ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

This is an anonymized example of an assessment conducted for a game studio seeking follow-on investment. All identifying details have been redacted to protect client confidentiality. This sample demonstrates the assessment methodology, analysis depth, and decision framework used to evaluate execution risk before capital deployment.

Colin MacKie embeds with game studios for 2-4+ weeks to identify structural failure patterns that predict team collapse. This assessment identified unchecked concentration of authority, interest-driven roadmap, and loyalty-based hiring -patterns that create compounding execution risk which additional capital cannot resolve. The result was a clear recommendation to decline funding until mandatory structural intervention is completed.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: EINSTEIN (ANONYMIZED)

Follow-On Investment: $2.8M | Timeline: Q2 '26 Launch | Ship Probability (current): <10%

RECOMMENDATION: DO NOT FUND

Decline this opportunity. Current leadership structure creates compounding execution risk that additional capital cannot resolve. Structural intervention required before reconsideration.

THE PROBLEM

Critical Finding: Structural Leadership Failure

- **Single-point control:** Studio Head controls both creative and technical decisions, eliminating internal checks and allowing flawed assumptions to compound unchallenged
- **Interest-driven roadmap:** Features selected by personal preference rather than market needs or validated core gameplay; builds motion without convergence toward ship
- **Loyalty-based hiring:** Key roles filled through personal relationships; weakens accountability and professional challenge capacity

Additional Critical Issues:

- Critical staffing gaps: There are no dedicated art or production staff and no plans to hire; visual direction driven by AI-generated assets without coherent identity
- Avoidant culture: Team members reluctant to challenge leadership; constructive feedback discouraged; risks go unaddressed

WHY FUNDING WON'T HELP

Primary risks are structural and cultural, not financial. Additional capital would:

- Extend runway without improving ship probability: Organizational lacks internal mechanisms to converge on market-ready product
- Enable continued scope expansion: Without leadership checks, interest-driven feature work will continue consuming resources
- Delay essential restructuring: Capital injection signals validation; reduces urgency for mandatory leadership changes

REQUIRED INTERVENTION FOR RECONSIDERATION

Before re-engagement, studio must complete:

1. Separate creative and technical leadership: Formal division of authority to introduce checks and balances
2. Hire Executive Producer: Independent hiring authority to professionalize recruitment
3. Produce validated roadmap: Demonstrate convergence toward core loop with defined scope and realistic staffing

BOTTOM LINE

Ship probability remains <10% under current leadership configuration. Concentration of authority eliminates feedback loops essential for course correction. Without mandatory structural intervention, likelihood of capital resulting in a shippable product does not meet investment threshold. Recommendation: decline and reassess only after verified completion of leadership restructuring.

This assessment identified that primary execution risks were structural and cultural, not financial. Without this embedded evaluation, the investor would likely have deployed $2.8M based on surface-level metrics (positive team morale, technical competence, sustainable workload), only to discover 6-12 months later that concentrated decision-making authority and weak product discipline made shipping impossible. The assessment prevented capital loss by clearly distinguishing between fixable resourcing gaps and unfixable organizational dysfunction.

To discuss whether embedded assessment could prevent bad investments in your portfolio, contact Colin MacKie at colin@cmackie.com

TEAM DUE DILIGENCE ASSESSMENT REPORT 5
OVERVIEW 5
Key Findings (Top Three) 5
Shipping Confidence Assessment 6
Timeline Outlook 6
Immediate Focus (Next 30 Days) 6
SECTION 1: LEADERSHIP CAPABILITY 7
Studio Head / CEO 7
Design Lead 7
Lead Engineer 7
SECTION 2: TEAM EXECUTION CAPABILITY 8
2.1 Team Composition & Coverage 8
2.2 Individual Contributor Risk 9
2.3 Communication & Collaboration 9
2.4 Velocity & Delivery Signals 9
SECTION 3: SCOPE & ROADMAP VIABILITY 10
3.1 Scope Reality Check 10
3.2 Dependency & Critical Path Review 11
SECTION 4: TECHNICAL RISK 12
4.1 Architecture Health 12
4.2 Material Technical Risks 12
4.3 Feature Risk Assessment 12
4.4 Platform & Certification 13
SECTION 5: PRODUCT & MARKET ALIGNMENT 14
5.1 Vision Clarity 14
5.2 Market Understanding 14
The Stardew Valley Standard: 14
SECTION 6: CULTURAL & ORGANIZATIONAL HEALTH 16
6.1 Morale & Retention 16
6.2 Psychological Safety 16
6.3 Challenge Culture 16
6.4 Sustainability 16
SECTION 7: RED FLAGS & MITIGATION 17
SECTION 8: RECOMMENDATIONS 19
Recommendation Rationale 19
REPORT CERTIFICATION 20

TEAM DUE DILIGENCE ASSESSMENT REPORT

Studio: Einstein (Anonymized)
Time Embedded: 3 weeks [26 hours total]
Team Size: 5 FTEs + 1 contractor
Funding Request: $2.8M Follow-On
Assessment Lead: Colin MacKie
Report Date: 7/7/2025
Distribution: Confidential

OVERVIEW

Investment Recommendation

☐ RECOMMEND FUNDING
☐ CONDITIONAL FUNDING
✓ **DO NOT FUND**

Under the current leadership structure, the team is unlikely to deliver a coherent, market-ready product. Execution risk remains high, is compounding over time, and is not correctable without substantial structural change. It is therefore recommended that the investor **decline this opportunity**.

Key Findings (Top Three)

Finding 1: Unchecked Concentration of Authority
Impact: High | Time Horizon: Immediate
Critical Risk: One individual controls creative and technical decisions, allowing weak choices to go unchallenged and compound.

Finding 2: Roadmap Driven by Personal Preference
Impact: High | Time Horizon: Immediate
Critical Risk: Features are selected based on personal interest rather than what moved the game toward a shippable core loop.

Finding 3: Loyalty-Based Hiring
Impact: High | Time Horizon: 3–6 Months
Critical Risk: Several key roles are filled based on personal relationships, limiting internal accountability and technical rigor.

Shipping Confidence Assessment

Overall probability of shipping as planned: **<10%**

Factor	Score	Weight	Rationale
Leadership Capability	2	25%	Decision authority centralized in one individual with no effective counterbalance.
Team Execution	3	25%	Low conversion of prototypes into integrated, testable gameplay.
Scope Realism	3	20%	Roadmap exceeds demonstrated delivery capacity.
Technical Risk	4	15%	High experimentation, limited production hardening.
Cultural Health	4	15%	Low internal challenge and limited upward feedback.

Timeline Outlook

Studio-Stated Milestone: Q2 ’26 Launch
Base Case: Unlikely to Ship
Upside Case: Possible only with leadership restructuring
Downside Case: Continued burn without product convergence

Immediate Focus (Next 30 Days)

Without immediate changes to leadership structure and roadmap governance, continued spending will not materially improve ship probability.

Must Address Immediately

1. Separate creative and technical authority
2. Establish external milestone review
3. Freeze non-core feature work

SECTION 1: LEADERSHIP CAPABILITY

This section evaluates whether the studio's leadership can consistently make good decisions under pressure, and whether the team trusts those decisions. Because teams often "perform" for investors, the assessment focuses on observed behaviors such as alignment, clarity, decisiveness, and accountability rather than stated intentions.

Studio Head / CEO: [Name redacted]

Assessment: Weak

Strengths

[Name redacted] is technically strong, maintains clear engineering standards, and makes effective use of his team without overloading them.

Concerns

The Studio Head is an inexperienced creative lead with overly rigid attachment to their own ideas. They show limited interest in broader market examples, are uncomfortable with constructive challenges, and demonstrate signs of insecurity often leading to decision paralysis.

Critical Challenge:

The Studio Head operated simultaneously as Creative Director and Technical Director. This removes meaningful internal review and allows flawed decisions to persist.

Design Lead: [Name redacted]

Assessment: Weak

Evidence: The Design Lead shows limited initiative and focuses more on documentation than on gameplay feel. While they understand core systems and design principles, they struggle to translate this into strong creative execution. Given their long-standing relationship with the Studio Head, there is concern this role was filled for compatibility rather than demonstrated capability.

Lead Engineer: [Name redacted]

Assessment: ✓ Adequate

Evidence: The Lead Engineer is knowledgeable and brings broad experience across a wide range of games, with particular strength in complex systems and technical architecture. He tends to polish too early in development, which can make later changes more burdensome due to rework, though this is not a critical issue. Similar to the Design Lead, they demonstrate a highly compliant working style and are reluctant to raise meaningful concerns, even when clear risks are present.

SECTION 2: TEAM EXECUTION CAPABILITY

This section assesses the team's practical ability to execute, including whether the right roles are in place, whether critical knowledge is concentrated in risky single points of failure, and whether collaboration patterns support delivery. The goal is to answer a simple question: can this specific group ship this specific plan, as currently staffed and operating.

2.1 Team Composition & Coverage

Discipline	Headcount	Adequacy	Notes
Engineering	4	Under	Over indexed on engineering but understaffed for stated design and milestones.
Design	1	Under	Understaffed for stated design and milestones.
Art	0	Critical	There are no artists currently on staff.
Production	0	Critical	Production staff is absent
QA	0	Critical	No QA staff, but this is not a current red flag at this stage of development
Audio	0	Critical	As noted above

Critical Gaps
Art/UI – Lacking a full-time art IC, visual direction is often improvised or driven by Generated AI images and models. Early visual design decisions have become locked without fully considering feasibility, stylistic cohesion, or player perception. This will result in a product that lacks a clear identity and market appeal.

Overall Team Skill Level: Weak
Morale: Good
Turnover Risk: Low
Delivery is highly dependent on Studio Head, creating structural brittleness. While the team has the expertise to execute the stated vision, current headcount is significantly below what is required to deliver it effectively.

2.2 Individual Contributor Risk

Key dependencies

Name: [Name redacted]
Capacity: At Capacity
Risk: Medium
Notes: [Name redacted] is a contract worker responsible for AI integration, creating a significant risk of knowledge loss.
Recommendation: Pause further implementation until comprehensive documentation is in place and transition partial AI development to full-time staff, with a full transition strongly recommended.

2.3 Communication & Collaboration

Stand-Ups: Effective
Cross-Functional Collaboration: Weak
Conflict Resolution: Avoidant
Information Flow: Transparent

Evidence: Observed stand-ups were congenial and generally effective, though tasks were often driven by the Studio Head's ad hoc priorities. In 2 of 5 observed stand-ups, the Studio Head introduced new feature ideas conceived the night before, bearing little relationship to current sprint goals or product roadmap. This pattern of reactive prioritization creates churn and undermines delivery predictability.

2.4 Velocity & Delivery Signals

Velocity Trend: Declining
Milestone Trajectory: Critical
Technical Debt: Managed
Rework Frequency: High

Evidence: In the absence of meaningful technical or creative pushback, the game has expanded significantly beyond its original design. Many features have been added to compensate for weaknesses in earlier implementations rather than addressing root issues. This has led to substantial scope creep. Based on the current feature set, a rough capacity analysis suggests: 8-10 engineers for core systems and platform support, 6-8 designers for content and UX, 8-10 artists for environment and character work, 3-4 production staff, plus QA and audio support. Realistically, delivering the project as currently scoped would require 30-40 FTEs - a 5x to 7x increase from current staffing.

SECTION 3: SCOPE & ROADMAP VIABILITY

This section tests whether the roadmap is realistic by comparing the stated milestone to observed capacity, dependency clarity, and evidence of scope discipline. It makes explicit what must be cut, deferred, or re-sequenced to protect timelines and reduce the risk of late-stage surprises.

Assessment: Unrealistic
Core gameplay systems are consistently deprioritized in favor of technically interesting but commercially irrelevant features. While design documents are occasionally produced, they are rarely subjected to rigorous review and do not function as a reliable source of truth for the project. Instead, features are informally ideated and added to the roadmap without sufficient validation.

Due to limited pushback from individual contributors and management, features are frequently approved without adequate scrutiny. Feature cuts are rare; rather than addressing underlying design weaknesses, new systems are layered on top of underperforming ones. Over time, this pattern has resulted in significant scope bloat and an increasingly unfocused creative vision.

3.1 Scope Reality Check

Studio-Stated Deliverable (Sanitized):
Launch: Q2 2026
Overview: The game identifies *Stardew Valley* as a guiding reference point, while attempting to integrate dynamic narrative systems intended to meaningfully alter the story based on player behavior. These include sophisticated mechanisms for quest delivery and personalization, designed to adapt the narrative to individual player interests.

In practice, this ambition introduces significant complexity and has not yet been grounded in a validated core gameplay loop. As currently implemented, these systems increase development risk without clear evidence that they enhance player engagement or support a cohesive, scalable production plan.

Required Adjustments

The current feature development pipeline is unstructured and lacks consistent vetting, and these deficiencies are increasingly evident in recent builds. Features are introduced without sufficient validation, prioritization, or alignment to core gameplay objectives. As a result, development effort is fragmented and increasingly inefficient.

A foundational restructuring of the game design process, feature pipeline, and review mechanisms is required to realign the project with a coherent product vision. While the dynamic narrative mechanics show potential, they are currently obscured by an accumulation of low-impact systems and distracting secondary features. A comprehensive redesign is therefore recommended to refocus development around a validated core experience and restore execution discipline.

3.2 Dependency & Critical Path Review

Top Dependencies

- **Validated core gameplay loop:** Currently over-designed. Team is building systems on top of systems leading to a diffuse and unsatisfying experience.
- **Narrative system integration:** Sophisticated technology with no clear application to in the game.

Key Concern:
The Studio Head has become increasingly focused on secondary features that have limited relevance to the core player experience. These elements function primarily as internal "nice-to-have" additions that are only meaningful to those deeply familiar with the project, rather than enhancing accessibility or engagement for first-time players. For instance, [specific feature example, anonymized] adds early game complexity, complicates the UI, and adds a distraction when the player needs to focus on learning the game.

As a result, onboarding and early gameplay lack clarity, creating a high barrier to entry for new users. The accumulation of these peripheral systems has obscured the foundational gameplay structure to the extent that the core game loop is no longer clearly identifiable, significantly undermining product focus and market readiness.

SECTION 4: TECHNICAL RISK

Section 4 identifies technical risks that can quietly extend timelines, such as fragile architecture, compounding technical debt, or systems that appear impressive but do not translate into a shippable product. The focus is on what could break delivery, how likely it is, whether leadership understands the risk, and what mitigation is feasible within current constraints.

4.1 Architecture Health

Architecture Maturity: Solid
Debt Level: Medium/low

Evidence:
The team demonstrates strong adherence to technical debt mitigation practices, resulting in a stable and maintainable codebase. Engineers are encouraged to polish features, even at the experimental stage. Overall, the team earns high marks for producing technically sound architecture.

4.2 Material Technical Risks

Feature	Risk	Mitigation
Dynamic narrative mechanic	At Risk	Needs simplification
Open world mechanic	Critical	Open world environment without open world mechanics leads to confusion. Recommend cutting
Dynamic Quest system	Critical	Currently highly linear fighting with the open world design. simplify and make game linear
Core loop	Critical	Currently there is nothing for the player to do on a second-to-second basis. Needs redesign
NPCs	Critical	Too many with not enough content. Recommend reducing it by 75%. Add more only when functional

4.3 Feature Risk Assessment

A large number of features are currently in a partially completed state, with many systems roughly 50–80% implemented. Given current staffing levels, the team lacks sufficient capacity to fully polish these features or ensure they integrate cohesively into a unified experience. This situation mirrors an industry failure mode, where unmanaged complexity and scope creep are leading causes of extended development timelines, budget overruns, and declining product quality in game projects. Scope creep, where unvetted features are

continually added without alignment to a clear minimum viable product, is a pitfall that will derail delivery and prevent this team from ever shipping a polished game.

Based on the current design scope, successfully completing the project would likely require approximately 30–50 full-time employees, representing nearly a 5x increase in headcount. Even with this level of resourcing, the game would be highly complex and risk remaining misaligned with *Stardew Valley* as a guiding reference point.

While several individual features show creative promise, they do not clearly cohere into a unified, market-ready experience. The current accumulation of unfinished mechanics effectively buries the core gameplay, increasing technical debt and development risk.

4.4 Platform & Certification

Target Platforms: PC, Mobile, [Platform Redacted]
Readiness: Critical

Evidence: The team is currently developing simultaneously across three platforms, including the untested [platform redacted] platform. Leadership has been reluctant to designate a primary target platform, citing the need for all platforms to function in parallel. This approach has diluted development focus, slowed progress across all targets, and increased overall execution risk by preventing the team from achieving production readiness on any single platform.

Recommendation: Designate PC as primary target platform immediately. Defer mobile and [platform redacted] until core gameplay is validated and PC build achieves beta quality. Simultaneous multi-platform development is appropriate for studios with 50+ people and proven production pipelines, not 5-person teams without a shippable core loop.

SECTION 5: PRODUCT & MARKET ALIGNMENT

Section 5 evaluates whether the product vision is clear and shared across the team, and whether there is a grounded understanding of the target audience and competitive landscape. It is not a full market analysis, but rather a credibility check that decisions are anchored in a coherent product thesis rather than internal preference or drift.

5.1 Vision Clarity

Clear Product Vision: No
Team Alignment: Partial

Observed Disconnect (if any):
Product decisions were driven primarily by internal priorities and were weakly anchored to player needs or market benchmarks. Although *Stardew Valley* was positioned as a guiding reference, the narrative shifted toward [redacted], contradicting the stated goals of the project. When asked to define the game, the Studio Head consistently provided lengthy, unfocused descriptions that changed every time he was asked, indicating a lack of strategic clarity.

5.2 Market Understanding

Audience Definition: Weak
Competitive Awareness: Weak

Evidence: While Stardew Valley was cited as a guiding reference, several features in [game name redacted] contradict its open, player-driven design. The game has evolved into a hybrid of linear and open-world structures, resulting in a dated experience with few strong contemporary comparables.

Market Context:
The farming/life simulation market is experiencing robust growth, with the genre valued at approximately $3.66 billion in 2024 and projected to reach $8.45 billion by 2033. However, this growth is driven by games that prioritize specific open environment design philosophies that [game name redacted] contradicts.

The Stardew Valley Standard:

Stardew Valley's enduring dominance stems from its commitment to player freedom. There's no “right way” to play, with players able to focus on farming, relationships, combat, or exploration entirely at their own discretion. [game name redacted] does not prioritize these features, instead focuses on novel asides.

Assessment: [Game name redacted] contradicts the design principles that drive success in this market. Rather than delivering player freedom and emergent gameplay, it imposes linear narrative constraints. The market rewards focused, coherent visions executed well -

[game name redacted] instead offers scattered features without a validated core loop. This represents fundamental product-market misalignment that additional capital cannot resolve.

SECTION 6: CULTURAL & ORGANIZATIONAL HEALTH

This section examines cultural and organizational health as a factor in execution risk, including morale, psychological safety, retention risk, and sustainability of the current pace. These are leading indicators, as teams that do not feel safe surfacing problems tend to accumulate hidden issues that become costly later.

6.1 Morale & Retention

Morale: Positive
Active Flight Risk: <10%
Key Retention Risks: No Risks

Evidence: The team works well together and is composed of individuals who value stability. The studio head is reluctant to make personnel changes, reinforcing a culture of comfort and continuity. As a result, morale is steady and there is minimal risk of turnover.

6.2 Psychological Safety

Can concerns be raised safely? Somewhat
Culture: Avoidant

Evidence: Team members are reluctant to challenge leadership, even when risks are well understood. While repercussions remain within modern professional standards, the Studio Head tends to be dismissive rather than confrontational and places high importance on team sentiment. This results in a psychologically safe environment, albeit one with limited constructive challenge.

6.3 Challenge Culture

Inclusion Assessment: Concerning
Evidence: It has been consistently observed that the Studio Head has cultivated a culture in which ideas are rarely questioned and obvious problems go unchallenged. This represents a critical organizational risk that is unlikely to self-correct. Without meaningful changes in executive leadership, the project is unlikely to succeed.

6.4 Sustainability

Workload: Sustainable
Crunch Pattern: Not yet evident, but timeline pressure will inevitably lead to crunch if structural issues are not addressed.

SECTION 7: RED FLAGS & MITIGATION

Section 7 consolidates the findings into the most decision-relevant signals, highlighting critical red flags that threaten execution and positive indicators that increase confidence. It is designed to distinguish fixable issues and structural, deal-level risk.

Red Flag 1: Unchecked Concentration of Authority

Critical Risk: Single-Point Leadership Failure
Severity: Critical
Mitigation Potential: Separation of Creative and Technical Leadership

When one person controls both creative and technical decisions, the organization loses the feedback loops that catch flawed assumptions early. In practice, this creates a "single point of failure" where weak choices aren't stress-tested, and downstream teams implement them as if they're settled truth. The result is compounding rework: the project grows through patches and compensatory features instead of converging on a shippable core. This is an immediate launch risk because it directly drives scope creep, unclear product definition, and late-stage instability.

Mitigation: Establishing distinct creative and technical leadership roles introduces structured checks and balances into decision-making. This creates formal mechanisms for challenging assumptions, validating priorities, and resolving conflicts based on data and expertise rather than authority. Over time, this improves decision quality, reduces compounding errors, and enables earlier correction of flawed direction.

Red Flag 2: Roadmap Driven by Personal Preference

Critical Risk: Interest Driven, not Market driven
Severity: Critical
Mitigation Potential: Appointment of a Strong, Market-Oriented Design Leader

A roadmap anchored to personal interest rather than player needs, market benchmarks, and a validated core loop will produce motion without measurable progress toward ship. Teams end up building "interesting" features that don't reduce uncertainty (fun, retention, content demands, production throughput), so the riskiest questions remain unanswered until late. This pattern also encourages early polish on the wrong things, making changes expensive and politically difficult. It's an immediate launch risk because it delays convergence on a coherent, testable product and inflates the cost of course correction.

Mitigation: Introducing an experienced design leader with strong product and market orientation would ground roadmap decisions in player needs, competitive analysis, and validated gameplay loops. This role would be responsible for maintaining product clarity,

defining success metrics, and ensuring features advance the core experience. As a result, development effort would shift from exploratory expansion to focused execution toward a shippable product.

Red Flag 3: Loyalty-Based Hiring

Critical Risk: A culture of unquestioning compliance
Severity: Critical
Mitigation Potential: Transfer of Hiring Authority to an Executive Producer

When key roles are filled primarily through personal relationships, accountability weakens because professional disagreement becomes socially costly. Over time, department leads self-censor, critique turns into compliance, and objective quality bars erode, especially in areas like product clarity, system design tradeoffs, and scope discipline. This also reduces the studio's ability to staff for missing competencies, because hiring optimizes for trust and comfort instead of capability gaps. It becomes a critical launch risk as the project scales: the absence of internal challenge and rigor accelerates bloat, slows decision quality, and makes corrective leadership action less likely.

Mitigation: Hiring an Executive Producer with independent authority over staffing would professionalize recruitment and reduce the influence of personal relationships on role placement. This position would prioritize competency, role fit, and organizational balance when building the team. Over time, this would strengthen internal accountability, improve leadership effectiveness, and ensure critical capability gaps are addressed before they impact delivery.

SECTION 8: RECOMMENDATIONS

Funding Decision: Do Not Fund

Recommendation Rationale

Based on observed leadership dynamics, decision-making structures, and product trajectory, additional capital at this stage would not materially improve the probability of successful delivery. The primary risks facing the project are structural and cultural rather than financial. Without meaningful changes to governance, leadership accountability, and product direction, increased funding would primarily extend runway while enabling continued scope expansion and inefficient execution. In its current form, the organization lacks the internal mechanisms required to converge on a stable, market-ready product.

Required Intervention

Prior to reconsideration for funding, the studio must implement a clear separation of creative and technical leadership responsibilities. Distinct authority over product vision, engineering architecture, and delivery planning is necessary to introduce effective checks and balances into core decision-making. This separation should be accompanied by formalized processes for roadmap validation, risk review, and milestone governance.

Additionally, hiring authority for key roles should be transferred to a qualified Executive Producer with autonomy to prioritize organizational needs over personal relationships. This is essential to restore internal accountability, strengthen leadership credibility, and close critical capability gaps.

Reassessment Criteria

Re-engagement should be considered only after the following conditions are met:

- Creative and technical leadership roles are formally separated and independently empowered.
- An Executive Producer is hired and granted control over staffing and production governance.
- A revised roadmap is produced that demonstrates convergence toward a validated core loop, defined scope boundaries, and realistic staffing requirements.

Until these interventions are executed and sustained in practice, the project's execution risk remains unacceptably high. Under current conditions, the likelihood of capital converting into a shipped, competitive product does not meet standard investment thresholds.

REPORT CERTIFICATION

This assessment reflects the professional judgment of the evaluator based on direct, embedded observation and participation within the studio over a three-week period. The evaluation included attendance at daily stand-ups, leadership and team meetings, review of technical and design documentation, hands-on examination of development workflows, and informal interviews with key personnel.

Findings and recommendations are based on conditions observed during the assessment period and represent an independent, good-faith analysis of execution risk, organizational structure, and product viability. While reasonable efforts were made to ensure accuracy and objectivity, this report does not constitute a guarantee of future performance and should be considered within the broader context of investor due diligence.

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Date: 7/7/25