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60 GAME MARKETING MISTAKES

AND HOW TO AVOID THEM

PREVENT THE MOST COMMON
MARKETING PROBLEMS THAT
WILL HURT YOUR GAME'S SALES

60 Game Marketing Mistakes
And How To Avoid Them

By Chris Zukowski

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Introduction

Marketing and selling an indie game isn't a standardized process, and most people have never done it. There is nothing intuitive about it. Therefore, many people make a lot of mistakes when trying it for the first time.

I have made and marketed indie games for many years and have seen a lot of these first-time mistakes. I don't want you to make them too, so I put together this guide that lists the most common mistakes I have seen and how to avoid them.

Before you read this list, it's worth saying upfront: please go easy on yourself. Do not feel bad if you have made any of these mistakes. As I said, none of this is intuitive. It takes *years* to get good at creating and marketing games, and the best way to learn is to do it–just do it. Mistakes are a sign of action. Congratulations on taking action instead of waiting for everything to be perfect.

Part I: BIG mistakes that cannot be taken back

For the most part, any mistake in game marketing is reversible. However, there are a few mistakes that cannot be undone. That is why I start this book with the mistakes that have the most impact. You should be particularly wary about these.

Mistake #1: Launching into Early Access thinking there is no consequence, or treating it like a soft launch to "test reception"

Problem

Too many indies think that Early Access is a nice way to get some feedback on their game before they reach out to publishers or investors to get funding. The problem with this approach is that, in the eyes of the Steam algorithm, your Early Access launch *is* your launch, and a lot of algorithmic boosts are keyed to that moment. If you approach a publisher with a game that is in Early Access and you need funding to get it to 1.0, they will quickly reject you because their business model is based around promoting your launch. That launch is when developers (and publishers) earn most of their money.

Solution

Don't launch into Early Access until you are actually ready to launch your game. I recommend at a minimum having at least 7,000 wishlists before you launch. If you need feedback, run a beta, run a Steam Playtest, or put out the free demo. All of these actions will put your game in the hands of players so you can find out what works and what doesn't without hurting your chances of getting a publisher.

Mistake #2: Treating Steam marketing as a sprint

Problem

Indies often focus 100% of their effort on finishing their game. They isolate themselves until a couple weeks before launch and then think, "Now it's time to start marketing!" Unfortunately, to do well on Steam, you need thousands and thousands of wishlists. Even the most highly anticipated games only earn about 300 wishlists a day. So, if you extrapolate that number, you can see how long it takes to meet the minimum thresholds for a successful launch.

Solution

Valve released data showing that developers who put up their coming soon page at least six months before launch had 300% more sales than the average game that had its coming soon page posted 30 days before launch. So, get your Steam page up as soon as you have your art style finalized and can show your game in motion for a quick 30-second trailer. Spend at least a few hours a week contacting streamers and posting on social media, participating in Reddit forums, and most importantly, applying for online festivals.

Mistake #3: Waiting until the last minute to get your Steam page ready for big moments and festivals

Problem

Sometimes indies line up big promotional events with third parties like PC Gamer or an online festival like The Mix. But if they don't have a Steam coming soon page yet, they have to scramble to get one up. Unfortunately, it can take Valve several days to review a page, and if they find anything that violates their guidelines, they will kick it back to developers to fix before finally approving it. I have consulted for indies who missed major opportunities because their Steam coming soon page wasn't approved in time.

Allocate at least three weeks to get a coming soon page designed, submitted, and finally approved by Valve. Furthermore, if you want a professionally edited trailer, it can take months for top tier editors to get you on their schedule. And don't worry about coordinating timing, after your page is approved by Valve, you get to push the final button to make it publicly visible when you are ready.

Mistake #4: Talking about your game without having a Steam page, a mailing list, or a Discord server

Problem

Nobody knows when and if a game will "go viral." If an indie doesn't have a Steam coming soon page yet, and one of their social media posts goes viral, all that visibility will have nowhere to go. Those are lost wishlists that the indie will never get. It might seem okay to divert the traffic to Twitter or Tiktok, but social media is notorious for being difficult to reach the people who follow you.

Solution

Before you share anything about your game, make sure you have at least a mailing list or a Discord server created for your studio. If you do go viral, you can quickly jump in and say "Follow me on my mailing list" or "Join my Discord to hear more" so you will be more likely to be able to reconnect with the people who followed you because of your viral content.

Part II: Steam page mistakes

Your Steam coming soon page is the front page of your virtual store. Every single person who buys your game will have seen the Steam page first. Therefore, it is very important to think carefully about and refine your coming soon page, and in this section I outline the biggest mistakes I usually see.

If you need more help, I also created a 100% free online class that will walk you through the process of designing a Steam page. You can sign up at www.howtomakeasteampage.com.

Mistake #5: Not having a trailer on your Steam page

Problem

Valve doesn't require indies to upload a trailer when they launch their coming soon page. So, a lot of indies assume it's not important (because trailers are really hard to make), and they launch their page with just a few static screenshots.

Solution

Get a trailer made before you launch your coming soon page. It makes your game look more professional and indicates that you are investing in it and care a lot about it. Even if you don't have a lot of footage, or money to hire a professional, cut together some small, tightly edited snippets of your gameplay. But DON'T launch with a cinematic trailer; Steam shoppers want to see actual gameplay. If you don't have enough footage for 30 seconds, you might be too early to put together a coming soon page.

Mistake #6: Obscuring your game's genre

Problem

Genre is one of the primary reasons a gamer plays one game over another. Vague media like overly cinematic trailers or screenshots that use non-gameplay angles mean shoppers have to spend extra time trying to solve the mystery of what they actually DO in the game. If it is too hard to figure that out, they are just going to move on to the next game instead of wishlisting.

Solution

Ensure that your Steam page features just about every genre trope that is part of your game. For instance, if you are making a metroidvania, ensure there is a screen that shows the world map. After your page is finished, send it to a couple people who don't know what you are working on and ask, "What games does this remind you of?" If their answers are vague, or they name a genre that isn't yours, it is time to redo your Steam page.

Mistake #7: Forgetting gameplay in your primary trailer

Problem

Indies can take the wrong inspiration from AAA games and make these very long, involved cinematic trailers that don't *actually* show off their game. They may also start the trailer with boring "In a world of magic and chaos…" title cards that are deep lore dumps instead of gameplay. I watched actual Steam shoppers browse for games and noticed that they scrub through the trailer timeline until they can find actual gameplay. Similarly, on social media, attention spans are so short that people will not wait patiently for a game's trailer to reveal itself.

Solution

Cut to actual gameplay within the first two seconds of your trailer. Do not show your studio logo (you aren't Nintendo). Remove those title text cards that are lore dumps. Remove those slow panning shots of the game's environment. Show the primary action and gameplay loop right away.

Mistake #8: Screenshots without UI

Problem

Indies want to make their game look as good as possible so they remove the UI and instead render static environment scenes or post camera angles that are cinematic but not actually reflective of gameplay. Steam shoppers can tell the difference between a marketing glamor shot and gameplay, and they want to see the latter.

Solution

Show actual screenshots of your game being played. It should have the UI (if there is any) and the actual camera angles that players will see when interacting with your game.

Mistake #9: Too much lore

Problem

"In a world where the seven keys of Vamtoozler bring darkness to the land of Mar'i'kith, and the 12 scepters of Billing'rith are aligned by the kings of the new lands, in contrast to the gods of the primary age, to bring peace upon the people of Ga'th'inl…"

STOP! Nobody buys a game by the lore–they buy the game because of the gameplay.

Solution

Cut lore out of your marketing. Focus on what players actually DO when their hands are on the controller. Remove nouns and add verbs to your descriptions. Verbs are gameplay; nouns are lore. Exposition and story are okay, but only after players buy the game.

Mistake #10: Accidentally looking like an asset swap game

Problem

Asset flippers are "get-rich-quick" schemers who buy one or two asset packs off the asset stores and then throw up a Steam page hoping to fool enough people and make a fast buck. Steam shoppers have been burned in the past and know the signs of these scammers. One of the telltale signs is a lack of unique art. Unfortunately, honest indie developers trying to get their Steam coming soon page up quickly will take quick screenshots of the game's opening area. Sometimes they only have one environment coded and designed, which means all their screenshots have a nearly identical look. This *visual* lack of variety can make the game look like an asset swap.

Solution

Ensure that you have a variety of screenshots for your Steam page. Every screenshot should look completely different. Think unique biome, unique enemies, unique player equipment, and unique sky boxes. People can very quickly see when a game is repeating assets, so be careful. If your game doesn't yet have three totally distinct environments, try to mock up (without lying) the early art you have so it looks like the final game, even though you aren't done implementing it in code. Also make sure that your UI reflects different game states.

People can tell you just went in quickly if all your screenshots have three hearts of energy and the default sword and shield. Vary the UI so it looks like you gave a damn!

Mistake #11: Having a quiet Steam page

Problem

Some indie developers put up the minimum requirements for their game's coming soon Steam page. This bare minimum effort causes their page to have an "incomplete" look and can give off the impression that they don't care or are not serious about their game.

Solution

Include a lot of vibrant art on your Steam page. Make sure your game's gameplay loop is explained with short, high quality gifs. Also, add small graphic embellishments, like borders around images and divider lines with beautiful typography. Great graphic design increases the perception of quality.

For more information on what you can do to your Steam page, check out my free class at: www.howtomakeasteampage.com.

Mistake #12: Not cross promoting from your old games

Problem

When an indie starts on their next game, they can focus all of their attention on it and forget that the Steam algorithms expose their back catalog to thousands of viewers every week. They are missing an opportunity to introduce fans of their old games to their upcoming title.

Solution

When you launch a new game, go back to your old games' Steam pages and cross promote them to your new game. For example, you can:
   a. Add the Franchise widget to all of your Steam pages (search "Franchise Pages" on Steamworks for more information).
   b. Add the URL of your new game to the "About this Game" section and Steam will auto-create the wishlist iWidget.
   c. Create a "cross promotion" event that announces your new game and links to it.
   d. Bundle your games together.

Mistake #13: Not having your publisher cross-promote to you

Problem

A publisher is often 100% focused on their new game and forget that one of their biggest strengths is their back catalog. Publishers typically forget to link to their upcoming games from their previously published titles.

Solution

Review your publisher's back catalog for games that are similar in some way to yours. Ask your publisher to add an iWidget link from them to your game. Also ask them to create "cross promotion" events to your game. They might not agree (a lot of this depends on their agreement with the other developers in their back catalog). However, bringing their existing fan base to your game is the whole point of having a publisher; that is why you give them 30% of your revenue. Make sure they earn it!

Mistake #14: Letting your publisher link to their page instead of yours

Problem

Every Steam page has a link to the developer and the publisher. Clicking the link goes to a specific homepage that shows the company's back catalog and presents a button to "follow" them. This "follow" button is a powerful way to notify fans every time you launch a game. Unfortunately, many publishers use the default setting, so clicking either the developer or the publisher link redirects people to the publisher homepage instead of the indie developer's homepage.

Solution

Ensure that you create a homepage for your studio and that the link on your game's page links to it. Stop giving more traffic to your publisher! For more information see https://store.steampowered.com/publisher/.

Mistake #15: Not translating your Steam page

Problem

Most indies post their Steam page only in English. The majority of Steam users speak a language other than English. When indies don't translate their page, they are missing out on thousands of views (and wishlists) from shoppers who only browse in their native (non-English) language.

Solution

Translate your Steam page for every language you can afford. If the in-game text is English-only, still translate. Steam will automatically show a warning that the game is English only. It is good at least to get people to see your game even if they might not understand the in-game text.

Mistake #16: Not keeping your tags up to date

Problem

Tags are the self-defined markers of an indie game's genre. Unfortunately, shoppers can add their own tags, which might not be correct. If indies do not check regularly, their tags could be inaccurate.

Solution

Set a reminder to check your tags and run the Tag Wizard once every month.

Mistake #17: Making your own capsule

Problem

Sometimes indie developers look to save money by creating their own capsule (aka thumbnail) for their game. The results can be boring, or at worst, unprofessional. An unappealing capsule turns away shoppers and streamers who might use your capsule as their Youtube thumbnail.

Solution

Hire a professional artist to make your capsule. Make sure you observe genre trends among other games in your genre. Do not skimp on your capsule.

You can find capsule artists by searching sites such as DeviantArt and ArtStation. You can also look at other indie studios that have very attractive capsules and try to contact the development team; if the artist was a freelancer, they might be willing to share their name and do an introduction for you.

Mistake #18: Not researching your release date far in advance

Problem

Some indies do not look ahead and launch their game during a seasonal store sale, or during Steam Next fest. Those events can take over the entire Steam storefront and obscure powerful visibility widgets like "Popular Upcoming" and "New And Trending."

Solution

Months before you plan to release your game for sale, look ahead. Google things like "When is the next Steam Next Fest" and "When is the next Steam sale." It is okay to launch the week before those events, but just don't try why they are still going on.

Mistake #19: Stressing out about wishlist deletes

Problem

Indie developers look at their wishlists on Steamworks and worry when they see the number of people who deleted their wishlists. They might think "Did I do something wrong?" or "Do people hate me?"

Solution

Don't worry about deletes. There is nothing you can do about it. You will see increases in deletes during big Steam seasonal sales–not because of anything you did, but because people are reviewing their wishlists to see what is on sale and tend to do some pruning at the same time. Everyone has wishlist deletes; it is just the natural course of action from Steam shoppers. Expect 10%–12% of your wishlists to be deleted. Forget about it and focus on finishing your game.

Mistake #20: Stressing about click-through rate

Problem

It is good to check regularly on your marketing efforts. However, some indie developers obsess over the click-through rate. Click-through rate is calculated by looking at the number of visits divided by the number of impressions.

Solution

The reason the click-through rate is a bad measure of success is that it doesn't track with the popularity of your game. When your game is doing very well, Valve features your game on the front page of Steam and in various store widgets. That visibility greatly increases the impression rate of your game, but, because you are being shown to more people, relatively fewer people are going to click on it. So your relative click-through rate goes down. That means the more visibility your game gets, the lower your click-through rate. Instead, track wishlists. It is a better marker of your success.

Mistake #21: Not tracking your wishlist activity

Problem

Indie developers may try a bunch of marketing activities without reflecting on what works and by how much. If they do have a spike in wishlists, they don't note the cause, so months later, they forget what worked and which streamers were effective.

Solution

Every two weeks, or once-a-month, download your wishlist data from Steamworks and import it into a tracking spreadsheet. Then, note any major increase in wishlists. If a streamer covered you, add a link to their channel in the spreadsheet. Tracking this data will allow you to feel pride looking back at how well you have done. If you record every major success and who caused it, you can also reach out to them again at launch time to cover you again.

Mistake #22: Not participating in Steam Next Fest

Problem

Steam Next Fest is tricky, because indies not only need a demo, but they also have to set aside time to host a stream and figure out which one of the three yearly Next Fests they should take part in. It seems so intimidating that some indies just say "forget it!" and launch their game without any Next Fest participation.

Solution

Everyone should participate in Steam Next Fest. Yes, it is work, but it's also free visibility! It's likewise good practice for your eventual launch, because you need to reach out to streamers, so you can test your game build. The effort is worth it, trust me.

Mistake #23: Picking the first Steam Next Fest you can

Problem

Some indie developers launch their Steam coming soon page and instantly want to get as much visibility as they can, so they opt into the first upcoming Steam Next Fest. The problem with this approach is that they go into the festival with a low number of wishlists and not much momentum. Next Fest scales visibility with the number of wishlists you have going into it, so newly launched games get a lot less visibility.

Solution

Wait and participate in the last Steam Next Fest before your game launches. Games that go into Steam Next Fest with at least 75,000 wishlists or can earn 3,000 wishlists in the weeks before, usually get front page featuring.

It is worth waiting for as long as possible to see if you can meet those wishlists goals. Even if those wishlist rates are out of your league, your demo will be better, your community larger, and your marketing efforts more practiced when you wait for the later Steam Next Fests. So please, wait until you are almost about to launch to join Steam Next Fest.

Mistake #24: Not contacting Steam support

Problem

Sometimes problems arise, like not getting invited to a special Steam event, not getting your game into a Steam seasonal sale because you recently launched, or not getting a daily deal after you've earned $300,000. Indies would sometimes rather complain about this injustice on Twitter than actually do something about it!

Solution

Use the [Steamworks support site](#) to open a ticket. You can ask them if you qualify for a daily deal (usually only available to games that earn ~$250,000 or more.) You can also ask them to reconsider your application to a Steam Genre Sale. Be nice, be clear, and be persistent. But they can't help you if you don't ask for help first.

Mistake #25: Not applying for festivals because you (think you) are not a good fit

Problem

Festivals are the best way to get a ton of wishlists. Some of these festivals are organized by third party organizations other than Valve. The organizers curate them around a special theme. For instance, they might have a "Narrative Games" festival or a "Board Game" festival. Many of these distinctions are quite arbitrary, but many indies self-censor themselves and say "I am not a good fit for this, so I won't apply."

Solution

You can't win if you don't play. Apply for everything and let the festival organizers reject you. Sometimes organizers need more games in their festival at the last minute and are willing to bend the genre rules to let your game in. Or they just really, really like your game. Whatever the reason, don't assume you are not a good fit–let them tell you. HOWEVER, if the festival is put on by a group aimed at promoting underserved audiences

(such as Women in Gaming or Black Voices in Gaming), do not apply unless you meet their criteria. You could be taking the spot of a developer who really deserves it.

Mistake #26: Not double checking the festival page before the festival launches

Problem

Even if an indie developer is accepted to appear in a Steam featured festival, sometimes the organizers forget to add the game to the page. YIKES! Those games miss out on TONS of visibility.

Solution

About one week before the festival you are in is set to start, kindly contact the organizer and tell them that you are very excited to appear in their festival and would like to double check that everything is in order and that your game will be featured on the Steam page. This "check in" will make sure that you are not left out accidentally. If the festival starts and you are missing, contact them ASAP. However, once the festival starts, they might not see your message right away, because they are busy running a festival.

Part III: Communication mistakes

The biggest boosts in visibility will come from other people, like Youtube and Twitch streamers, and you must learn how to communicate with them to get coverage.

And then once you have secured that coverage, you need to talk to your new audience to keep them in the loop with the state of your game.

In this section you will see common mistakes that people make that can make these communication processes less efficient at best and prevent you from getting covered at worst.

Mistake #27: Not including capsule art

Problem

Streamers love to see our capsule art because they can make high quality YouTube thumbnails out of them. Streamers who don't get a capsule are forced to search for the capsule or create their own. In both cases, that is a very timely process, and an influencer might not play the developer's game because they don't have the time.

Solution

Include your capsule in your press kit so streamers can easily find it and use it for their marketing purposes. If you can, include your capsule in .PSD format so they can isolate layers and reformat it to fit their needs. Similarly, include a copy of your game's logo with the background removed.

Mistake #28: Neglecting your announcement

Problem

Sometimes indies just post their Steam coming soon page and don't tell anyone.

Solution

Make a big to-do out of the launch of your Steam page. Build anticipation, create a tweet that says "announcing our new game," title your trailer "announcement trailer," and tell the press you are announcing a new game. There is something magic about the word "announce." People will be more likely to retweet you and share your news if you say it is an "announcement."

Mistake #29: Skipping streams during a Steam festival

Problem

Every game that participates in Steam Next Fest is given two featured streams. When a stream is featured, it's pinned to the top of the page and earns a lot more traffic. Unfortunately, it's a bit stressful and requires a bit more work, so many indies just don't participate in the promotion.

Solution

During Steam Next Fest, you should definitely stream and pick your featuring dates. It's more free visibility!

Mistake #30: Not doing Steam updates consistently

Problem

Indie developers are often so busy developing their game that they forget to post dev log updates. When you post an event to your Steam page, there is a neat looking "news" widget that appears. If you haven't posted one in a while, the past updates are hidden, and your Steam page will send off vibes that your game is dead.

Every three weeks you should post some sort of an update. It can be as simple as saying "Still working on this game–here are the bugs I fixed." Another idea is to document how your game is played. Explain the enemies and their backstories. You just need to prove that you still have a pulse.

Mistake #31: Writing updates that don't talk about your game

Problem

Some indies run out of ideas about what to say in their monthly dev log updates and write posts about what they personally did, like "we went to PAX." The problem here is that this content is about as exciting as watching Aunt Sally's trip to the state fair.

Solution

In my experience, Steam shoppers are more interested in your game and how it is played, what type of enemies it has, and levels they will find when they buy it. So if you're feeling stuck on what updates to post, write "instruction book content" that describes the basics of how your game is played. Talk about the weapons, the armor, and the magic spells. Talk about your game and what makes it tick, because shoppers are interested in your game, not your trip to a game convention.

Mistake #32: Only sending one message when your game launches

Problem

Too many indies only send one message to their community when their game launches.

Solution

Don't surprise your community. Whether it is the announcement of your game, your launch, or the start of a big sale, you should be contacting them more frequently. At the very least, you should be counting down to the big day and then reminding them that the promotion is almost over. I recommend at minimum you communicate with your audience about your announcement or promotion in the following manner:
- One week before
- Three days before
- One day before
- The day of
- Three days after
- One day before the end of a promotion
- Eight hours before the end of a promotion (last chance reminder).

Mistake #33: Forgetting the call to action

Problem

When telling people about their game, indies may focus just on showing their art and forget the most important part–to tell potential fans what to do if they are interested in what they see. This information is called a call to action.

Always have a call to action! So with every tweet, every email, every TikTok, you should have a clear idea of what you want people to do after they see your primary message. This can be a simple message like "Wishlist on Steam" or "Buy now" or "Join my mailing list." Always make sure the call to action is clear and features a big button at the bottom of the message.

Mistake #34: Creating a social media account for each game

Problem

Indie game developers often make a Twitter account for their studio and for their game…and then they make a different account for their second game.

Solution

Create one social media account (and Discord and everything else) for you or your studio (depending on your size). Don't create one for each game. One of the fundamental aspects of running a business is if someone bought something from you, they are much more likely to buy again. When you have one social media account for everything, you are able to sell your second (and any other subsequent games) to the people who bought your first game. Building a following is like rolling a snowball. Each game you release builds on the effort of the previous one so that by the time you release your fifth game, you have quite a social following. If you start an account per game, you are starting from scratch every time.

Mistake #35: Ignoring "trending topics" on Twitter

Problem

For the most part, Twitter doesn't work very well at getting a game seen by the general gaming public. It is mostly indie developers tweeting at other indie developers.

Solution

To break out of the indie bubble, check the "trending topics" tab on the right. Mentioning those keywords (it doesn't even have to be a hashtag) can get your tweet featured by more people outside of the game development subculture.

Mistake #36: Not surveying your audience

Problem

Indies often run a beta test without asking the players what they thought about it. Some indies include an in-game button that links to their Discord, but that rarely leads to direct feedback.

Solution

When you put out a beta (or even a demo), include an in-game button that says "Feedback" and links to a Google Forms survey. On the form, ask them what they thought of the graphics, how much they enjoyed it, and any other general feedback. Don't make it too long–just five questions at most.

Mistake #37: Sending keys to spammers

Problem

When indies publish a Steam page, their email address is scraped by key resellers. Key resellers then spam indies with emails like: "Hi, I am a small streamer, and I would like to cover your game. I will need three keys for me and my team. Can you please send them?" Some indies think this kind of message is real.

Solution

Just ignore every single key solicitation. A top tier streamer will always just buy the game instead of asking you for keys. It is fine to track down a streamer and send them a key. But you are not missing anything by ignoring those unsolicited key requests.

Mistake #38: Making streamers jump through hoops to cover your game

Problem

Some indie developers write a pitch to influencers that say something like: "Hey would you like to cover my game? If so, reply and I will give you a key."

Solution

Don't make influencers ask for it. Just send them the key unsolicited. Say "Here is my awesome game, and here is a key so you can play it on Steam. SEE YA!" If you have to reply back to them, you just added another step that wastes time and may prevent you from getting covered.

Part IV: Business mistakes

Marketing and business decisions are not distinct. Deals with other companies and the way you structure your own company has a direct impact on the way you market your game. Watch out for these common business mistakes as you proceed on your development journey.

Mistake #39: Quitting game development after your first game "fails"

Problem

In a recent study I did, I found that about 75% of studios release one, and only one, game. The first game from a studio is rarely profitable. It takes time to build up a back catalog that can support a studio full time.

Solution

Your first game will probably "fail." But don't worry, that doesn't mean you are a bad designer. You will do better with your next game–plus you will have more of an audience, more of a codebase to reuse, and more business contacts. There is so much good that will come from quickly getting back into game development and releasing your next game.

Mistake #40: **Expecting to fund a studio off of 1 game**

Problem

Indie developers often build up big teams and spend everything they have to release their game. However, most games earn money slowly over time, and don't make their money back.

Solution

Keep the budget for your early games small. Release quickly. Budget to release multiple games. In their 2020 earnings report, Devolver Digital revealed that 60% of their annual revenue comes from their back catalog. Not their new releases. Plan to release lots of games over time.

Mistake #41: Not bundling with other developers

Problem

Many studios take the word "independent" too literally and try to do too much by themselves. They put their game up for sale and don't bundle it with games from other indie developers.

Solution

Make friends with other studios that are making games similar to yours and bundle with them! After you have released your game, bundle with other developers who are launching. Many Steam shoppers are willing to pay a bit more when presented with two games at a discounted price. Steamworks also makes it very easy to create bundles. So, make friends and make bundles.

Mistake #42: Not discounting your game

Problem

After their game has launched, many developers forget to discount their game by at least 20%. They assume discounts are just devaluing their game.

Solution

Discount your game by at least 20% at every opportunity Steam allows you. The Steam visibility algorithm is built around discounts. When you discount by at least 20%, everyone who has wishlisted your game will get an email telling them that the game is on sale. Discounts can also trigger additional features within the store. If you want more visibility, which leads to more potential sales, you must discount your game at every opportunity you have.

Mistake #43: Discounting too deep too fast

Problem

Many indie studios panic if their game doesn't sell well immediately, and they react by slashing the price in the hope that a discount will generate more hype. However, Steam shoppers are trained bargain hunters and act when a game reaches its "historic low" price. If a developer jumps from a 20% discount straight to a 60% discount, they lose out on the customers who would have purchased the game at 30%, 40%, or 50% off.

Solution

Discount your game slowly and methodically. For the first six months, never drop your price below 20%. Then stairstep your discount gradually, never skipping a step. Save your major discounts like 50% or 75% for very big milestones, like participating in a daily deal or during a seasonal sale.

Mistake #44: Underpricing your game

Problem

The median price for an indie game in 2012 was $8.70. In 2020 the median price was $7.30. Compare this to AAA games where prices have increased 400% from 2012 to 2020. Indies are not charging enough for their games.

Solution

Raise your price. To figure out how much to charge, look at your nearest competitors in genre, quality, and scope and increase it by 20%. That is how much you should charge, and if everyone does that, we will stop undervaluing our games.

Mistake #45: Using boring subject lines

Problem

When writing subject lines for emails or Steam updates, indie developers often use boring headlines like "Update #11" or "Spring update" or "Dev Log #23." The purpose of the subject line is to be so interesting that it forces people to click to satisfy their curiosity. Boring subject lines = lower click-through.

Solution

You only have so many words, so make them SUPER interesting. Give people a reason to click. Here are some examples of non-boring headlines:
- "I am afraid to say this…"
- "Our big reveal is finally here…"

- "The time I nearly broke my nose…"

Mistake #46: Writing insecure-sounding requests

Problem

When indie developers ask people to do something, they often write these very flabby and insecure-sounding requests like: "Hey, I am sorry to bother you again, but can you please, maybe, consider wishlisting our game (but don't feel too pressured, and don't do it if you don't want to)." That language is weak! And it makes you sound like you are not confident about your game. Your game is awesome! You are awesome! Start acting like it.

Solution

Write short, polite, but direct commands in your communications. Construct call to actions that are VERB + DIRECT OBJECT. Here are some examples:
- "Wishlist now"
- "Please respond when you are ready."
- "Join our mailing list."

Mistake #47: Not following up with publishers or influencers

Problem

Indie developers are always pitching to someone–publishers to sign a contract, influencers to cover their game, the press to write about them. However, indie developers aren't persistent enough. They give up after one email. Sometimes people are busy, sometimes they forget, so they need more than one reminder.

Solution

Without spamming, be more persistent. Here is how.
- Step 1: Keep a spreadsheet of everyone you want to contact.
- Step 2: Create three columns for and label them Attempt #1, #2, #3.
- Step 3: Each time you reach out to the contact, mark the date in the column.
- Step 4: After three attempts, they clearly aren't interested so move on.

Mistake #48: Not making friends

Problem

Too many indies think they can do everything alone. This approach hurts your chances at survival.

Solution

Making friends and teaming up with other developers is a huge way to get more exposure for your game. The number of people who buy indie games on Steam is actually pretty small. So if someone buys one indie game that is similar to yours, they are likely to buy yours, too. So, make friends with developers like you, and cross-promote your games. To find other developers, use VG Insights to filter by your game's tag, look for

games in production or ones that have released within the last two years, and find their Twitter accounts. Then play their game and say "Hi, I liked your game."

Mistake #49: Giving up before your first ten reviews

Problem

When a game gets ten reviews, there is a little badge that is assigned to it that has a thumbs up and the word "positive" (if the majority of reviews are good). This tiny bit of UI can cause an increase in the number of Steam shoppers who decide to click on it. However, too many first time developers who don't have a hit game give up before they even reach this first threshold.

Solution

For your first game, you should set a goal to get at least 10 reviews. This goal can be hard to reach and takes some planning! You can't just give away free keys in return for a review, because those keys do not count towards the magic ten. Here are some tips for getting ten reviews:
- Communicate with your community about how important having at least ten reviews is and encourage them to review.
- Contact streamers to get them to play, which increases sales and the probability that someone will review the experience.
- Discount the game at every chance you can to bring in more sales.

Mistake #50: Putting all your eggs in a basket you don't own

Problem

Some indies spend a lot of time building a following on a single social network like Twitter or Youtube. For instance, all their call to actions are "Follow me on Twitter." However, as we now know, social media companies can be bought and sold, or the algorithm can be drastically changed. This shift can render an indie developer's hard work in building a following useless. Remember that Twitter, TikTok, Discord, and Youtube are all run by big corporations that don't care about knock-on effects for small individuals.

Solution

Instead of trying to build a following on those channels, build followings on channels you do own, like a mailing list. You still need to use Twitter and TikTok to get visibility, but don't make getting a following there your primary goal. Use those risky channels as a source to build a mailing list following. If you appear on a podcast or something and they say "How can people hear more from you?" don't say "Twitter," because that is building an audience on a platform you don't own and control.

Mistake #51: Doing genre research by only looking at the top earners

Problem

Researching how much games in different genres earn is a good idea! However, too many indies just pick out the top earning game in each genre and say, "See, our game will earn that much money." That view is definitely based on survivorship bias.

Yes, it is good to look at the top earners, but also look at all the games that were released in your prospective genre each year. Then total up the expected earnings and calculate what the median income was. Look at how many games were released in that genre. If you see that there was only one game in that genre that did well, despite dozens being released every year, that is a worrying sign. You should also play all the games in that genre. Look at the winners and the losers and see what features the winners have and what the losers are missing.

Mistake #52: Freaking out or getting mad if you find someone has the same game idea as you

Problem

When an indie developer finds out that another game developer is also making a roguelike + city builder + visual novel, their first reaction is typically to say, "Oh no! I am going to quit–someone came up with my game idea first" or "They stole my idea!"

Solution

Don't stress out. First off, successful game development is all in the execution. I think an original idea and original game concept is overrated. The more important factor is how well you execute it, and how good the design is. How good the controls are. How easy to use are the UIs.

Second, every artist is different, and a slight variation to an idea is a very different game. There is no way you can make the exact same game.

Third, if some Steam shopper is interested in their game, they will probably also like your game, too. Both of your games will be purchased. So team up! Promote your games together! It will be ok!

Mistake #53: Attending the Game Developers Conference before you have a game ready

Problem

Going to GDC is expensive. You have to buy a plane ticket and rent a hotel, plus the ticket itself is super pricey. I see indie developers attend GDC before they even have a game in progress because they just want to get inspired or to meet other developers. GDC is too expensive to be worth it for most first-time devs.

Solution

GDC is only worth the money if you meet any of the following criteria:
1) You are trying to get funding, and you have already met with publishers and are in the process of solidifying the deal.
2) You have someone else who is paying for the trip (government grant, a nonprofit, etc.).
3) Your game is winning an award at GDC and you are picking it up.
4) You are speaking at GDC and they are paying for your ticket.

Going for the purposes of socializing and meeting other devs is really hard to do if you are not already well known in the industry. Instead of GDC, join your local (or nearby) IGDA or game dev chapter. Release more games and people will find you. Going to GDC will not help you.
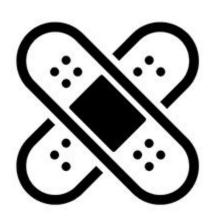
Mistake #54: Not playing enough games

Problem

I find some indie game developers don't understand the people they are making games for. Many developers have not done enough to understand the tropes of their chosen genre. They don't know the current genre trends. They don't understand what real fans like or don't like about certain games. If you don't understand the current market, Steam players will give you bad reviews, or just think your game is out of touch.

Solution

Play every game in your genre. Play all the recent releases. Do your research. Write down all the tropes of your game's genre. Be careful what tropes you ignore, which ones you subvert, and which ones you embrace. Understanding where your game fits in with the rest of the market is so valuable. To find games similar to yours, use VG Insights and filter the games down to games released within the last five years and your game's genre tags. Then buy all those games (they are a business expense) and play them, noting down everything that is the same and different and wrong with each one. You must do your homework.

Part V: Show floor mistakes

In general, I don't recommend developers spend time and money on in-person physical shows. They are fun, but they are not an efficient way to spread the message of your game. But despite my feelings on physical shows, indie developers are going to do them anyway. So, if you find yourself with a booth, at least do it responsibly. Here are common mistakes I find indie developers make.

Mistake #55: Not telling people what your game is

Problem

Indies on a show floor cover their booth in merch and posters of their beautiful world and interesting characters but forget to tell attendees what genre the game is.

Solution

Tell visitors right up front what your game is and what genre it is in. For instance, you might say "A <genre X> and <Genre Y> adventure" or "The most in-depth city builder ever created." If someone walks up to your booth say, "Here is our roguelike dungeon crawler." Don't be coy. Don't give them a lore dump. Just tell them the genre and the hook.

Mistake #56: Not having a demo that lets them play

Problem

Show attendees see lots of booths and have limited time. Some indies create demos where there are slow cinematics openings, or introductory town areas where players have to wander around and chat with the right person to get to the combat arena. Don't do that! Attendees don't have time to wade through all that. They will be leaving for the next booth before they even get to the really fun bit.

Solution

Instead, drop them right in the action. They want to PLAY your game as soon as their hands touch the controller. Give them the coolest weapon and put them in an arena with the best enemies, within the best looking environment.

Also, unless you're making a Visual Novel, remove all character conversations and all lore. Also remove all cut scenes that are longer than 5 seconds. Nobody on a show floor is going to sit through an NPC giving detailed back history.

You are trying to impress them. In the full, released, game you can slowly build excitement, but a show floor demo needs to hit them over the head with what you do in the game.

Mistake #57: Including complicated tutorials in your demo

Problem

Indies slow down their show floor demo by adding elaborate tutorials that walk players though every control in a carefully plotted sequence. However, humans can really only remember two things in a short period of time, so most of the tutorial is going right over their heads and keeping them from actually experiencing the game.

Solution

The type of person who attends a gaming convention is a hard core gamer. They understand how most games play and it's not their first time with a controller. They are very literate with the tropes and rules of most games.

Instead of slow tutorials, just tell them what the two primary buttons do and drop them right in the action. Also, on the pause menu, display a graphic that lists what all the buttons do. And remember, if they get stuck, you are right there–just lean over and tell them what the buttons do. If you have to go to the bathroom, put up a sign that tells them what the two buttons do. Just let them play!

Mistake #58: Not watching for journalists and influencers

Problem

Indie developers running a booth focus so much on getting people through the door that they don't stop to look at who they are talking to. The most important people to come by your booth are journalists and influencers, because they can amplify your message.

Solution

Assign someone to check the line periodically for anyone with a "press" or "media" badge. If you find one, whisk them to the front, give them all the merch you have, give them your business card, get their business card, answer any questions they have, and be as charming as possible. Contact them after the show to remind them that you exist and you were so glad you had the chance to meet them. Contact them a month later to remind them you are still glad that you had a chance to meet them.

Mistake #59: Not having an email sign-up form

Problem

Everyone who visits a booth is mildly interested in the game and wants to hear more about it as it comes closer to launch. Too often though, indies don't provide a way to re-engage with those people. A QR code that leads people to a store page is a good start, but an indie can do so much more.

Solution

Post a piece of paper where people can write down their email address or provide an ipad that has the mailing list form loaded up. If there is a long line to your booth, have someone go down the line with the sign-up form encouraging people to join. You can also use special tagging to note that these people met you in person. Then all future emails to them can start "Hi, I talked to you at PAX." Those people now have a more direct connection to you.

Mistake #60: Not following up
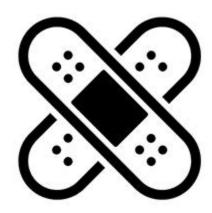
Problem

People visited an indie developers booth, left their email information, traded business cards, and talked to some press contacts. Then the indies go home and back to developing their game without contacting the people who visited their booth. Conference attendees see hundreds of games and meet dozens of people. They probably won't remember the indie in booth number 117J.

Solution

After a conference, go through all the business cards you got and just send a quick email to say, "Hi, nice meeting you. I am the person making <game name>. Here is a link if you'd like to explore more."

If you put out an email signup sheet, on the day after the conference, send an email to them that wraps up how it went and a reminder to wishlist the game. If you met any journalists or influencers at your booth, email them thanking them for their time. Also follow them on social media and stay in touch.

I promise, you will be one of the few people at the whole conference to follow up, and you will stand out.

Summary

I know this is a very long list and you will forget half of the recommendations here. So here are my big three suggestions that if you follow them, you will avoid most of the mistakes listed above:

Suggestion #1: Plan for the long term. Your first game will fail. Your second one will too. But, with each release, your skills as a game developer will improve, the number of gaming industry contacts you have will increase, and your community of fans will grow. Don't fall in love with your first game. There will always be more games to develop and you will have better ideas in the future.

Suggestion #2: Look for opportunities and say yes. No game succeeds by itself. You must leverage the audiences of other people, companies, and platforms to get your game seen. Join local developer groups, make friends with the people making games similar to yours, opt into festivals, agree to that interview with that journalist, and apply to that game development fund that is looking for submissions. You miss 100% of the shots you don't take.

Suggestion #3: Pay attention to what is going on around you and adapt. Indies don't play enough games! You should be playing every game and watching every film in your chosen genre. You must look at your competition and really deconstruct what they are doing and how they made their game. Look at the Steam store front. What games are selling well? What games failed? Look at the reactions by fans and streamers who played your game. Pay attention to what they are not saying. Look at the expressions that vanish in a second because they are afraid to show you what they really think of your game. Take all those inputs as valid data and improve your game based on what you see around you.

My final quote about the creative process comes from artist Chuck Close
"Inspiration is for amateurs — the rest of us just show up and get to work"