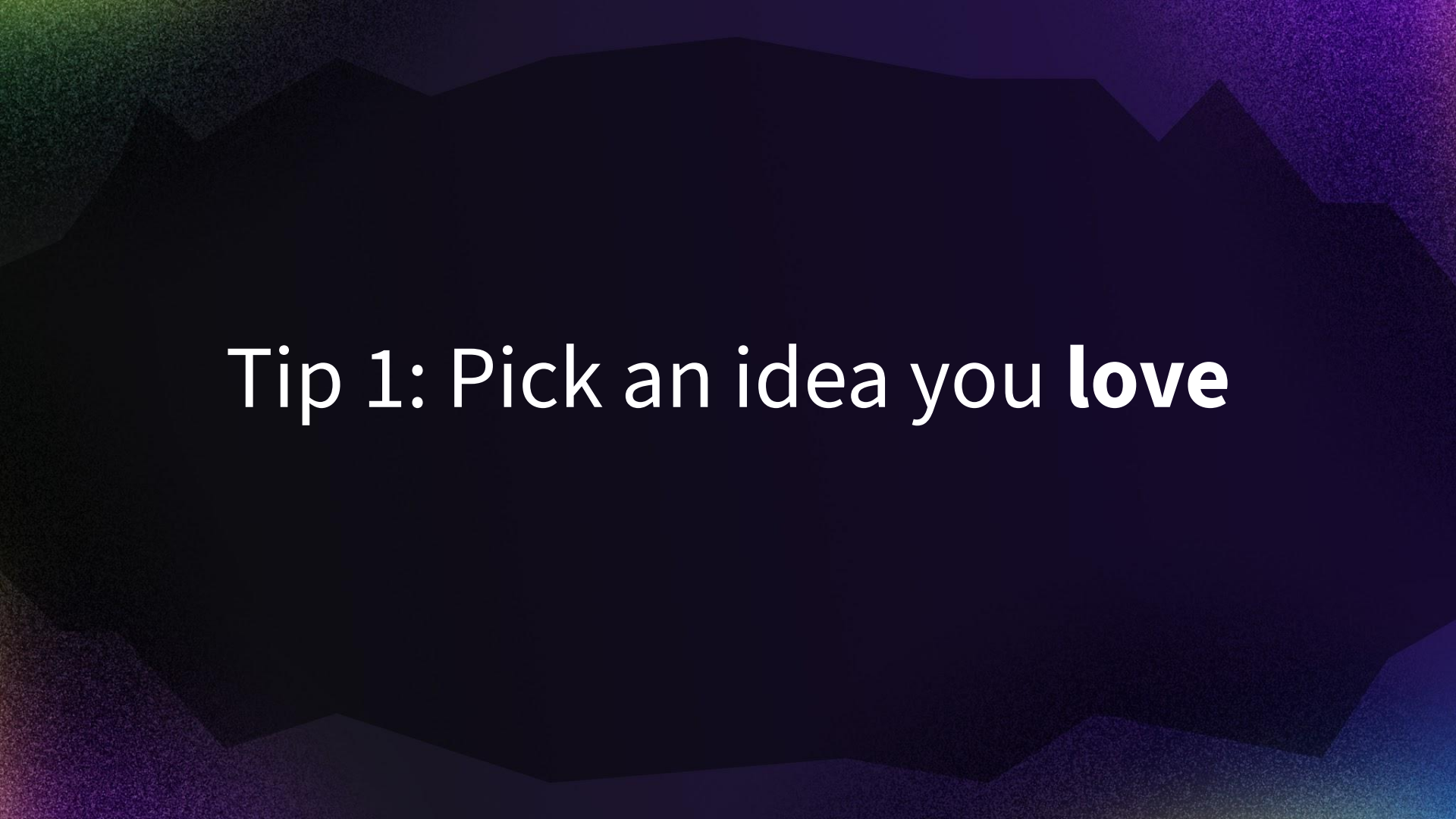


The CTF was deliberately isolated

- Separate from Hack the North's main backend
- If it failed, applications and the event continued as planned
- We spread the work out over a team to ensure we didn't burn out any single individual

Similarly, we did not bet our entire success on GWR, and it could be adjusted!





Tip 1: Pick an idea you **love**

Enthusiasm = fuel

- YOU need to be REALLY enthusiastic about the idea.
- Because if you're not excited about it now, you're going to find it way more boring later.
- Common pitfall: you're **told** to execute on *someone else's idea*
 - Team leads: encourage your organizers to come up and champion their own ideas >>> you forcing ideas on them



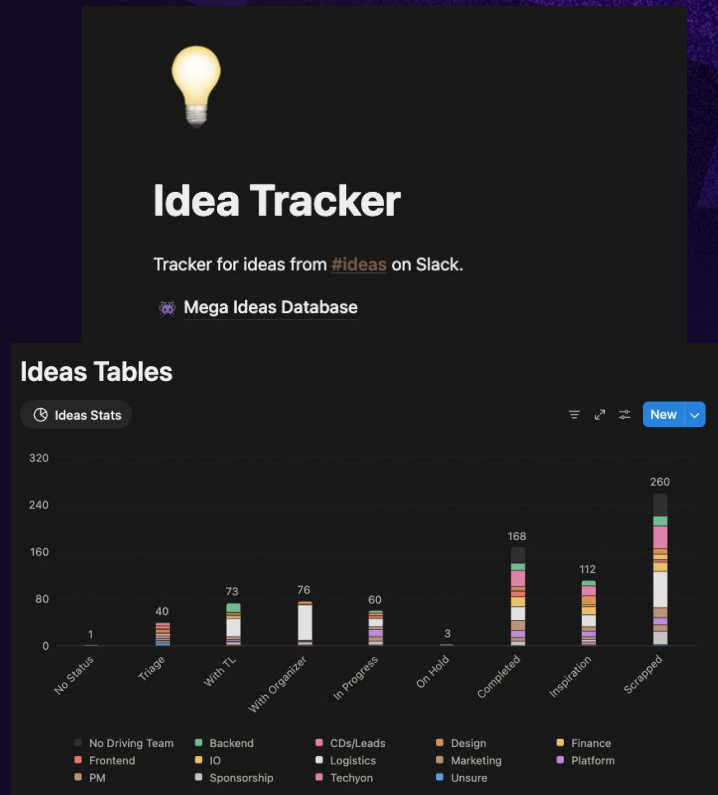
I loved the CTF, it was my baby

- HackMIT's hidden entrance sparked the idea
- Hack the North **needed** its own version
- It stayed fun enough to keep pushing
 - Excited to work long nights on it
 - Sacrifice other things



Foster an Idea Culture

- Talk about your ideas in your org!
- Hype up other people's ideas!
 - And contribute to them!
- The best time to note down an idea is the second you have it
 - Other people are having them too!
- A tracker can be useful





Tip 2: **Distill** the idea

Let's find the CORE of your idea:

Some good questions can be

- Why did you have this idea?
- What feeling are you creating?
- Why would hackers care?

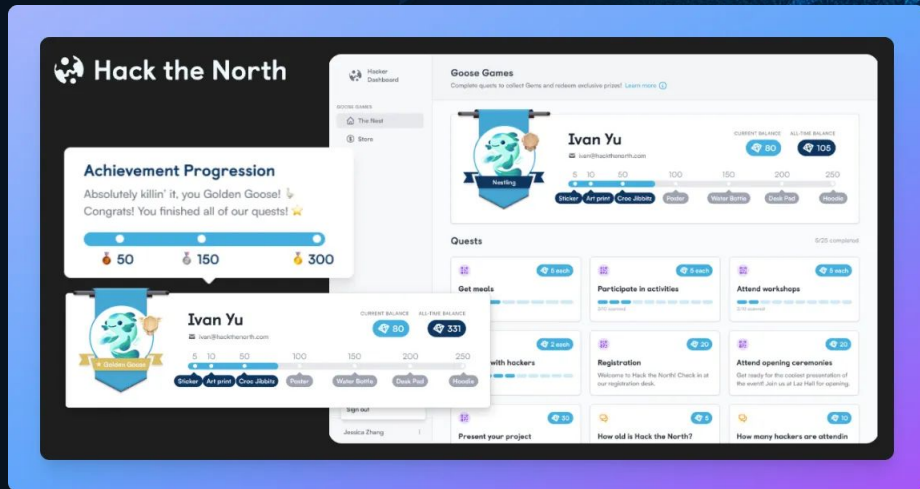
You should be able to have a
one-sentence answer to each.

In GWR's case:

- Why did you have this idea?
 - It would be cool to have a world record.
- What feeling are you creating?
 - Excitement, like you can do anything!
- Why would hackers care?
 - Most people have never been a part of a world record, and it's an opportunity to be part of something bigger!

MVP + Setting a North Star

- Focus on the core Minimum Viable / Exciting Product of your idea
- Write down a clear North Star / Objective
- Then make all decisions from first principles



Objective:

The goal of Goose Games is to enhance the Hack the North experience by:

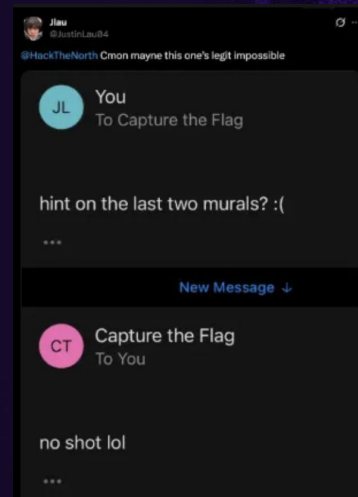
- Encouraging greater participation in workshops, activities, and community interactions.
- Providing an outlet for fun, low-stakes engagement that complements the main hackathon.
- Creating a platform for ideas that didn't scale into full activities or workshops to still thrive in a lightweight format
- Create a centralized rewards system so that all activities are enticing because they all build to some kind of reward

The CTF had three pillars

- A skills-based acceptance path
- Accessible challenges
- Rewarding fun over pure competition

Then we used those to define

- Difficulty
- Challenge progression
- Rewards and recognition



Define the MVP, and kill if needed

- Describe the participant experience to yourself
- **Kill ideas** that are not actually fun, it's ok!! Do it early and often, you'll be able to stick with a banger.
- **Remove complexity** that **weakens** the core
 - If you have 3 different branches to your idea, pick one!
 - Ex: Google Calendar Scheduling for Hackers + Volunteers + Organizers! -> Just organizer



Simple, excellent
>
impressive, broken

Under the gloss: a basic web game

- The challenges could be simple because the experience was the point.
- If an idea is **complex**, it's at **much higher risk**
 - Ask me how I know...
- Simple things, at large scale, become complex
- CTF: simple web game
- GWR: people building legos
- GG: quests -> points -> shop



The Broken Calculator worked because...

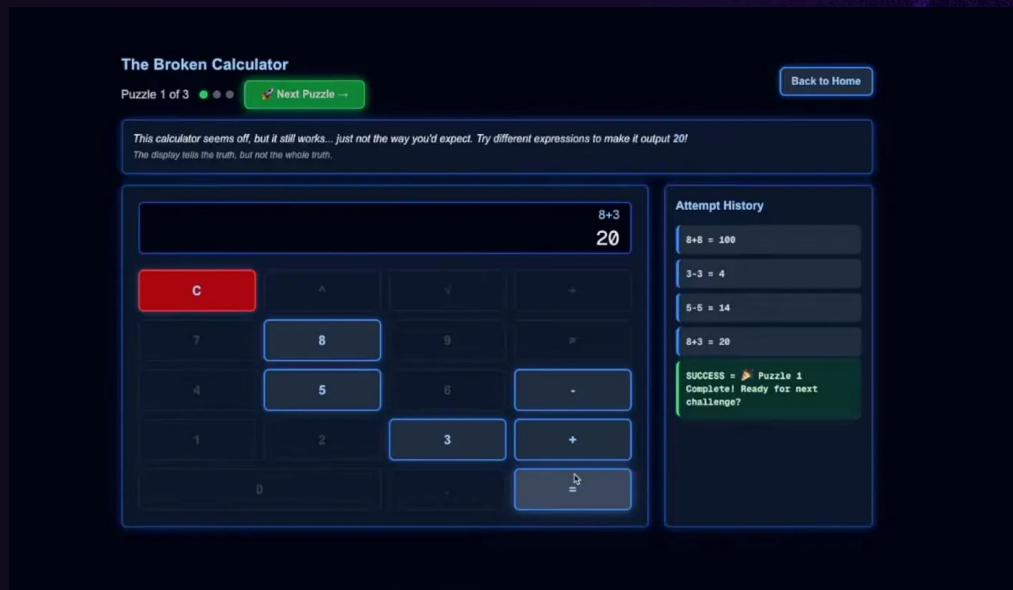
- Players could start easily
- Success arrived immediately
- That success built confidence which drove them to keep playing, for acceptance!

Echoes of

A skills-based acceptance path

Accessible challenges

Rewarding fun over pure competition



Tip 3: Make it **easy to say yes to**

Not everyone needs to be as excited as you.

- If you truly love the idea, it's **impossible** to have everyone on your team love it
- Luckily, they don't need to!
- They need confidence that you got this under control.



Your team just needs to believe:

- You own the idea (and its implementation)
- Your idea will not kill the event
- You have a realistic backup plan in case things go wrong
- You can finish your idea and it's realistic

Convince *yourself*, and everyone else of that, and your team is bought on!



Now *how* do you do that? A one-page pitch

- Explain your *thesis*
- Why does your idea matter?
- Walk through the participant experience
 - CRITICAL!! Customer first thinking
- Identify exactly what you need from others
- Be honest about major risks
- Explain the backup plan

All in *one place*, so that it's not spread out over a bunch of messages! (You'll thank me later!)
Keep it not crazy long, but good to have!



The 48-Hour Hackathon

Preface

I originally wrote down most of these ideas in mid-October during internal transitions, from chatting with other folks and thinking a bit. I stand by the general idea and thesis, but honestly I'm not so sure that this is really the best approach to improve Hack the North.

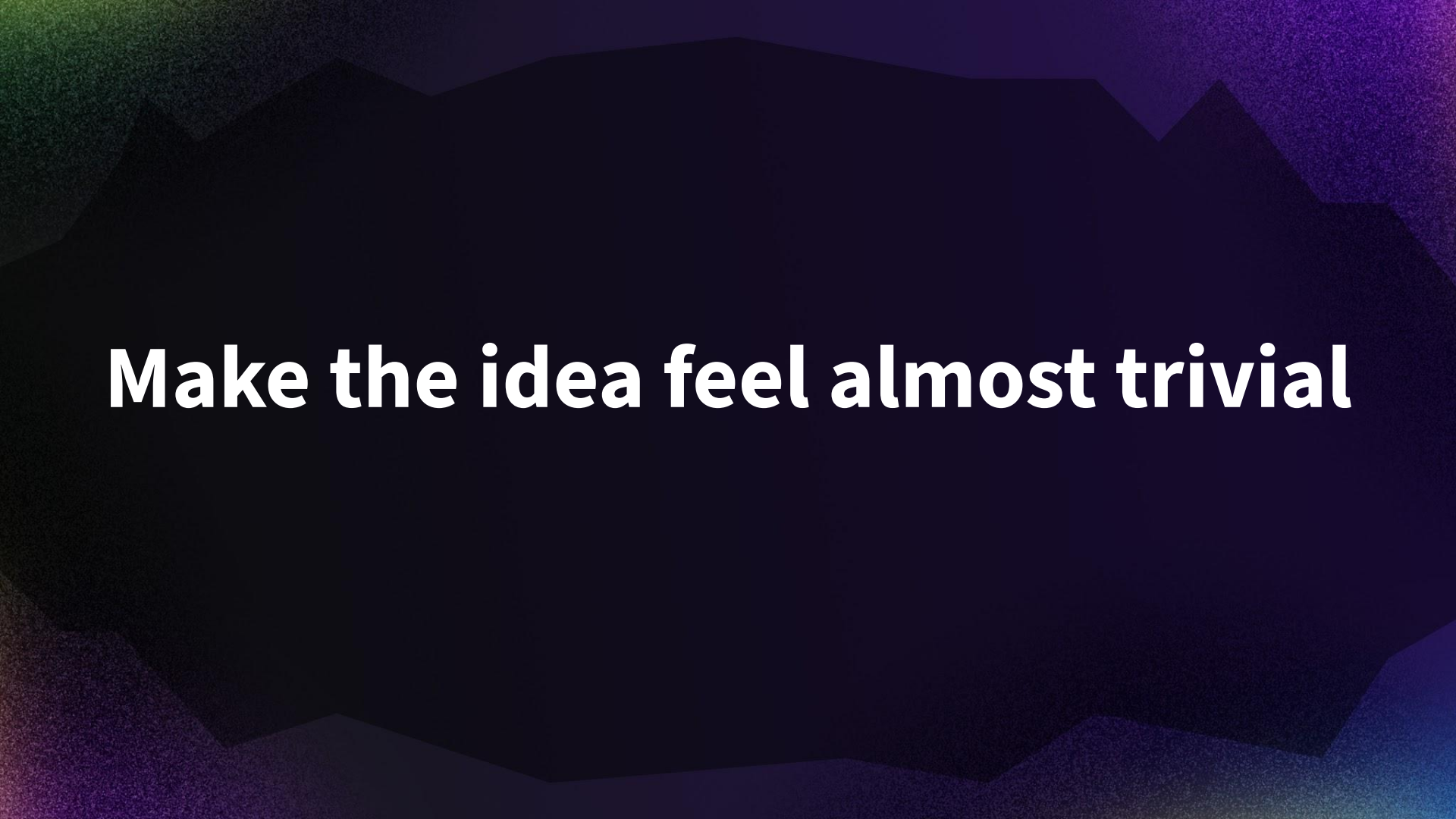
I think some ideas from this yap could be relevant, like changing activity density, workshop scheduling and the overall schedule. And in the spirit of building ideas up before brining them down, I would love to hear what you all think about this idea. I think everything from changes to the 48h moonshot, to more practical ideas that would fit into the current event plan.

Ultimately, I don't see an amazing way to overcome the problem of finding a date to run a longer event, so this whole idea for a 48 hour event might be already dead in the water. I think being on most long weekends would be annoying to sponsor reps, and potentially hackers / volunteers as well. Being in September is super nice as an incoming student to Waterloo, and in general it's more chill around than compared to slots where there are long weekends, and it's part of the identity of Hack the North.

11 years of HTN has taught us a lot, and I think the current formula is pretty good, but that doesn't mean that other ways of running our event can't be equally or even more successful at our underlying vision of empowering hackers and building community. Because I think a serious reflection about what can change is important to keep innovating, instead of just running a cookie cutter event.

Current situation

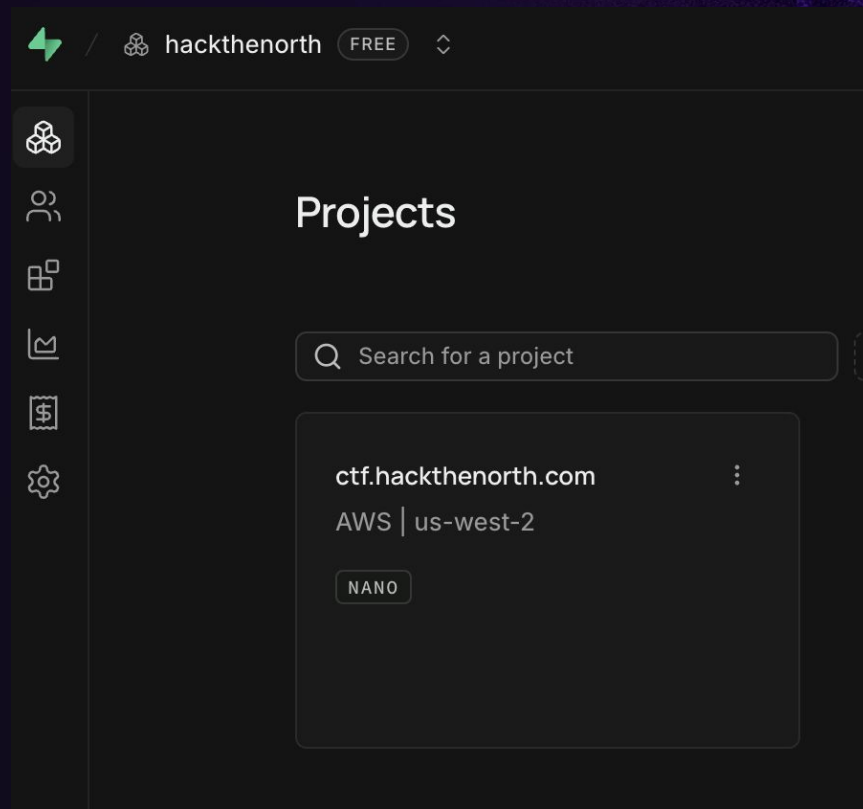
I think HTN could be a lot more enjoyable for the average hacker if it was a day longer.



Make the idea feel almost trivial

Why the CTF was easy to approve

- Off critical infrastructure
- No day-of logistics
- Our team owned the software
- Minimal and optional design and marketing asks
- People trusted my ownership because I said I'd do it, and I was reliable + ppl checked in on me



Before you pitch, ask...

- Who needs to be involved?
- Why might they resist?
- How can joining become easier?
- What is the smallest possible ask?

Integrate this into your one-pager and your pitch to your team in a meeting / messages! Pre-empting questions is the best way to show you've thought through the idea!



Share it inside the organization



Alex Aumais Apr 7th at 10:13 PM

anyone like making puzzles 🧩 🤪 literally 5 years later, bumping this idea of a **CTF** (capture the flag) 🐸 or game or puzzle or quest something 🗺️ to give another cool way to get into this event, or intergrated some way into the event 🧐. has come up a couple times, MIT does it i would love to support this idea, but need some people who are very interested and passionate about this idea, so speak up! 🎉 🤪



1



1



My call to action looking for partners to join me in developing a CTF idea.

Share outside, too

The screenshot shows a Medium article page. The left sidebar contains navigation links: Home, Library, Profile, Stories, and Stats. Below these are 'Following' and 'Topics' (Artificial Intelligence, Blockchain, Software Engineering). The 'Writers and publications' section lists Code Like A Girl, Beth Kindig, Dinah Davis, Hunter Walk, and Ken Bautista. The main content area features the article title 'The Complete Story of Hack the North's 2025 Capture the Flag Challenge!' by Hack the North, published on Jan 14, 2026. The article text begins with 'Capture the Flag (CTF) is a kind of puzzle challenge where players use various technical and security skills to "capture" hidden secret "flags", and in 2025 we hid one inside Hack the North's website! Here's that story.' It then states that Hack the North (HTN) is Canada's biggest hackathon, where 1000+ students from around the world come to the University of Waterloo for a weekend to build creative software and hardware projects, present them in front of industry judges, and make lifelong friends along the way!

Medium

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Technology + Hackathons + Capture The Flag + University Of Waterloo +

The Complete Story of Hack the North's 2025 Capture the Flag Challenge!

Hack the North · 16 min read · Jan 14, 2026

3

Written by: Alex Aumais

A Capture the Flag (CTF) is a kind of puzzle challenge where players use various technical and security skills to “capture” hidden secret “flags”, and in 2025 we hid one inside Hack the North's website! Here's that story.

Hack the North (HTN) is Canada's biggest hackathon, where every year 1000+ students from around the world come to the University of Waterloo for a weekend to build creative software and hardware projects, present them in front of industry judges, and make lifelong friends along the way!



Tip 4: **Own it**

Ownership is responsibility

- Ownership is **not doing every task**.
- Ownership is taking **responsibility** for whether the **final result** works.

This means you

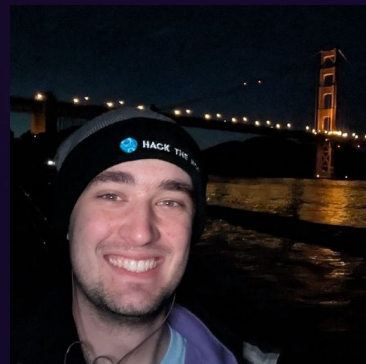
- Watch timelines carefully
 - (Build in buffer!)
- QA the product yourself / test flows
- Run a dress rehearsal if needed
- Be the reliable person anyone can come to about.



CTF had a mixed squad

- Backend
- Logistics
- Sponsorship
- Broader perspective and capacity

A little team can go a long way!



Be the benevolent dictator.

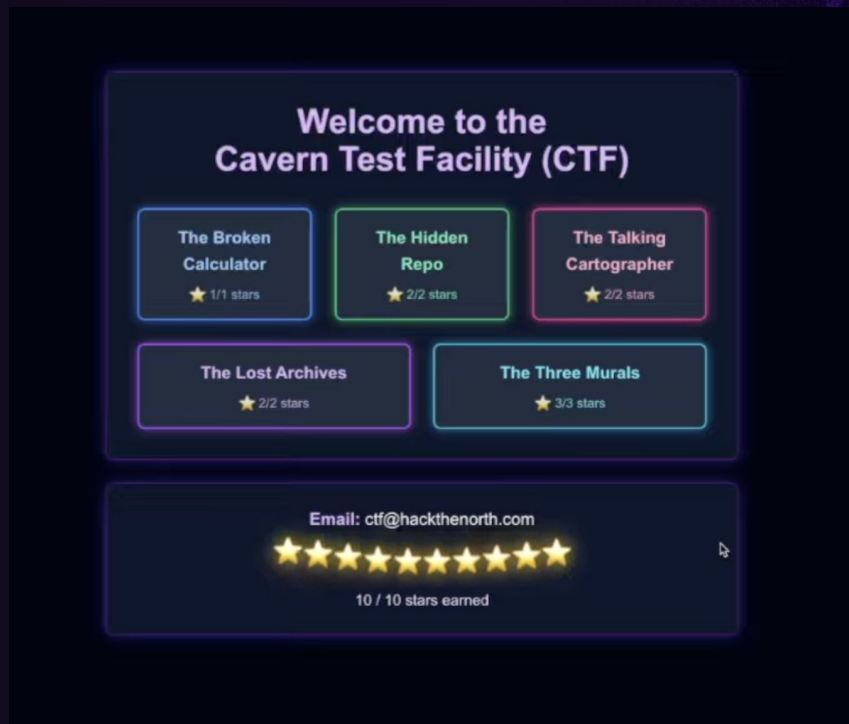
- Listen deeply. Work collaboratively.
- But also: Keep the project moving to a clear end, and make sure stuff is up to snuff
- If needed, do things yourself



CTF: Split the work, keep one vision

- Team mates own subprojects
- One person integrates the pieces
- One person fills the gaps and makes sure its smooth end to end
- We each QA everyone else's games
- But ultimately, you own the project and it's quality!

(Can be a big load, try your best to balance it. Sometimes things are ok even if not perfect!)



Stay responsive

- Unblock stalled work
- Step into broken pieces
- Do not assume collaborators will care about every detail as much as you do

Keep your team leads / directors in the loop, so that you're not just in your corner.



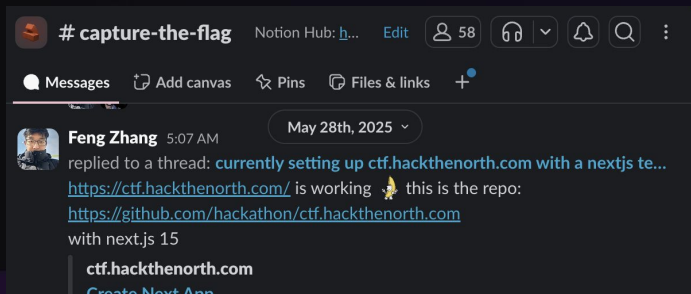
The background features a dark, textured surface with prominent wavy, mountain-like shapes in shades of deep blue and purple. A vibrant, multi-colored gradient, transitioning from green to yellow to orange and red, is visible along the left and bottom edges, creating a sense of depth and movement.

Ownership is clear!

Tip 5: Deliver the **experience**

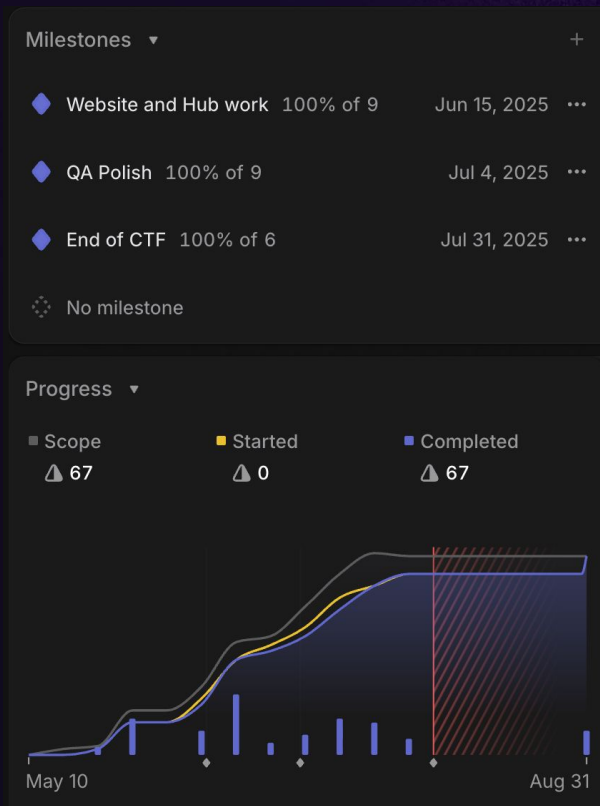
Start making it real early

- Prototype: we started Mar 28 for a July launch!
- Build: work every day/week! It will consume time but worth)
- Mock
- Rehearse



Create a deadline before the deadline

- Set an earlier internal milestone
- Reserve generous QA time
- Leave room for surprises





A basic version is only the start

Polish the hacker journey

- Walk it repeatedly
- Test with unfamiliar people
- Take feedback honestly

DON'T JUST TEST THINGS IN ADMIN MODE!

Test in prod as a real user, with real users!



Polish the invisible details

- Instructions, emails, FAQs, and errors
- Brief your team on the end product so they understand it! (All Hands demo!)
- Marketing that helps people notice
- Set up a feedback form to improve for later!

Also think about the future! Your idea may live a long time!

- Taking 1-2hrs to document things will be HUGE for the long term success of your idea + your team understanding it

The screenshot shows a web interface for a feedback form titled "Hack the North CTF 2026 - Feedback Form". At the top, there are tabs for "Questions", "Responses" (with a count of 23), and "Settings". Below the tabs is a decorative banner with the text "Hack the North" and "Capture the Flag" over a background of stylized flowers and foliage. The form is divided into sections, with the first section labeled "Section 1 of 4". The main content area contains a welcome message: "Hey there! Thanks for participating in the Hack the North 2026 CTF challenge! We hope you had a good time. It's our second time running this kind of CTF challenge, so we wanted to collect your feedback! Every question is optional, and we are grateful for responses to any questions. Thank you so much for your help in improving the challenge for future generations!". Below this, there are two question blocks. The first question is "How many cogs did you earn in the CTF?" with a "Short answer text" input field. The second question is "How long have you spent playing CTF so far?" with a text input field and a note: "Don't worry if you plan on playing more later, we just want to know so far." A "1 hour" timer is visible at the bottom left of the form.

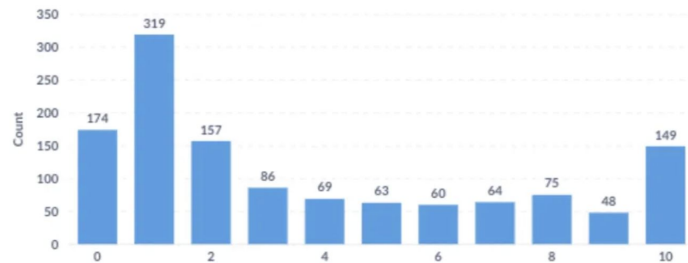
So, does it work?

What happened next

- 1,337 players joined
- More earned one star than zero
- We documented data, lessons, and decisions
- Ran a feedback form!



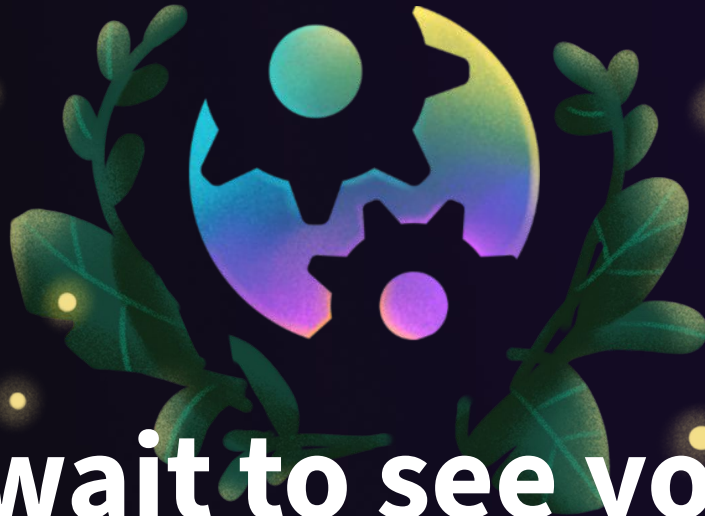
Count of Users with Star Counts



Five questions about your idea to think about

- Why do I love my idea?
- What are the North Star and MVP?
- How do I make yes easy?
- Who owns the outcome? Can it be me?
- What needs polish?





Can't wait to see your ideas!

Questions?

(Ex: what to do about pushback?)