



Get Ready, Get Noticed, Get Big: A Practical Guide to Marketing Your Indie Game

Intel has supported the PC gaming community since the late 1970s, when the Intel® [8088](#) processor ran at 4.77 MHz inside the [IBM PC](#). While hardware advances received the early headlines—and large studios dominated the trade press—the role of independent game developers has always been of interest. The freshest ideas, the most interesting stories, and the most ground-breaking advances still come from the *indies* who bravely bring their visions to market. Their struggle to balance the mastery of new technology and to conquer competitive marketing is growing in complexity.

Intel's new Get Ready, Get Noticed, Get Big initiative is designed to help indie game developers with vital tools, information, and guidance during each stage of the marketing process. This marketing guide is a go-to resource packed with current content for vital individuals and small teams trying to get their titles noticed in the dynamic gaming market.

The mention of any particular game, product, or tool is not an endorsement.

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The State of the Industry

According to [Newzoo](#)—the leading provider of market intelligence covering global games, eSports, and mobile markets—more than 2.2 billion gamers worldwide are generating an [estimated](#) United States dollar (USD) 108.9 billion in game revenue for 2017. That global market for games offers many enticing targets for indie developers.

LAI Global Game Service [reports](#) that Western Europe is now the market leader with 31 percent of the total sales, and it boasts the top spending per mobile title at USD 4.40 each. North America is in second place with slower growth prospects, but MENA (Middle East, North Africa, and Turkey) is projected to grow by 21 percent, year-to-year. Asia is growing at an annual 13 percent rate, Latin America increased by 14 percent in 2016, and Eastern Europe (and especially Russia) is another key emerging market. Even long-overlooked regions such as Southeast Asia remain largely untapped.

In early 2017, [Apple](#) reported that their App Store brought in USD 20 billion in revenue for the previous year. On January 1, 2017, they set a new record of USD 240 million in revenue in a single day. The top-grossing apps were games, and *Super Mario Run** from Nintendo was the number one app overall.



*Figure 1. Still popular after all these years—
Super Mario Run* was the #1 downloaded app in 2016.*

According to PCGamesN.com, Steam* will hit a record of 5,000 [new releases](#) in 2017, representing an enormous opportunity for developers. Statista breaks down the game industry [numbers](#) for 2016; and with some careful study, a clever independent could spot several profitable, growing niches. For example, should you develop for the growing elderly population in the US? According to the US Census Bureau, the US population aged 65 and over is [projected](#) to be 83.7 million people by 2050.

Statistics from the Entertainment Software Association's February 2017 [report](#) tell an encouraging story. "Video game industry growth is likely due to (1) the rise of independent video game developers, who in*

Targeting a brain-boosting puzzle game or nutrition diary might make sense. At the other end of the scale, a game for preteens in the Middle East might offer lucrative potential.

Multiple opportunities exist for hungry independents in the games market. In a 2017 blog [post](#), Kenneth Tran at Gamasutra.com offered this insight, “The independent games industry is currently in a state of near perfection.” Tran says the market has been “disrupted by digital distribution and self-publishing. Everyone knows this story: the rise of [Google Play](#), the (Apple) App Store, [Unity* Personal Edition](#), and [Free2Play*](#).”

The key takeaway from Tran's blog is the concept of *perfect competition*. An indie game developer can create incredible beauty and compete on equal terms like never before. The barriers to entry are crumbling, with free dev kits, copious training and documentation, and multiple vendors offering assistance. When you combine that newfound muscle with the availability of extensive market research and data, the ability to Get Noticed and grow into something big is enticing. Remember, [Minecraft*](#) was a wildly successful indie game before [Microsoft](#) put it on every platform on earth, [making](#) Markus *Notch* Persson a billionaire. In 2016, *Forbes* magazine [listed](#) *Minecraft* at second place in the top-selling games of all time, at 107 million copies, though still far behind [Tetris*](#), with an estimated 495 million copies sold.



Figure 2. Minecraft began as a popular indie game before it was purchased by Microsoft and became a household name.*

Why Marketing Matters

Marketing is [defined](#) as “an aggregate of functions involved in moving goods from producer to consumer...the process or technique of promoting, selling, and distributing a product or service.”

Effective marketing can mean the difference between a little-known cult classic and a blockbuster. Marketing includes your ability to spread the word, build excitement, satisfy customers, and create enthusiasm; and when done right, it is measurable, plannable, and repeatable. If you can master

shaders, physics engines, and compilers, you can certainly compete in the marketing arena. Be prepared to put in the time and effort to learn.

Game designer Sarah Woodrow estimates that developers spend only 30 percent of their working time actually coding. “The rest of the time will be everything else you need to do, especially if you’re a one-man band.” The only way to succeed if you remain small and nimble is to constantly learn and adapt. Try new angles, but fail quickly and move on. Learn how to run a business and how to do marketing and networking as you go, but be prepared to spend some time and money.

Often juggling family, work, and other commitments, the time that indies devote to their projects is already squeezed. Finding time for marketing activities is difficult. Experts sympathize, but they stress that time for marketing must be found. Intel’s Patrick DeFreitas is a partner marketing manager who outreaches to the independent gaming community. For him, the answer to the question, “When should I start marketing?” is obvious: IMMEDIATELY!

“I’ve seen reports that over 4,000 new games are launching every year,” he recently explained. “That’s 11 games a day!” He suggests you start marketing your title early. “Every day you let pass allows another stack of competitors to fall into your same genre, attracting the same customers, pulling for the same share of wallet,” Patrick explained. “You must decide how much time to devote to marketing. If you spend ‘x’ hours developing your title, you must put in an equal amount of time toward its promotion.”

Think of marketing as any activity that starts a conversation and builds a relationship with the gaming community. You’re probably marketing without realizing it. Developer blogs, websites, social media, gamer- and game-developer forums, video trailers, and a host of other tasks let you lift the curtain on your game’s development to promote its progress and features. Every chat with a potential customer is a marketing activity. Along the way, you’ll be able to gather feedback to help iterate designs and even extend the shelf life of your title.

The [How to Start Getting Noticed](#) section of this guide delves deeply into these marketing concepts, presents strategies for using them effectively, and discusses how to avoid common pitfalls.

The Right Time is Now

While it’s never too early to think about how to differentiate your game in the marketplace, waiting until release to trumpet its arrival is too late. Most game sales happen shortly after release, so it’s essential that potential customers know well in advance that your game is coming.

Marketing approaches vary depending on where you are in the development process. Use Table 1 to begin crafting your marketing strategy and creating a timeline of activities.

Table 1: *Crafting the marketing strategy.*

Dev Stage	Activity	Goal
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Initial planning	While crafting story and gameplay—and choosing a programming language, game engine, graphics, and audio tools—look for anything unique in how you're approaching a problem. Use it later when creating your value proposition.	If possible, identify elements of your game development process that set it apart from other games. Maybe you're <i>Agile with a Twist</i> or strictly use student volunteers for QA. Work that into your title's value proposition. Next, create a timeline that sets deadlines for each milestone in your marketing strategy, from defining your value proposition and writing it down to creating assets, promotional materials, and all of the subsequent steps outlined for each development stage.
Asset creation, prototyping	<p>Share game graphics and audio samples on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forums • Your website and blog • Social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube • Meetups • Game events <p>When your prototype is ready to share, give keys to beta users so they can test drive the gameplay.</p> <p>Establish a communication channel for beta users.</p> <p>Be a speaker or panelist at game events.</p> <p>Create and share at least one trailer (or several trailers) to spur excitement about your game.</p>	<p>Start communicating your value proposition through visual and audio samples, as well as early gameplay experiences. Collect user feedback and use it to refine gameplay.</p> <p>When community feedback is positive enough, encourage people to start spreading the word about what you're doing.</p> <p>Encourage people to share gameplay videos to help generate interest.</p> <p>Establish relationships with key influencers—including the press—whose interests align with your game. Get them talking about what you're up to, sharing your graphics or sound clips. Post gameplay videos and interviews you've done about the game's development.</p> <p>Use this momentum to promote interest among retail and online distribution channels.</p>
Finished development, ready to release	<p>Hold contests and value-add promotions (tell-a-friend and get a code to unlock features or Easter eggs).</p> <p>Exhibit at game events, either by purchasing a low-cost booth through a booth aggregator, or by</p>	<p>Increase interest and drive sales.</p> <p>Encourage influencers and fans to talk about your game and share their experiences to get other potential customers interested in playing and buying your game.</p>

	<p>developing a relationship with a tool vendor and landing a spot in their booth.</p> <p>If you can't exhibit, attend the show and bring promotional handouts, copies of your game, game keys, business cards, t-shirts, and so forth.</p> <p>Continue to blog about your progress and link to your website/blog wherever you can.</p>	
<p>Game released and generating interest without any marketing effort</p>	<p>Exhibit and speak at events, meetups, and trade shows.</p> <p>Hold in-store promotions or online promotions such as contests, podcasts, and value-add promotions to boost momentum as the <i>new</i> factor fades.</p> <p>Use social media and every other available channel to make people aware of where they can play and buy your game.</p> <p>If appropriate, release a new level periodically or leak clues to unlocking Easter eggs and hidden features.</p> <p>Seed stories in magazines and online via podcasts and influencer websites to build excitement over playing your game.</p>	<p>Keep your audience engaged and interested in playing your game.</p> <p>Help people find and buy your game.</p> <p>Sustain momentum and rekindle interest in your game after the thrill of its newness has faded.</p> <p>Boost sales around holidays with special add-ons.</p>

How to Start Getting Noticed

During the initial planning stage (see Table 1), think about your target audience and how to reach them. At the 2013 Konsoll conference, dedicated to the advancement of the Norwegian independent game community, famed IndieGameGirl* Emmy Jonassen [spoke](#) about *How to Successfully Market Your Indie Game on a \$0 Budget*.

She told the story of [Monkey Labour*](#) from Dawn of Play, which didn't sell many copies until they reached out for a game [review](#) at [Touch Arcade](#). After a positive review, sales spiked 600 percent. She also mentioned [Hitbox Team](#), which spent USD 100,000 building [DustForce*](#) and very little on marketing. A friend volunteered to write press releases, create trailer videos, manage media communications, and begin marketing efforts before launch. *DustForce* generated tremendous interest and awareness well ahead of release, landing over 100 articles, including a positive [piece](#) on GameSpot. Their return on investment was made in seven days, and the game quickly became profitable.

Reaching out is the first step. Rev up your social media presence, start a blog, begin networking with friends in the industry, and make new contacts—all at little cost. [Read](#) *How NOT to Market Your Indie Game* at Gamasutra, by Dushan Chaciej, CEO and lead designer at Frozen District, creator of *Warlocks 2: God Slayers**. He's made every possible mistake.

Where to Start: Irresistible Promotional Materials

Create *irresistible* promotional materials that compel sharing and discussion. Trailer videos, screenshots, press releases, social media presence, a landing page, and a development blog are the best places to invest your time, Jonassen advises, with the trailer being particularly valuable.

Trailer Video

The game development tutorials at Envato include an Indie Game Dev's Marketing [Checklist](#), written by Robert DellaFave, a self-described *logic nerd* who founded Fourth Dimensional Gaming. It suggests that the trailer doesn't have to be "overly flashy or dramatic, but it should leave viewers with a lasting impression of your game," as he put it. Create a trailer using video-capture software and editing tools. Customers use trailer videos to see if they like a title's appearance, music, art, concept, and playability. Game journalists rely on trailers to sort out the clutter of a jammed inbox.

As a good example, Jonassen pointed to the trailer [video](#) for the gold edition of the PC game [Guacamelee!*](#), a side-scrolling shooter from Drink Box Studios. Created by Kert Gartner—a noted leader in trailer production—the first 3–5 seconds are entrancing, with artwork, action, and music all combining into a happy frenzy. Lasting less than 60 seconds, the trailer contains testimonial pull-quotes showing that it was updated after positive reviews came in, and ends with a call to action and logo. It's fun, frantic, and leaves you wanting more.



Figure 3. The trailer for the gold edition of the PC version of Guacamelee! is instantly funny, engaging, and lively, and lasts just 59 seconds.

Virtual reality (VR) games are a new challenge for creating trailers, as you'll need to convey the excitement of a 3D world in a 2D video. Gartner is experimenting with mixed-reality environments to film players against a green screen, and also using avatar-based trailers to enhance the visual appeal. Such efforts can be time-consuming and require enormous processing power to play, record, mix, and stream, but the new Intel® Core™ i9-7980XE Extreme Edition processor can do it all from a single system. For more information about simultaneously handling VR game-trailer production tasks that previously required multiple computers, check out this [article](#) at the Intel® Software Developer Zone.

Screenshots

Screenshots are another important weapon in your arsenal. They should be high resolution, with excellent composition that's well-lit. Avoid dark images, skip the menus and interface unless they are part of your genius, and concentrate on the beauty of the creation. When choosing a screenshot, pull an engaging scene that captures what DellaFave describes as "your game's most magnificent moments." Get your viewers to sink into the art and want to see more, like in this scene from [Secrets of Raetikon*](#), created by the Viennese team Broken Rules.



Figure 4. This screenshot from *Secrets of Raetikon** shows the dreamy, atmospheric, 2D adventure game.

Press Releases

Press releases have to engage immediately, with passion and sizzle. Keep in mind that stressed-out deadline writers will like pieces from which they can cut and paste, so make sure your writing is good—don't assume it will get *cleaned up* before publishing. Jonassen advises that the first paragraph is crucial, and it must summarize all the key points you want to convey. Place the reader into the game, give them a point of view as the player, and sell the sizzle.

Fact Sheets

DellaFave also suggests creating one-page fact sheets with links to your website, landing page, and developer's blog, plus contact information, website addresses, team history and pedigree, and other titles you have worked on. Readers like quotes because they bring more life to a written page and make the writing more genuine and relatable. Include quotes in your fact sheets when possible.

The screenshots, trailer, press release, and fact sheet are crucial pieces of your promotional materials. Check out [presskit\(\)](#)* for guidance. It's a free resource for beginners who need help getting traction or need templates to speed up their work. See also this [infographic](#) from *Entrepreneur* Magazine* for some timely writing tips.

Landing Page

Once you have someone's attention, you should drive them somewhere, and that's where a good landing page comes in. Create a unique web address to convert visitors into customers, and include an instantly-recognizable button for game purchases. The only navigation off that page should be to the purchasing process or to provide more information about the company. The page should be stocked with screenshots, testimonials, and other art. Your landing page should also be easy to share via Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Google+.

Developer's Blog

Another key to initiating and maintaining customer contact is the developer's blog, which is one of the best ways to reach out to your fans. Jonassen says that sites with a dev blog bring in 55 percent more traffic than those without blogs. She advises that you post at least once a week.

At [becomingminimalist.com](#), writer Joshua Becker gives some important [reasons](#) why he believes more people should blog. Number 4 on the list is, "You'll develop an eye for meaningful things." Once you start thinking of your blog as a weekly task, you'll find yourself making notes about things that readers might like to read about. You will soon realize that you have plenty to say. And because this dynamic industry is constantly evolving and you're surrounded by interesting, creative personalities, you can cultivate those relationships and build new ones by staying in contact through your blog.

Good dev blogs include eye-catching artwork and give subscribers an easy option for an RSS feed, email subscription, or social subscription. With each post, you'll ring the bell and get fans (and the press) to return. Include a download button or link to make it easy to pull a demo, or the actual game if you're into the revision phase and you want to keep interest up.



Figure 5. Dev blogs such as this one from Drink Box Studios are a key to driving traffic and continually engaging your customers. Note the easy subscription buttons on the right.

Reaching Out to the Press

Be systematic about contacting the trade press and requesting they officially review your game. There is a *herd mentality* to getting reviews; once you get that first one, you're in the herd, and more will follow if you keep reaching out. Some of the many places to find reviewers to choose from include [GameSpot](#), [Gamasutra](#), [VentureBeat](#), [IndieGames](#), [GamesIndustry.biz](#), and [Polygon](#).

Be as methodical about generating press coverage as you are about tracking down a compiler bug. First create a list of press contacts and then grow that into a spreadsheet where you can track what you sent, when you sent it, the response you got, and so forth. To build the list, collect business cards at conferences and conventions, get contact information from bylines on websites, and spend time churning the web for names. Networking can help—share with other indies and always be on the lookout for new tips. Turnover in the industry is non-stop, so maintaining your press contacts list will require time, but it's solid gold.

Once your promotional materials are ready to go and have been scrubbed for errors, contact game

reviewers via social media and email. Create a template for introducing yourself, your team, and the game, but be sure to personalize the message for each reviewer. Answer the question, “Why should this reviewer care?” Make your pitch compelling, clear, and concise. This is your elevator pitch, your reason for being; take time to polish it into a shiny object.

Following Up

Always follow up with your press contacts and reviewers, especially when you break through and get some much-coveted publicity. Jonassen told of an example where she followed up after publication of a review and thanked them for taking the interest. She got a reply, made a friend, and expanded her network. That contact now republishes her press releases or passes her info along without fail. And she keeps in touch while faithfully commenting on new articles that her contacts publish. When she sees her contacts at game shows or conferences, Jonassen has a more genuine relationship.

Your marketing campaign goal is simple—to build and maintain an adoring fan base. Make it easy to discover your game, using social media to post updates. Post on social media daily, if possible, even if you’re just passing something along. Think of it as the *I’m alive* circuit for your marketing efforts. Be active in forums and blogs, and participate in game jams and other events. Show up at your local game development community events. They’re desperate for the help and welcome new faces as well as old veterans. Start a [crowdfunder](#) not just to pull in money but to help with your online presence.

Convert Visitors into Active Fans

When you create and update promotional materials and regularly post a blog, you systematically convert casual visitors into paying customers. Even better is when you *upgrade* your customers into active fans. Regular news about your game and your company is vital to your growth. Nurture your fan base with personal touches, and respond quickly to questions. But don’t just post and respond—drive the conversation with dialogue starters. Make fans feel like part of the process by seeking input on certain decisions. And remember to remain professional when responding to trolls and critics. Simply explain the reason for your decision, but don’t throw gasoline on the fire and engage in a two-week flame war.

According to Jonassen, the Canadian team at Sauropod Studio developed [Castle Story*](#) with some polite interest but not many sales. They hadn’t put much effort into sales materials, and their first demo was too short. But once they had their 11-minute story told and recorded, it got posted to [Reddit](#). Within an hour they started getting an avalanche of serious interest from the gaming community, which they were eventually able to convert into sales.

Examples of starter promotional materials such as those for *Castle Story* are available across the Internet. If you know of a game that does a good job, start at their website and download their materials to get an idea of what you need.

Maintain Your Marketing Momentum

Once you have a playable demo, you're ready to step into the limelight either as an exhibitor or a vendor. Or create your own event. For example, *Inc. Magazine* has an eight-point [primer](#) on staging your own event. They describe how to employ GPS tracking, add augmented reality, manage social media, and more. Some of their advice may seem costly, but many examples don't require a big budget. The key is to plug away on social media with continual build-up and updates, via your Twitter handle, Facebook page, and blog posts.

Contests are another inexpensive way to create value-add promotions. Insert Easter eggs into your game around major holidays or in conjunction with an upcoming event. Enlist the aid of your customers by suggesting that if they contact a friend, they'll get a secret code. This was hugely successful with games like [Candy Crush*](#), created by United Kingdom-based [King.com](#), and was responsible for 500 million downloads, an average of 6.7 million daily users by 2013, with average daily income of USD 633,000 at the iOS App Store alone. In 2015, King was [purchased](#) by Activision for USD 5.9 billion.

Podcasts and interviews are another way to spread your message. With the right interviewer, you can talk about your philosophy, passions, and motivations. Interviews are easy to share and blog about when they're recorded as videos. Remember that if you're not in the right frame of mind, or your interviewer isn't well prepared, the results live forever. So come prepared, be alert, and preferably know your questions in advance.

Common Mistakes and Pitfalls to Avoid

Keep these points in mind while working on your marketing activities:

- Establish a schedule of marketing activities and commit to it. Don't stop.
- Plan to spend *at least* as much time and energy on marketing activities as you do on development. Some experts advise that you may drop to a ratio of one-third development, two-thirds marketing.
- Be careful about what you share—don't give away your *secret sauce*. Also, if you provide a peek at what you're doing too early, you can build up a buzz that you can't satisfy quickly, and attention will drift away.
- Use a public voice in your blogging and social media that addresses your audience as your peers, not your minions. Keep a sense of humor, humility, and wonder about the road you're on.
- Know the roles of your influencers and reviewers. For example, if you're building a PC game, don't contact people or publications solely focused on mobile games.

- Tell your game's story with an eye toward its value proposition. Whatever it is that makes your game special, be it art, design, story, music, or cleverness, sell that continually. Entrepreneur.com has a good [tutorial](#) on developing a value prop, and it's crucial. Of course, be careful not to oversell it in the process. Let others draw their own conclusions about the game's quality.

What Makes You Unique?

Your first marketing strategy step is to develop your value proposition. If you know what makes your title unique, and what the target market should see in your product, you're way ahead. Recall the first brainstorming sessions you conducted, and remember what motivated you to design the game. If you remember thinking, "There's never been a game like this," or "Nobody has ever done this before," you have the beginnings of a unique story. Use the concepts that help you stand out and make you different to develop your company slogan and focus your marketing activities.

To flesh out your ideas, follow these steps from [sitepoint.com](#), written by Alyssa Gregory, founder of [Small Business Bonfire](#), a social, educational, and collaborative community for entrepreneurs.

1. Describe your target audience. Are they using PCs, smartphones, or tablets? What is their age group? Do they like sports, technology, or just a quick puzzle or game?
2. Explain the problem you're solving. Why does the world need another shooter? What's unique about your puzzle game?
3. List the big benefits. Will they be entertained, mystified, challenged, or otherwise satisfied?
4. Define your promise. Do you vow to be the most intriguing, have the most engaging theme or the most beautiful art, or stay true to your mission? A big benefit to any company is to share in a common promise that people can rally around.
5. With the thoughts from the first four steps, write a full paragraph with three or four full sentences—aim for at least 60 words.
6. Take out the chainsaw, cut that word salad down, and saw off the sharp edges. Smooth the slogan until it's memorable, repeatable, and your whole team agrees with every word.

Here are just a few examples of popular value propositions from the business world:

- Fast, incredibly fast relief. – Anacin*
- Melts in your mouth, not in your hand. – M&M* Candies
- Clinically proven to reduce dandruff. – Head & Shoulders*
- You get fresh, hot pizza delivered to your door in 30 minutes or less—or it's free. – Domino's Pizza
- When it absolutely, positively has to be there overnight. – FedEx
- Get Met. It Pays. – Metropolitan Life
- We are THE low-fare airline. – Southwest Airlines

At Convince & Convert, they [list](#) things to consider when developing a value proposition:

1. Unabashedly appeal to your ideal customer. For example, Abercrombie & Fitch says its ideal customers are *cool, good-looking people*. They're focused on a segment, not mass appeal.
2. Use unique personalities. If you have a personable, identifiable leader, use him/her!
3. Avoid the *superstar* rat race. Don't strive to be the best—stand out with a unique approach.

Demographics

To create a value proposition, you must know your target audience. How old are they, are they male or female, do they come from one region or are they global, and what are they interested in? What are their buying habits? What makes them tick?

At gamerefinery.com, Joel Julkunen [wrote](#) an article about target audiences and competitors. As the leader of GameRefinery's analytics department, he creates algorithms and statistical models that pull the data apart and make it understandable. He understands the marketing challenge that game developers face. "The natural strategy is to make a game that appeals to your target audience AND at the same time stands out from the crowd of similar games." If you're writing a role-playing game (RPG), you need to appeal to traditional RPG enthusiasts. But at the same time, you must differentiate yourself, or you're just another title.

Julkunen suggests plotting your game in a matrix to determine where it sits in the cognitive and dimensional spectrums. On the horizontal axis, pinpoint your game's placement between *acting quickly versus acting correctly*, and *simple versus complex* thinking. Think about the skills your game aims to teach. Strategy games focus on a player's cognitive skills by emphasizing tactical thinking, puzzle solving, and pattern detection. Speed is not important but being logical and methodical are. Shooting games challenge players to develop sensory and motor skills such as speed, aim, and reaction. Plot where your game falls on this axis, between physical (sensomotoric) and mental (cognitive) skills.

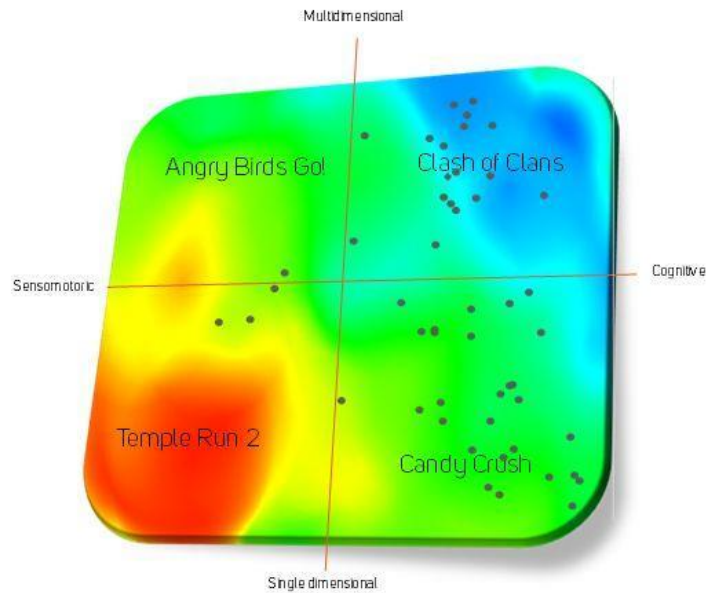


Figure 6. Simple 2x2 matrix used by Julkunen to show where games fall based on mental versus physical, and complex versus simple axes. The real-time strategy (RTS) game *Dune** would be just right of center on the X axis, but toward the very top of the Y axis (source: GameRefinery.com).

The vertical axis differentiates between *core layers* to model complexity. As Julkunen describes it, single-dimensional games are simple, because they focus around one core layer, such as repeatedly solving scrambled word puzzles. At the opposite end of the spectrum are games like *Clash of Clans**, a mobile strategy [game](#) that requires multidimensional thinking about planning, asset optimization, and resource allocation. An example of an exceedingly intricate challenge would be a real-time strategy game like [Dune*](#), created by Paris-based [Cryo](#) in 1992. To win, players must balance offense and defense, create buildings or weapons, plan assaults, conserve resources, and watch for sporadic sandworms, all in real time. There is a lot of clicking, but not a lot of aiming. You now have a two-by-two matrix to plot where your game sits: physical versus mental, and simple versus complex.

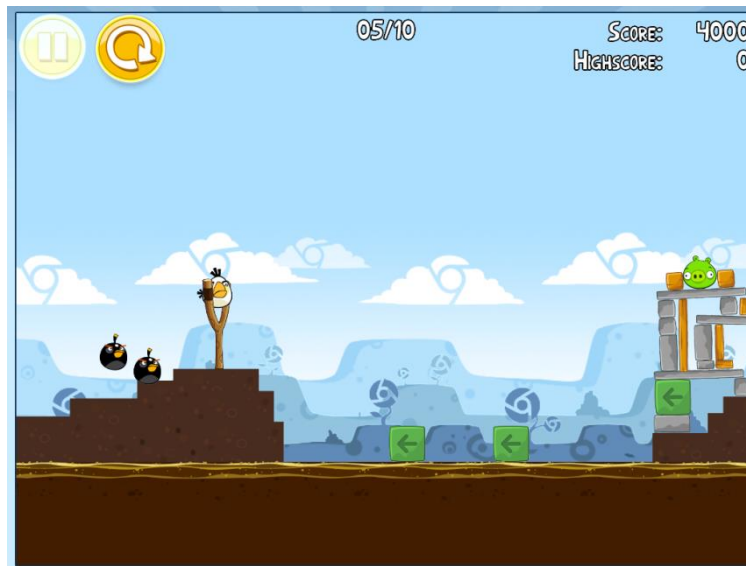


Figure 7. In Angry Birds, players master the physical task of pulling the rubber band on the catapult while calculating how explosions will destroy structures and remove obnoxious pigs. This game includes physical AND mental components to a multilayered challenge.*

With your matrix done, build on your assumptions about games you're already familiar with, and determine what player types to attract. Also consider what you know about top-selling games and decide if you have an easy story to tell that appeals to buyers of equivalent best-selling titles. Study successful franchises for insights into their appeal, approach, marketing, outreach, and other tasks—good examples are everywhere.

Personas: Mythical Prototypes

While in development, create a persona—a mythical prototypical consumer—to guide you along. A persona represents an important cluster of behavior patterns that can be grouped by purchasing decisions, adoption of technology, lifestyle choices, service preferences, and other behaviors, attitudes, and motivations. As you identify these patterns, you can create a generalized character to represent the entire segment.

INDIE GAME PLAYER TREVOR

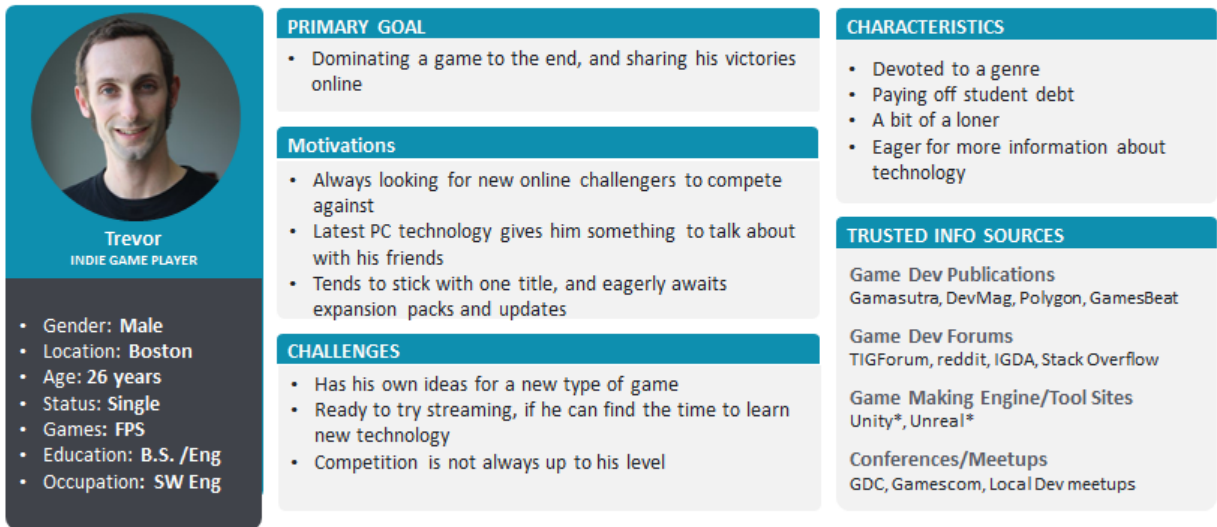


Figure 8. A detailed persona capturing the motivations and tendencies of a certain gamer type.

At the Gurusability blog, Papa_Lamp [discusses](#) some overall persona themes in the gaming world. He cited an article in Gamasutra by Flavio Camasco debating the difference between hardcore and casual gamers, and he argues that a serious [Journey*](#) addict is just as hardcore as someone who plays a lot of [Shovel Knight*](#) or puts in long hours managing the farm in [Stardew Valley*](#). He argues you might as well differentiate solely on the amount of time a player commits to a title.

Papa_Lamp then describes the gathering of metrics to determine player behavior. He discusses work by [Lennart Nacke](#), from the University of Ontario Institute of Technology, who presented [a talk](#) at the 2009 Canada Game Developers Conference (GDC-C). Nacke advocated the use of gameplay metrics to help identify and build personas, and while data can be hard to track down, the premise remains true. Nacke suggested mixing qualitative and quantitative metrics, and described how those feed into the bigger picture to inform game design.

Kevin O'Connor, president of user insight at [UXMag](#) calls personas, "The foundation for a great user experience," and says personas should hold true regardless of age, gender, or education.

O'Connor recommends conducting one-on-one interviews with at least 30 people before studying the results to watch what patterns evolve. He also suggests the interviews be conducted *in context*, such as where the gamer plays, to ensure there are no missed environmental clues. Such formal studies can cost around USD 35,000 and take three to six months—several lifetimes for an indie developer. You'll have to use your own insights and anecdotes to replace a formal report, but the underlying science is important to know.

A few online tools are available to help you create a persona, including UpCloseAndPersona.com and ImFORZA. The tools are only as good as the assumptions you use to create them, but they're a start. You can create simple personas based on a fictional name, an assumed set of details about their background, and a simple statement about their goals. For example, *Andre is a French hipster with too much spare time who wants to be entertained by a challenging racing game. Or Tomoko is a middle-aged Tokyo woman with a demanding schedule who needs an easy game or puzzle while riding a commuter train.*

If you've interacted with the gaming community at large, you probably already know a lot about your ideal customer segment. You may already have an idea of who your target audience is, based on feedback you've received. Obviously, the more time and money you spend to identify the persona's traits, the better.

Once you've started selling your title, you can easily answer questions about your customers with quick polls and surveys. SurveyMonkey*, PollEverywhere, Typeform, SoGoSurvey, and many others exist solely to help you ask questions and get answers as you strive to Get Big.

Competitive Analysis

Another key tool in your marketing arsenal is a competitive analysis, which is a broad statement about your business strategy and how you relate to the competition. The more you know about the companies battling in your space, the better. According to Entrepreneur.com, if you can [build](#) a clear picture of your competition, you'll understand their strengths and weaknesses. "With this evaluation, you can establish what makes your product or service unique—and therefore what attributes you should play up to attract your target market," they write.

Inc.com suggests [asking](#) these questions about your competitors, adapted for the gaming world:

- What are their strengths? Artwork, theme music, playability, extensibility, community following, and established presence are all areas where you may be vulnerable.
- What weaknesses can you take advantage of? Maybe they are under-staffed, over-worked, under-funded, or missed their target date. Maybe their music is basic, their art is bland, but they have a killer artificial intelligence.
- What are their basic objectives? Do they seek to gain market share? Do they attempt to capture premium clients? See your industry through their eyes. What are they trying to achieve?
- What marketing strategies do they use? Look at their advertising, public relations, and so forth.
- How can you take market share away from them?
- How will they respond when you enter the market?

This is where you set aside your developer's hat and put on the business person's uniform. Think of this process as its own puzzle game that requires quick thinking, long-term strategy, and fast reflexes. Make it fun!

Gather competitors' information from their websites, such as the size of their team and their expertise. If you don't yet know who your competitors are, talk to trade show attendees, read community boards, explore gaming events, and talk to sales people. Build a spreadsheet or a grid where you can collect the information. You may not know a competitor's annual sales, but you can use high, medium, and low for starters.

Try tracking down these key differentiators while building your grid:

- List similar titles to your game.
- Estimate their pricing model.
- Figure out where they distribute.
- Determine the team size.
- Analyze their strengths and weaknesses.
- Locate them on a map.
- Guess the strength of their reputation.
- Weight their commitment to your genre.
- Rank their threat as strong, medium, or low.

Once the grid is built, fine-tune your assumptions, keep gathering information, and keep asking questions. Your future depends on your insights into your competitors and how fast you can get into the market. For example, understand the concept of MVP—Minimum Viable Product. At Agile Alliance, the [term](#) refers to how many bells and whistles should exist in a demo to draw instructive feedback. If you extrapolate the concept to competitive analysis, you can determine if you can safely cut levels, complexity, characters, or structures. If your competitors don't have 50+ levels, 25 weapons, or 12 character options, you probably don't need those either to release your title.

Talk with anyone you can reach. If you find a competitor at an event, ask them a few questions in person, if possible. Who knows—you may make a friend who could become a partner some day! After all, Digi-Capital* [reports](#) that 2016 was a record-breaker for mergers and acquisitions in the games industry.

Strategy and Goals

Your ability to set realistic, achievable marketing goals and strategies is crucial to Get Big. That starts with writing them down. Tadhg Kelly, creative director at Jawfish Games, said it best in a GamesBrief [article](#) about the biggest marketing mistakes that indies make. His succinct answer: "Making a game that has no marketing story." In the same article, Oscar Clark, evangelist for Applifier, says teams should always ask "So what?" In other words, so you're making a great (insert genre) game...so what? Is that enough of a marketing story?

At GameSparks.com, the team created a [blog](#) devoted exclusively to game marketing. They suggest two *artifacts* to guide your marketing efforts: a marketing strategy and a marketing plan. The strategy guides the overall objective, while the tactics get you there.

Table 2 includes some keys to what GamesBrief considers a good marketing strategy.

Table 2: Keys to a good marketing strategy.

Element	Description
GaaP versus GaaS	Are you a product or a service? Will you have frequent updates with new add-ons that a subscriber would get excited about? Or will you launch a product and then move onto the next project?
Business Model	Will you charge a one-time fee, or give the title away and collect cash via in-app items?
Target Audience	Define your distribution and marketing choices by who you are targeting, and not the other way around.
Platforms and App Stores	Unless you plan a multiplatform launch, your decisions about console versus PC, smartphone versus tablet, and Xbox* versus Nintendo are vital to know up front.
Geography	Are you going global or staying regional? Do you have translation services, or are you restricted to a single geography? The fewer words on your screens, the less you have to translate, so your early design decisions could be guided by these answers.
Budget	Even if your budget is small, you have time. Always think about where to spend money and time. And consider a <i>kill criteria</i> , where you stop spending any effort on a project.
Marketing Channels	Events, reviews, ads, launch parties, blog posts, social media, and other channels can help get your word out. Which ones seem right to you?
Measurement	How can you gather statistics to better allocate your limited resources?

For more information, [read](#) *How to Publish a Game*, by Nicholas Lovell. It's packed with tips, tools, and strategies. Black Shell Media provides equivalent [tips](#) while offering a full range of marketing solutions. An [academic paper](#) by Peter Zackariasson and Timothy L. Wilson at academia.edu goes into more depth.

Once the overall strategy is in place, or at least forming, develop specific tactics for each sector. See these posts and articles for valuable information:

- [Anecdotes](#) about successful video game marketing from Creative Guerilla Marketing.
- At entrepreneur.com, Mike Templeman discusses specific tactics to [capitalize](#) on *Pokémon Go**.
- Read about the [battle](#) between Xbox One* and Sony PS4* at the Strength in Business website.
- An article from David Murdio gives digital marketing [tips](#) for video games, which follows up on his article about video and social media marketing [tips](#).

Your marketing plan is a compilation of the strategies and tactics you intend to use. Keep in mind what Mike Tyson said, a US boxer who often knocked out opponents very early in his matches. “Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the face,” he replied when asked how well he thought he carried out his plan after entering the ring. Be prepared to adapt to changing conditions in the marketplace—flexibility is vital.

Marketing Goals

Management guru Peter Drucker has a famous saying, “You can’t manage what you can’t measure.” His point is simple—if you don’t know a statistic before you make a change, you won’t know how much impact your change had on the result. Software engineers are familiar with the principle of changing only one thing at a time to see if they moved the needle on a measurement. If you use a shotgun approach and try several tactics simultaneously, you might not learn which tactic had a big impact.

For indie developers, that might be a hard discipline to follow because you usually don’t have time to try one tactic and measure the results. What you *can* do is try to devise statistics that capture the effects of a single change. For example, gather Google stats on website traffic, then start blogging more often and measure the changes. Track the number of your Twitter and Facebook followers, and determine the rate of change when you post a video versus a simple comment.

Sometimes your data gathering may consist of simply, “Hey, traffic is up.” You can get a bit more scientific and measure the before-and-after results as you go. Then you can revisit your tactics and goals, and give yourself a specific task, such as, “I want to increase traffic by 10 percent in the next two months.” This gives you something to execute against, focusing your efforts.

Lead Generation

A sales team lives and dies with their lead generation tactics. Because one of your hats is to lead your game’s sales efforts, you must understand the term. Lead generation is the concept of developing a list of names that you can hopefully turn into sales.

On this topic, a web search will pull up lengthy advice from [Hubspot](#), [InfusionSoft*](#), [ThriveHive](#), [Lynda](#), and [Salesforce](#). Most of them want to sell a service, and some, like [Unbounce](#), [MarketJS](#), and [DuctTapeMarketing](#), will help you turn the task into a game of sorts, or offer tips.

Here are some ways to start generating leads:

- Create a new demo video and circulate it far and wide.
- Check your website to make sure the call to action still stands out after you squint at it like a cowboy in a dust storm. If it becomes invisible, fix it!
- Obey [Hick’s Law](#) of web design—give your website visitors fewer choices, not more. Focus is good.
- Capture email addresses in exchange for content.

- Use services such as [FollowerWonk](#) to identify leads on Twitter.
- Try tools like Quora that use yes/no questions to track links. Here's a [link](#) to a case study about building connections that turn into conversions.
- Post presentation slide decks to sites such as SlideShare. According to one case [study](#), SlideShare has 70 million visitors, and the site is [addictive](#). Be sure to include a link back to your landing page where your readers can get more information.
- Speak at events. Look for opportunities to talk about your journey, and get used to making humble brags, spreading around the credit, and thanking your long-suffering significant other in public.
- Update your email signature. Make sure it includes your contact information and logo. If you recently won a contest or landed some good praise, update your signature block.
- Try renting an email list. LaunchBit is a good [place](#) to start, among many others.

All of these tips have one goal: build a better list of leads. The end goal is converting those leads into sales. Think of your efforts as beginning a conversation. Your job is to continually create new content to share, new conversations, and new ways to engage your growing fan base. Building a buzz takes a brick-by-brick mentality, and it's much like tending a garden.

In one of the great post-mortems at Gamasutra, Rob de Lara [described](#) one of his problems in getting [NyxQuest: Kindred Spirits*](#), an award-winning action-based platformer for Wii World*, completed on time. "I know the *many hats* issue is a common *wrong* for indie developers, but it took me totally by surprise," he said. "I didn't expect the management, paperwork, and PR requirements of a video game to take so much time. We had (and still have) to devote a lot of time to write emails, request reviews, prepare trailers and screenshots, and answer interviews. After a few months, we feel that there are still a lot of people who haven't heard of *NyxQuest*. Some magazines have nominated our game for *Best Sleeper Hit*, and there's a reason for that. Hopefully, we will be able to address this issue and create more buzz for our next game. We wanted to create a nice blog, dev diary, and additional media content, but because of the enormous amount of work, we had to leave it for the future. Lesson learned: PR is a huge area that requires full-time dedication. The more time you spend here, the better the awareness of your title will be."

If you are going global, tailor your messaging to individual regions. This obviously takes more time and effort, but trying to use a *one message fits all* approach could shortchange your relationship-building efforts. Similarly, if you're collecting demographics data that seem to be pointing you in a certain direction, go with that flow. Building a true buzz in one demographic can help your game catch fire in other sectors. But it takes a spark to get it going.

Creating a Brand

Your brand sums up your appeal, positioning, persona, attitude, and design changes, all in one subtle statement. According to *Inc. Magazine*, killer brands all do the same [things](#) well:

1. Focus on a single brand.
2. Snag a good domain name.

3. Keep it simple.
4. Choose one: descriptive, evocative, or whimsical.
5. Avoid branding by committee.
6. Apply your brand consistently.
7. Protect your brand.

Forbes has a great [checklist](#) for creating a great brand, and so [does](#) Branding Strategy Insider. See Strategic Thunder's [list](#) of questions to answer; Brand Butterfly also has some good [bullets](#) to consider. Whatever you come up with, maintain the identity religiously to establish your corporate identity. The brand should be splashed all over your website, business cards, landing page, contact page, download page, dev blog, and other marketing materials. Each facet of your company—from audio to video—needs to be consistently and appropriately branded.

Multiple books and articles have been written about the top branding mistakes companies make; [Entrepreneur.com](#), [Precision Intermedia](#), [All Business](#), and [Inc.](#) are just a few. Read them, and extrapolate to the indie game dev world. For example, Xerox is a global term for photocopying—but the company once tried to kill the use of *Xerox* as a replacement. Esurance gave in to a few critics and killed their beloved babe mascot *Erin Esurance* just as she was gaining serious traction. Colgate thought it could pivot from toothpaste to packaged food, even though the two are hardly related. Burger King's creepy *King* mascot was thought to be a sure winner in the board room, but it wasn't. A Chevy executive once demanded that employees drop the beloved short-hand term and use the whole word—Chevrolet.

Working Without Deep Pockets

Indie budgets are notoriously thin. Nevertheless, start budgeting and tracking costs and expenses because when you start that second title, you can refer back to these costs.

Budgeting is more than just wishful thinking. As you become more of a business leader, you'll have to become familiar with terms such as return on investment (ROI), risk versus reward, and cost versus benefit. If you don't know the costs, you can't calculate the numbers.

ROI is an attempt to use data to steer decisions. If you expect to invest USD 100 on productivity tools, you better see at least USD 101 in return on that investment. You could get better returns on upgrading to [Unity Pro*](#) or buying more RAM for your main system. The art in calculating ROI isn't in the numbers; it's in how you put a number on things that are difficult to quantify.

For example, what is the expected benefit of using an agency to create your branding? Let's say the cost would be USD 8,000. What's the benefit of offloading that task to a vendor rather than your overworked teammate? How do you measure the expected (or at least, hoped-for) outcome? Trying to put a dollar figure on the value of what it's worth to *not* have to complete your project on your own is not easy, but it's certainly worth doing.

$$\text{ROI} = \frac{(\text{Gain from Investment} - \text{Cost of Investment})}{\text{Cost of Investment}}$$

Figure 9. To calculate an ROI requires a firm grasp on inputs and outcomes.

You can find ROI calculators at many places on the web; [Financial Calculators](#), [Easy Calculation](#), and [Money-Zine*](#), are just a few examples.

Cost-Benefit Analysis

Cost-benefit analysis starts with being systematic and data-driven about where you spend your time and efforts. Multiple online tools and cost-benefit analysis explanations are available at [The Balance](#), [Mind Tools*](#), [Chron](#), and [Investopedia*](#). Allocating time and creating an efficient daily routine may seem difficult when you're juggling school, work, relationships, and physical well-being, but it helps to have a plan. And in that plan, get granular in your indie project's budget. Don't simply allocate 10 hours a week to game-making; break that down further so that your marketing efforts don't get overlooked as your journey continues.

Elon Musk, the famed South African entrepreneur who changed the world through *Tesla**, *SpaceX**, and other endeavors, famously [declared](#) that he hasn't read any books on time management. But he manages time in his own way. "It's very important to have a feedback loop, where you're constantly thinking about what you've done and how you could be doing it better. That's the single best piece of advice: constantly think about how you could be doing things better and questioning yourself."

If you have enough data to calculate the ROI on a decision such as branching out to multiple geographies, you're far ahead of most indie developers. More commonly, game devs make their ROI decisions based on intuition, which is hit-or-miss at best. The good news is that if you at least attempt to calculate ROIs and cost-benefit analyses, you are more memorable to investors. And that alone would make exploring data-driven marketing a little more important.

Metrics: In Data We Trust

Consider this graph of game sales for *Beat Hazard**, an indie title from [Cold Beam Games](#). This galactic arcade shooter set to the beat of a player's chosen music [hit](#) USD 2 million in total sales.

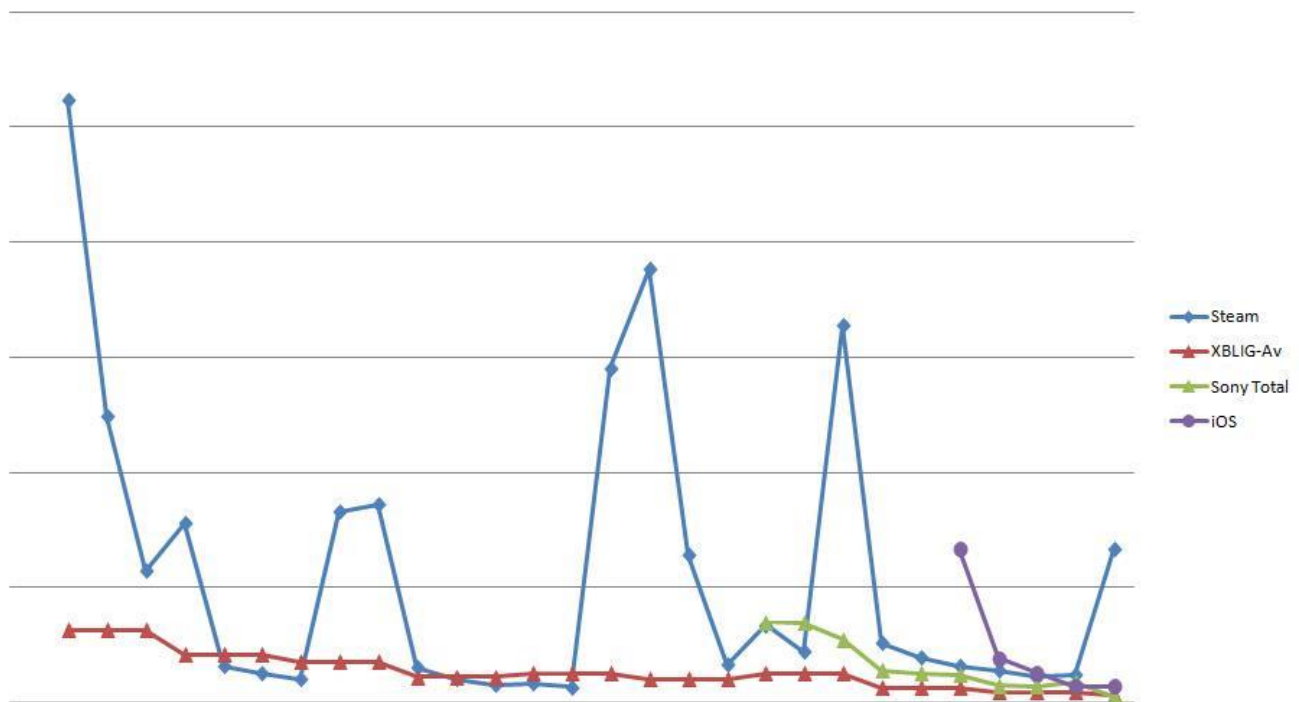


Figure 10. Sales graph for *Beat Hazard**, showing sales on the Y-axis and time on the X-axis. Marketing around holidays defied the typical initial burst/long tail pattern for most games (source: ColdBeamGames.com).

Most games start with an initial peak and taper off over time, and *Beat Hazard's* launch was typical. This particular title benefited from incorporating new content in the game around holiday themes, generating new spikes from refreshed gameplay.

The best indie developers are keen on gathering metrics for everything they can find. Think of all the different aspects of your business that you can track:

- Buzz on social media and number of reviews, downloads, and visitors
- Number of likes on YouTube and Facebook
- Number of followers on Twitter, Facebook, and Google+
- Number of market influencers you've impacted

Under Drucker's maxim, that you can't manage something if you can't measure it, you need to gather metrics on all your key marketing tasks.

In addition, you must recognize when an idea didn't work. If you had a marketing goal to increase traffic by 10 percent with a new video, and there's barely a bump, then something wasn't right with the video, the distribution, the timing, or more. Perhaps the answer lies in the visitor comments. Try again with a new video that is different and completely fresh.

At Developer.com, the staff wrote an intriguing [article](#) entitled *I'd Rather Be Coding: Gathering Metrics*. It explains why gathering metrics is as important to beginning marketers as it is for project managers.

Analytics

Google Analytics is a big advantage for today's indie developer. Check out the success stories Google compiled at their [site](#), or read some of their tutorials.

Gamasutra has an [article](#) by Nemanja Bondzolic about using "Google Analytics in Games" where they tracked how users interact with [SUPERVERSE*](#), an online arcade space shooter. They needed to know the most popular hardware configurations that users played the game with. They gathered information by tracking usage, which proved helpful for their future planning.

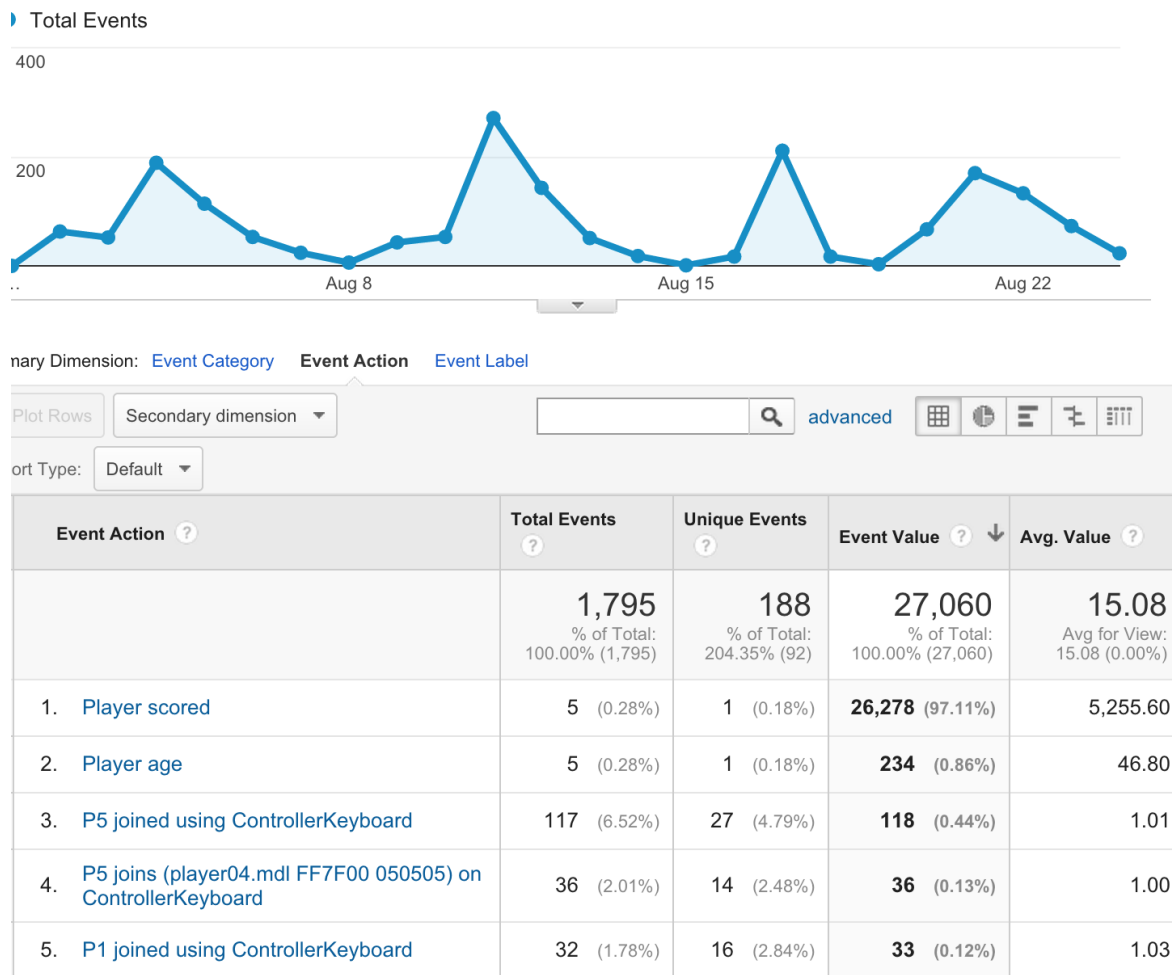


Figure 11. Google Analytics can reveal important data about user events (source: GamaSutra.com).

Some pitfalls to avoid when gathering analytics include:

- Information becoming dated quickly due to external events, changes in your game, or other variables.
- A single source for statistics, and always needing confirmation about the data you gather.
- Drawing conclusions based on statistics for one region that may not apply to other geographies, so as with all measurements, use some judgement.

As you gain marketing expertise, become familiar with search-engine optimization (SEO). Make sure your game shows up in a results list when a consumer searches for titles similar to yours. The web contains plenty of information on this topic, and an article from [Moz](#) is especially helpful with an eight-step process to get you to that promised land.

Forbes published an interesting [article](#) that describes the 12 most effective SEO strategies for 2017. In it, John Rampton talks about content length as a key motivator for ranking position results. When writing your blog posts, for example, avoid the tendency to stop too soon. According to Rampton, “virtually every study done to date shows a correlation between longer content and higher rankings. Some suggest 1,200–1,300 words, while others say 1,500 words should be the minimum. If you want your content to rank, aim for a minimum length of 1,200 words for standard blog posts, and 2,000 words+ for [timeless] content.”

Marketing Channels

Marketing channels are how goods and services flow to consumers. Game titles can move directly from the creator to the customer via their own website, for example. Or a retailer can be involved in selling boxed games of top titles.

Your choice of distribution channel(s) depends on how hard you want to work. If you collect the cash directly via your website, you'll become a PayPal expert, you'll be generating unique product keys, and you'll be chasing accounts. This method can become quite time consuming.

Channel marketing includes digital marketing, direct marketing, email marketing, and more. Trends come and go quickly, so you'll want to collect metrics to determine if email campaigns are working better than banner ads for you, for example. According to a 2017 [article](#) by Andrew Medal at Entrepreneur.com, as many as 60 percent of all banner ads are clicked on by mistake. About 91 percent are viewed for less than one second. Clearly, the metrics just aren't there any more for banner ads.

By far the most common marketing channel for indies now are download sites. Consumers can download indie games from multiple providers that act as wholesalers, such as the Xbox Games [Store](#), [Microsoft](#), [Steam](#), [GameJolt](#), [IndieDB](#), and [EpicBundle](#). While you may lose a percentage of sale revenues via the bigger sites, you benefit from increased exposure and traffic.

Shows and Events

Game jams, trade shows, and gaming events are great places to concentrate your marketing efforts. Your budget may not allow for extensive travel, but crashing on a friend's sofa and carpooling are still common for many indies who are starting up. And although you might not be able to offer T-shirts, key rings, or USB drives, walk around the shows and events to see what others are doing.

Some of the most well-known indie gatherings include Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3), Game Developers Conference (GDC), Independent Games Festival (IGF), and PAX. See gamesindustry.biz for a continually updated [list](#) of industry events that range from eSports to *casual connects*.

Participating in a panel discussion or presenting a slide deck about your story is a great way to get recognition. You'll find that public speaking isn't so difficult while talking about your favorite topic. Be prepared to spread advice and encouragement in your talk, and promote your presentations through all your social media channels.

Jams and Meet-ups

Game jams are formal or informal gatherings for the purpose of planning, designing, and creating one or more games within a short span of time, usually ranging between 24 and 72 hours. Participants include programmers, designers, artists, writers, and fans. Game jams can be intoxicating, exhausting, and exhilarating. They're a great way to meet other indies, but participating in such gatherings can leave you drained.

PixelProspector maintains a complete [list](#) of game jams, as [does](#) Wikipedia. Here's some [advice](#) from [BáiYù](#) at itch.io:

1. Avoid *crunch* and deadline pressure—pace yourself and know your limits.
2. Know the scope of the project; don't bite off more than you can chew.
3. Plan for the worst. If someone drops out, reduce your scope immediately.
4. Communicate with the team. State your assumptions about who is doing what.
5. Leave time for testing and bug fixes.
6. Protect your health. Don't get caught up in the frenzy. Stop for breaks, fresh air, and stretching.

Meet-ups are another great way to network. Meet-ups range from informal, local hang-outs to formal meetings with speakers and schedules. Some are dominated by developers, and others by players. Search at Meetup.com or elsewhere to see what's happening around you. At meet-ups, you could bring your game demo for some feedback, show off your game trailer, give a talk, or otherwise network with like-minded indie fans and developers. You may find these are also a good place to look for help with design, coding, graphics, or music.

Closed Alpha Exposure

Project managers use the alpha stage of a software project as the first stage of rigorous testing. While the code may be unstable, it is now at a state where you can gather feedback at meet-ups,

jams, and other gatherings. Players can tell you what they like and don't like, and help you make decisions about features to add or drop. Few indie devs are brave enough to host an *open* alpha testing phase, where all comers can drop in. That's why most teams who endure alpha events usually close them to a carefully selected audience. The advantages of gaining player feedback, gauging playability and enthusiasm, and generating buzz may or may not offset any nagging issues or crashes, so use your judgement about how early you want to show the world what you've got.

Contests

Entering your game in a contest is a time-tested way to get feedback from accomplished judges and maybe a pat on the back when you most need it. Winning a contest can boost your momentum, give you an instant marketing point, and provide info for your dev blog and social media storm. Pushing yourself through a final scrub to hit an entry deadline can also provide motivation.

Feedback and technical assistance is a key part of the annual [Intel® Level Up Game Developer Contest](#). Intel gathers a well-rounded field of judges from the indie world and top development studios, and their insights and observations are a special part of the allure. The winnings are more than just cash prizes; all contest winners in 2017 received a Razer Blade Stealth Ultrabook*, and the Game of the Year winner received USD 5,000, an agency-driven digital marketing campaign tailored to their needs (valued at USD 12,000), and a distribution contract offer with Green Man Gaming.

Don't Tweet That

Social media is a sharp, two-edged sword which, when put into the wrong hands, can prove deadly. Pick your battles wisely, stay true to your game's identity and voice, and learn to shrug off criticism, no matter how loud it seems and no matter how well-intentioned it may have been.

Some of the most common social media sites are well-known—Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram—and a new one may spring up at any moment. Joel Lee, [writing](#) at MakeUseOf.com, listed three *awesome* social networks just for gamers in 2013: Raptr, Playfire, and Duxter. Of those, Duxter has closed its doors, Playfire moved to Green Man Gaming, and Raptr said good-bye in September 2017. Use caution when investing considerable time in a new site.

Pricing and Monetization Strategies

One of the biggest challenges in game distribution is how to price it. Yu Zhan at the University of North Carolina has a simple guide to pricing strategies, divided into three sectors: Pay to Win, Pay to Play, and Play for Free.

Players can pay for better heroes, better weapons, or more levels after starting out for free, for example, such as in *All-Star Heroes**. In this game, the players can't really win the game until they pay.

*Dark Souls** is an example of Pay to Play. They sell sequels and downloadable content, plus online versions. *Minecraft Realms** is another example of this strategy, and so is *World of Warcraft**.

Free-to-play games, sometimes called freemium, use a strategy where the game is free, but it's full of ads and inducements. Most recent games use this strategy, sometimes offering players the ability to pay up to avoid ads.

Setting the right price involves competitive analysis, described [earlier](#), and knowing how similar titles handle pricing. If you know your target audience and their expectations, you should be able to set a price and stick to it.

Six to 12 months after your game's launch, determine whether you're leaving money on the table by not offering discounts, sales, and other promotions. You can push the boundaries of industry-wide pricing trends if you are tracking sales and gathering stats to make informed decisions. But keep in mind that it's almost impossible to raise your prices once you're in the marketplace.

Retailers want you to be successful so they can grow, too. Brick and mortar locales are growing less important, especially for indies, and most of your sales will probably come either by selling online via Steam, Green Man Gaming, Humble Bundle, G2G, or others. At the GameJolt marketplace, [look](#) beyond your own borders and list retailers by region. At Statista, [find](#) information about game market revenues for a particular region.

Revenue sharing with Steam or other providers is necessary in today's indie landscape. Gamasutra [tackles](#) the question and asks if it's worth it. The answer is *maybe*. They conclude that, "If you partner with the wrong folks (or even with the *right* folks but under the wrong conditions) no contract is going to help you. But going through this process is vital. Most importantly, a contract may help you avoid getting into the wrong partnership. Additionally, a contract will give you a reliable framework if disagreements arise between you and your partners."

PR and Self-Promotion

According to the Public Relations Society of America, PR [is](#) a "strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their public." When done properly, PR includes complex planning, metrics-gathering, and development stages. Unfortunately, hiring a public relations company to help promote your game is a luxury most independents can't afford. However, inexpensive activities you can use to enhance your reputation with the public do exist.

Rich Kahn, founder and CEO of eZanga.com, [told](#) [smallbusinesspr.com](#) there are five easy things you can do:

1. Become an authority in your industry. Accept any speaking engagement you can find, volunteer often, and answer questions on a blog for starters. Publish interesting tidbits on Twitter, engage in polite debate, and make a name for yourself. Be sure that your thoughts are consistent with your brand—don't hype FPS titles if you're an RPG studio, for example.

2. Connect with schools. Students are the employees of tomorrow, and getting in front of them as a guest lecturer is an easy way to expand your public presence. You can build on your campus connections to hire interns from engineering, business, graphic design, and writing programs, depending on your needs.
3. Befriend the media. Reach out to the reviewers and editors whose bylines you respect and chat them up. They may need a quote someday to perfectly capture a key insight, and there's nothing like seeing your wisdom in a pull-quote, highlighted for everyone to see. The more you learn about the people who cover your industry, or especially your particular niche, the more fun you'll have at conferences and gatherings, too.
4. Consider co-branding. If your game was a hit at a local jam or meet-up, the more you share that success, the more you help that entity in their marketing efforts, too. If you spread the word about a positive review at a growing website, you help their efforts as much as your own. Good co-branding is like having good manners at a party—of course you would thank the host and compliment their efforts.
5. Take the industry pulse. Build your own online surveys about interesting challenges, and publish the results on your blog. Trumpet the news on social media, and share the wealth. You might be picked up by your media friends, which gives you more credibility the next time you survey.

Your game development journey is full of peril and excitement, sometimes in the same day. To Get Ready, Get Noticed, and Get Big, you face multiple challenges along the way. Although this guide covers some of the biggest hurdles you will face, new ones arise every day.

Because most indies' marketing budgets are tight, you will have to improvise, adapt, and overcome throughout your journey. While this guide offers a few ideas, some elements are mandatory, such as a social network presence, a website landing page, a solid video trailer, and a playable demo. Start early in getting the word out, establish your voice and use it, and avoid the tendency to go quiet. Find panel discussions to join, and tell your war stories. You may not have deep pockets, but you have a unique story and the passion that goes with it. Jaded veterans working on yet another sequel admire your enthusiasm, so ride it as far as you can.

Back at Gamasutra.com, game designer Sarah Woodrow offers this encouragement: "Indie game development will drive the future of games. Indie game developers will be the ones to take games beyond what we know, to create truly innovative and interesting experiences. There are indies who are starting out now who will be the business leaders of the game industry in 10–20 years. We are already seeing a rise of indies; we will see more."

About the author

Garret Romaine has been covering the game industry since 1992, reviewing games, writing features, and authoring white papers, case studies, and analysis. He writes for RH+M3 and holds an MBA from Portland State University.

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