# Touching Grass, But Quite Imperfectly

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Last month, I hosted a friend from SF at my home for a few days. He bemoaned his inability to build and launch apps; I sympathized; he blamed it on his inability to generate good ideas; and off the cuff I suggested that we build "touch grass the app" as practice if he couldn't think of a better idea in 10 minutes. He couldn't, so we spent 3 days coding, mostly as a joke.

Here's what we came up with. It has 5 features: (1) a button to take a picture and checks if it contains a "hand" and "grass"; (2) a button that gives walking directions to the nearest park; (3) a shamelessly ripped-off version of the GitHub commit history chart; (4) a history map; and (5) a list of passive-aggressive notifications that ping every hour until you've touched grass.
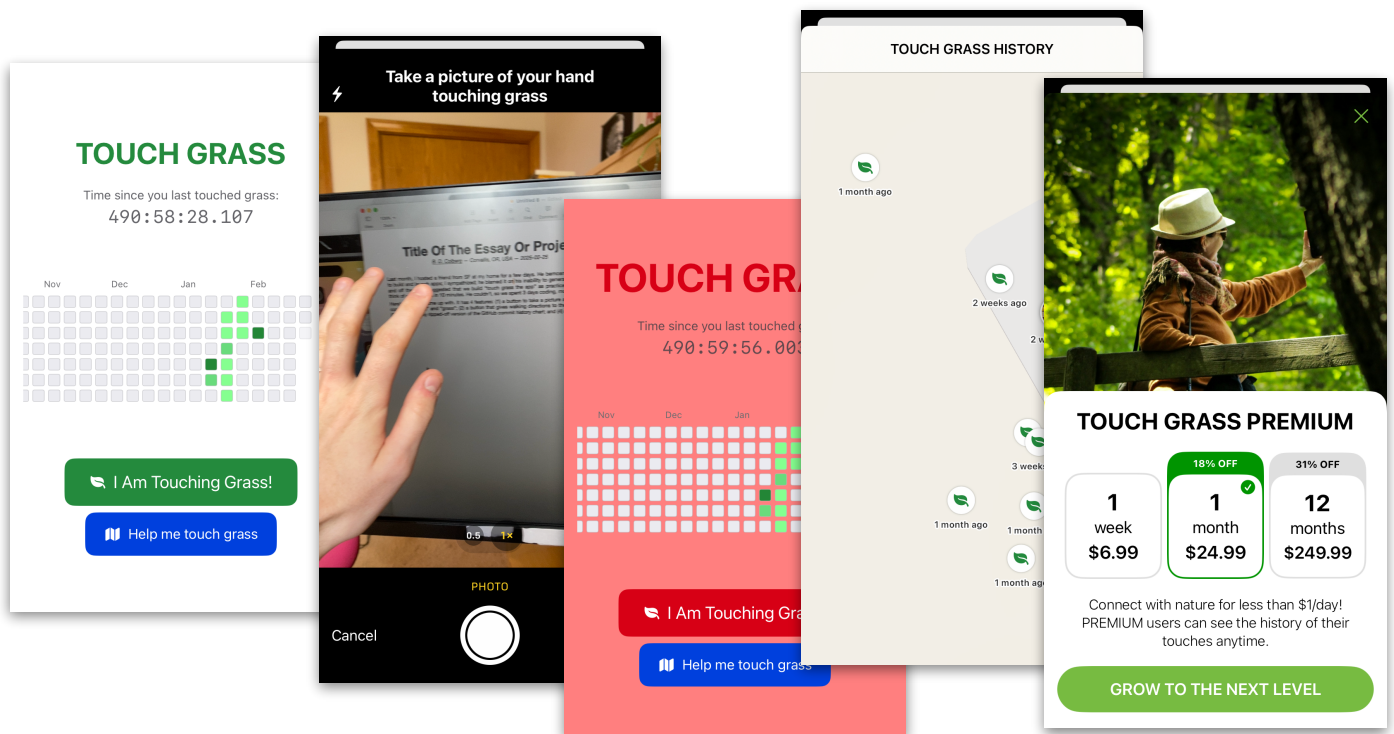

We decided to put a paywall on the feature that was most (1) valuable to power users but also (2) least disruptive to the core app experience for casual users: the grass touch history map. Because we thought it would be funny, we decided to charge the largest reasonable amount we could imagine for this: $1/day discounted over time to $250/year (or $1000 for a lifetime).[1]

Based on this pricing, we cackled over a marketing strategy: use @TOUCH_GRASS_APP (X) to publicly gift a lifetime subscription of "TOUCH GRASS PREMIUM (value: $1000)" to the maker of a particularly embarrassing post every day. This would, the thinking goes, be good content in a few different ways: (1) people laughing at the person, (2) people laughing at the "value," and ideally (3) some of the victims actually taking the offer and laughing at its utility.

Eventually my friend went home. We released it on the App Store, but App Store Review hasn't judged our prices to be particularly, ah, guideline-aligned, so we've mostly moved on. I'd mentioned it to some other friends, who (to my shock) all wanted to use it, but didn't push.

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[1] To this date, we have still not gotten the App Store to approve it at this price, but not for lack of diligent effort!

Then today, the funniest thing happened:
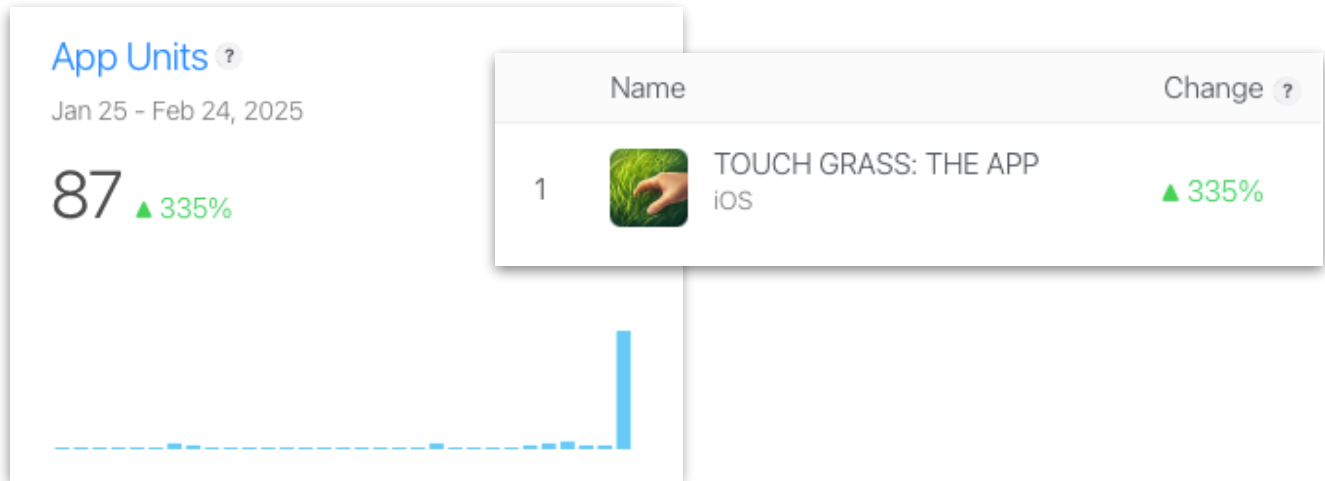
Our only-soft-released app, which we joked about on X for a while but didn't actually put in any legwork to promote or market properly, spiked its download rate 30x in one day. Huh?

I decided to Googled "touch grass app" to see if I could figure out what was up.
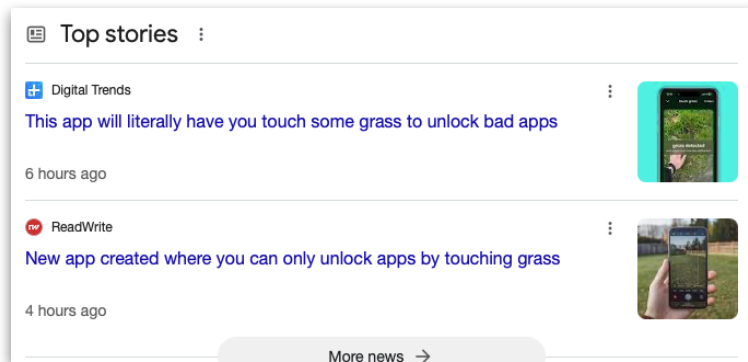
Huh? That's not what my app looks like, and I haven't implemented that feature! What gives?

What gave is that someone else (1) had and (2) executed on the same idea, a month after me… but better knew what they were doing, and blew my efforts completely out of the water.

A *fantastic* learning opportunity! Right in my lap; and to my gain, despite my flaws! Let's look.

To be able to properly criticize my creation process, it's important to show how it unfolded:

1. Have idea about making "touch grass the app."
2. Decide to make "touch grass the app."

3. List out a few different features that "touch grass the app" could have (camera verification, directions to nearby grass, annoying notifications, temporal history, location history).
4. Implement most of them, over a few days, kind of shoddily (thinking we can polish later).
5. While we do that, make a social media account, and post about it to friends as a joke.
6. Launch free version of the app with basic features, get some people to download it.
7. [WE ARE HERE] Launch paid version of the app with more features.
8. [TODO?] Hone and iterate on both technology and marketing?
   A. [TODO?] Use the X account to dunk on people by giving them free lifetime premium?
   B. [TODO?] Polish the app, make its functionality more smooth and satisfying?

We jumped wholeheartedly into the "building" stage. Marketing, we figured, would come after it's working; first we needed to make the product, *then* we could do the less fun work of figuring out who it produces value for and how to communicate that fact about it to them.

But also, once we had something okay, it… well, in the App Store screenshots it looked basic. No great aesthetics, no pizzazz. So before it would be cost-effective to market, we needed to actually then step back and polish it until it's, like, a professional-looking app, right?

Our entire outlook was building-first, because *we are builders.* The result? A mostly-built app, that we don't put much more effort into actually building to a finished state, because nobody uses or cares about it, because it hasn't been sold, because it's mostly-built. A cycle of nullity.

Whereas it appears that Rhys' approach was essentially:

1. Build the app to exactly the state necessary to record a video of its key value proposition.
2. Share a public link to the TestFlight (Feb 12).
   1. ~0 traction (6 likes)
3. Get his fiancee, who works in design, to make a better marketing video (Feb 19).
4. Post the video on X in the "Build in public" chat, get ~0 traction (Feb 21).
   1. something else, unlisted, drove ~500 impressions to the App Store
5. Make a beautiful landing page that essentially only plays that video (Feb 24).
   1. Post in "Build in public" chat again, get twice the engagement as before, still ~0.
   2. Post, with some commentary behind the motivation and value, on Hacker News.
      1. unexpectedly blow up, getting to #1, driving tons of traffic!
6. Post the video separately on X again, with a different title distilled from HN (Feb 24).
   1. get 14k likes and 850k views as of writing!
7. Post a reflection on the surprise of the prelaunch app unexpectedly going viral (Feb 24).

You know what's funny, looking at this? I thought the moral was going to be different. I thought he ruthlessly executed a marketing-first plan—unlike me—and then only built the app up afterwards quickly in the face of overwhelming demand. But that's not even remotely true.

Because guess what? He built his app starting *4 months ago!* That was *3 months before* us!

Here Rhys is on 2024-11-01, showing off a proof of concept of his app. We didn't hypothesize our app until 2025-01-15, almost 2.5 months later. But then we had it launched in *only 2 days*. His *still* isn't launched; there's a public TestFlight, but the App Store version is just a waitlist.

Something else that's funny: on 2025-11-22, Rhys reacted earnestly to someone posting "sad that someone hasn't released an IRL app called touch grass." In the replies? A link to our app.

So it looks like… well… Rhys is a builder too. He built the app—for three months!—before any concerted marketing push. And not to brag, but he wasn't as quick as us; we did it in 2 days, and our app (unlike his) requires no backend and therefore has no ongoing costs on our end. We built faster, we built better, but *he* went viral and we didn't. Why is that? What can I learn?

Mechanically, there are four failure points:

1. We waited [are waiting!] for our app to be complete, and effectively paywalled, to market.
   A. We are blocked on App Review for our paywall, and have let it stagnate for weeks.
   B. We are both spending most of our time on other personal projects that we're juggling.
   C. We love building, but marketing is an enjoyable sweet spot of talent for neither of us.
2. We have no demo video whatsoever, let alone a nicely-edited one.
3. We have no landing page to explain the value proposition to web users.
4. Our App Store entry is a few literal screenshots, instead of well-designed carousel items.
5. Our app does not have the Screen-Time-blocking features that Rhys' app is built around.
   A. We actually did consider this, but thought (without checking) that it wasn't possible.

Essentially, (1) he has nicer design, but most importantly, (2) we aren't *trying* to sell the app. Elaborating on the second point, we (1) didn't market before building, and (2) aren't pushing it. Partially this is because we built this project one-off sort of as a joke. But it's irresponsible to leave money on the ground for relatively little effort, no matter what position you're inhabiting.

There's a larger underlying reason to not really trying here: we saw this project as building skill practice, and did not realize it was an actual opportunity—despite many positive reactions.

I'll be taking away at least 10 lessons, on things I did well and badly:

✅ Shipping is good. This is the first app I've published. It *can* ride the tailwind, if imperfectly.

❌ Marketing does not require building/shipping first, just enough to convincingly tell a story.[2]

❌ Marketing is more important than building. Rhys went viral *without a downloadable app!*[3]

❌ It is important to think *from the problem* you are solving, to identify more valuable features.

❌ If an ideal feature seems impossible, it is important to *confirm* that before abandoning it.

❌ App Store "screenshots" do not actually need to be screenshots: they should be custom.

❌ Making a video of an app's core functionality is a good way to validate in a resonant way.

❌ Making a landing page is a good way to sell/spread an app indirectly on the Internet.

❌ Personal stories and empathetic use-cases are important for distributing an app idea.

❌ Listen to people when they say they like something, and pay attention to being surprised.

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[2] I was first told this lesson in a college course 5 years ago. Some things only really sink in the hard way, sadly.

[3] ditto ^^