

Publishing a Independently Developed Video Game

Introduction

The video game market seems to always be increasing. With the advent of online publishing platforms and the accessibility of mobile games, there are more opportunities than ever for games to find a market. This is in addition to the already well-established forms of game publishing on home video gaming consoles and the PC. With so many options for independent, or indie, game developers, the goals of distributing a game not only include *how* to publish, but also *where* to publish a game.

Focusing on these two areas, the first part of this report is divided into two main parts. To begin, the qualities and features of successful indie games are discussed and analyzed. Secondly, the specifics of several distribution and publishing platforms are considered and discussed. The second part of the report attempts to develop a simple marketing plane for an amazing game called *Space Fighter* based on the analysis in part one. The report specifically focuses on publishing on the PC platform, since *Space Fighter* is a PC game.

Part I – How to Publish a Game

In his book *Game Programming All in One Third Edition*, author Jonathan Harbour identifies the key areas that one should evaluate when attempting to publish an independently developed game. Additionally, some of the most successful independent games in recent times have these key features that help lead them to success.

Features of successful games

Graphics

Harbour identifies a key component early on his analysis: "...the most important thing to evaluate [when attempting to publish a game] is whether it is graphically attractive (Harbour, 2007)." This is rather obvious on reflection, because playing any video game requires the player to constantly look at and interact with the game screen. Having a pleasing interface and other art assets will help a player have a more satisfying experience with the game. These graphics don't have to push the limits of fidelity. They can be designed to be pleasing in other ways and evoke a theme or make a game look good without taxing computer hardware.

The website venturebeat.com features an article on the best indie games of 2014. One of the notable standouts is a game called *The Banner Saga* (Greene, 2014). This is a strategy game available on several platforms, and is highly praised for its graphics. The site mentions that "The Banner Saga had only a few rare moments where it wasn't gorgeous to behold... (Greene, 2014)." The game features hand drawn graphics and animations in a classic cartoon style reminiscent of the classic Disney films of the past. The creation of gorgeous environment and characters helps to draw players into the game world, providing a satisfying

and noteworthy experience.



The gorgeous hand-drawn graphics of 'The Banner Saga'

Sound

Next on Harbour's list of game considerations is the realm of audio. He mentions that sound effects should match the theme of the game and that music should help the player "...feel as if he is in the game itself (Harbour, 2007)." Again these claims seem self-evident when giving the subject a little bit of thought. The human experience is often quite full of sounds. If a game developer does not feature appropriate or pleasing sounds in the game, the player will not be fully immersed in the game world. Good sound design can also aid in playing the game. Examples include having certain sounds to alert players to enemies they can't see, or notifying the player they are no longer in danger. The other key audio component, music, can help set the theme or tone of the entire game or moments within the game, just as music does in the world of other media.

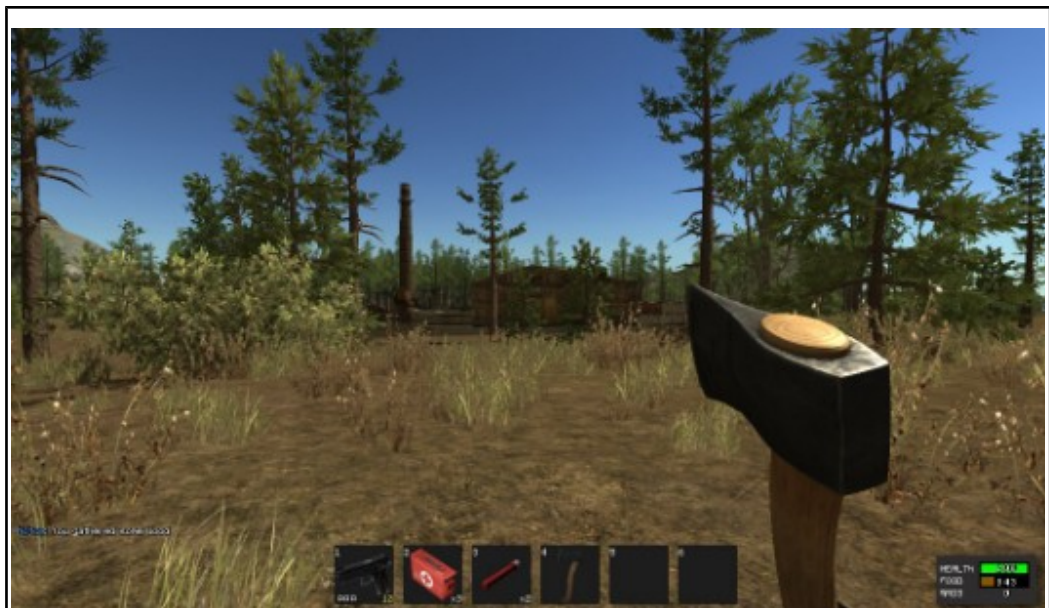
An example of a popular indie game with well-liked music is *Transistor*, again found on venturebeat.com's list (Greene, 2014). The world of this game is futuristic and sparsely populated, with the player battling robotic enemies and searching for clues to unfold the game's story. The music of the game was not only pleasant to the ears, but fit with the post-apocalyptic/electronic theme of the game. Greene specifically calls it out in his article, stating that "it almost goes without saying, but few scores released this year that can match Transistor's self-described 'Old-world Electronic Post-rock' (Greene 2014)."



Gameplay and Structure

Harbour continues to the next section of important things to evaluate in making a successful indie game. He specifically mentions that games should explain things, reward the player and have a firm structure, while the game play "... pulls the player back to play" (Harbour, 2007). The compelling or "addictive" gameplay of any game, independent or not, is necessary for a game to be successful, because the gameplay is what makes the game a game! However, the focus that Harbour puts into game structure is a little misguided in the modern era of videogames.

Harbour claims that one should ensure that a game has "... a beginning, a middle, and an end" (Harbour, 2007). But there are several very successful independent games that have broken this trend. Sometimes this is done without the game having been officially released, and only available for play through "early access." The popular PC game distribution platform known as Steam, lists the game *Rust* as one of its current indie top sellers ("Browsing Indie", n.d.). The page for this game specifically calls out the fact that there is no real structure to the game by indicating that "The only aim in Rust is to survive ("Rust", n.d.)." Players are essentially dropped into an open world, and can make their own stories and fun. The gameplay and structure emerges from the tools given to the player, and the creative, innovative and interesting ways with which they can use these elements in the game. So it seems that structure is not a key element in making a successful game. However, while the structure may not be as important as Harbour states, the gameplay certainly is. No one wants to play a game that is not fun to play. The success of the game *Rust*, mentioned above, is that it offers fun gameplay to the player, not a structured story or environment.

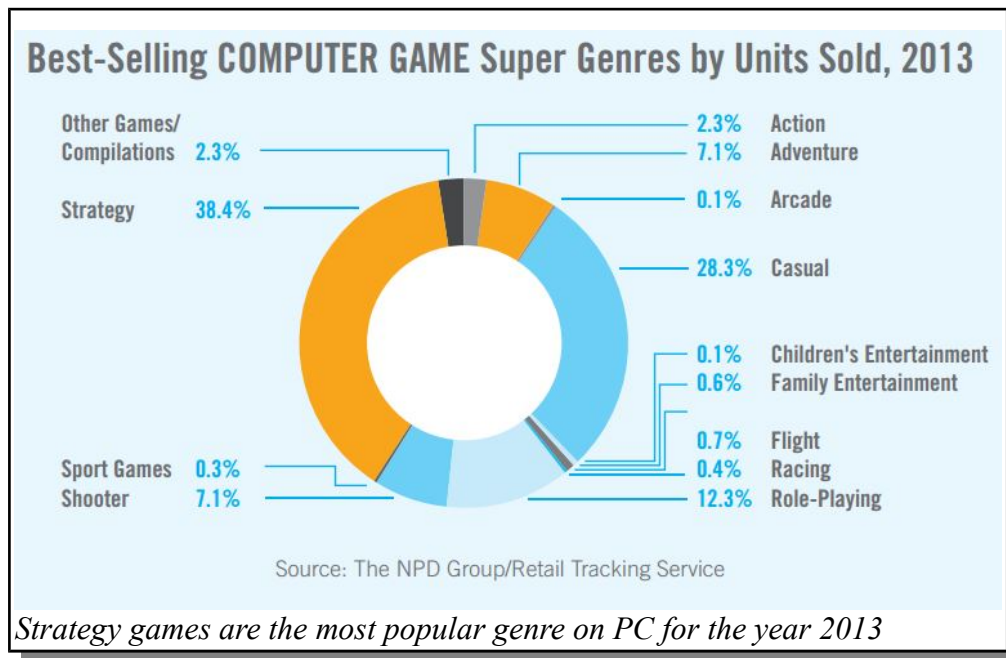


The open world of Rust allows players to create their own stories and structure

Genre

The final item on Harbour's consideration list is the specific genre that a game fits into (Harbour, 2007). He mentions that even if a game does not excel in one of the above categories, but it appeals to players of a specific genre, then "...it will probably be interesting to a small hardcore group (Harbour, 2007)." This is because many people like a specific kind of game, just as they prefer a specific kind of book, movie or other genre of media. A game just existing within a particular genre can have it generate the interest of fans of that genre. It may not make the game successful outright, but it can help a lot.

However, there are several game genres from which to choose. In a report on 2013 video game sales, the most popular genre for computer games was the simulation genre (Du Plessis, 2014). Sales in this genre made up 38.4% of all units sold, followed closely by the causal genre, making up 28.3% of sales. A game that fits into a more popular genre, may have more chance to succeed because people are familiar with the genre, and already know that they like games that have a specific play style. Unfortunately, this also means that there may be more competition in those markets, because other people will be releasing games in hopes of also garnering more sales.



Computer Game Publishing Platforms

Digital distribution of video games is becoming increasingly popular. The PC marketplace has a large number of distribution platforms for this purpose. Additionally, console sales now offer digital distribution for many games, and the mobile market consists of entirely digital distribution through marketplaces like Apple's App Store and the Android Play Store. However, since the focus of this report is on computer games, only the PC distribution platforms will be considered below. Furthermore, due to the large number of these platforms, only a few of the most noteworthy have been singled out for discussion.

Steam



Steam is a digital distribution platform for PC games created and maintained by the company Valve. They are one of the most popular distribution platforms on the market today (Fernandez, 2012). They offer an incredible amount of games, including independently developed games. Since the platform is so popular, they receive many submissions by creators. To decide which games are published on their platform, the company has a special section called Steam Greenlight. This section allows developers to feature their games, even if they are not yet fully complete. The community of gamers using Steam can then vote on which games they would like to see released on the platform. However, any and all final decisions still rest with Valve of course ("About Greenlight", n.d.).

To submit a game to Steam Greenlight, a developer will need a Steam account, a video of the game or game concept, some screenshots, and a few other items. Additionally, there is also a one-time submission fee of \$100, but once paid, an unlimited number of games can be submitted. This fee is designed to prevent joke submissions from entering the system, and the money is actually donated to charity ("About Greenlight", n.d.). After the community selects a game, the developer is contacted with further details and paperwork. Once the game is complete, it can be released. Revenue from game sales is split between Valve and the developer, and hopefully the game becomes successful.

Good Old Games (GOG)



GOG is another digital distribution platform available for PC games owned by the developer CD Projekt. They offer many games for sale, but a quick browse of their site reveals that they have much less on offer compared to the Steam platform. Another difference is that GOG offers its games without digital rights management (DRM), meaning the user does not have to install any proprietary software, and can download and play games freely. However, this platform is also not as popular as Steam (Fernandez, 2013).

The submission process for GOG is relatively simple. Any developer can try and submit their game directly through the form on the GOG website. The company then decides internally if they want to publish the game on the website, and contacts the developer within 2 weeks. If they decide to publish the game, it gets featured on the website, and gets a "dedicated cross-media marketing campaign" ("Your Game on GOG.com", n.d.). Revenues are split between the developer and the company. Surprisingly, the company is very open about the revenue split. The standard offer is 70% to the developer, and 30% to the company ("Your Game on GOG.com", n.d.).

Desura



Yet another digital distribution platform is Desura, created and maintained by developer Bad Juju Games. Their site receives much less traffic than GOG or Steam, and the games featured are mostly indie games (Fernandez, 2013). Furthermore, the site requires the installation of client software on the user's computer. However, the focus on indie games allows the site to more tightly focus on that particular segment of the gaming market.

Submission of a game to Desura is relatively easy. The game can be submitted directly through the website, providing information about the game. However, Desura does not accept brand new games, ideas or storylines for games. Once the project is approved, the company will contact the developer with the next steps in the publishing process, but most of the publishing operations are handled by the submitting developer through the website or client ("How To", n.d.). Promotion of the game is also left up to the developer and revenues are split between Desura and the developer.

Part II – The Plan to Publish "Space Fighter"

The game *Space Fighter* is not yet in a fully complete state. Certain elements can be improved and tweaked, as discussed in the documentation included with the current version of the game. However, this does not preclude the development of a market strategy for the game. Most of the information needed to develop this strategy is known, based on the current state of the game's development.

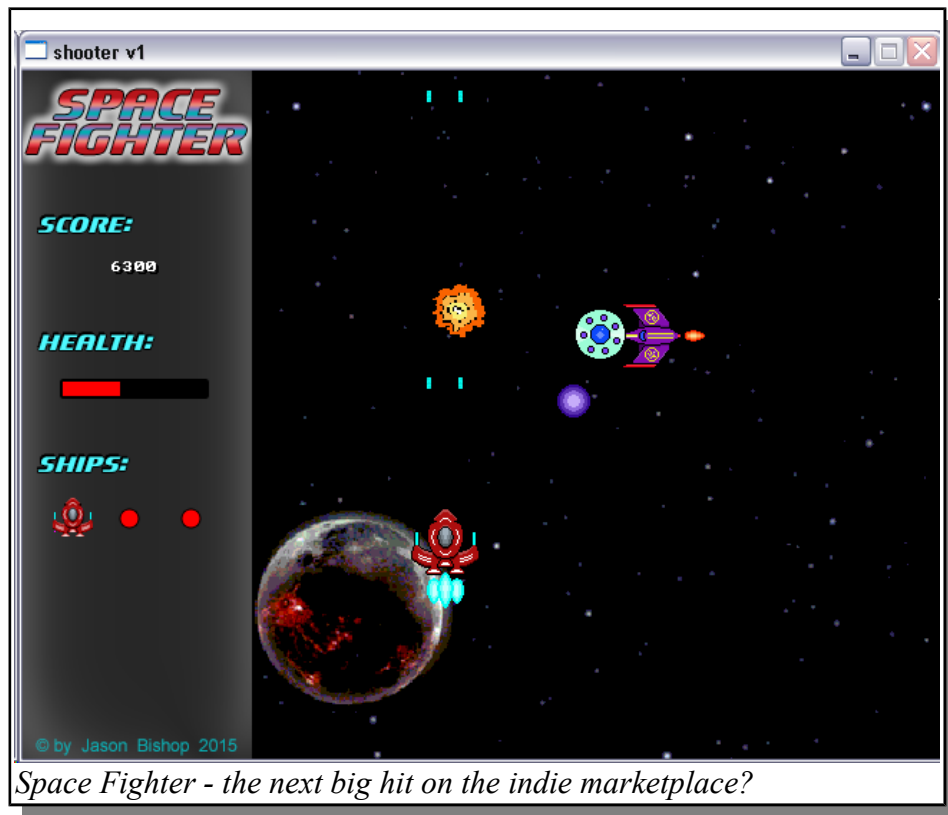
Evaluating the game

Part I of this report discussed several features that can help make a game successful. These criteria and suggestions can be applied to *Space Fighter*. Graphically, the game is relatively appealing, with custom designed sprites using bright colours. The background of the game features a scrolling starfield that fits with the game theme. The information section of the screen is a bit sparse, and could use more graphical highlights to make it more appealing. Furthermore, there is currently only one level available in the game. The game could be enhanced graphically by adding more interesting and cool-looking levels, increasing the graphical variety the game has to offer.

The sound design of the game is also in keeping with the theme. The laser firing and other sounds are "space-like" and are not overly grating or intrusive. The background music is catchy and high energy, making the game feel more frenetic. However, there is only one looping music track available at this time, and more variety in music could help enhance the appeal of the game.

In terms of story and structure, the game has none, but this is common in the vertical scrolling genre. Addition of some story elements or opening sequences could be developed, but are not a priority for making an appealing game. However, the game play is still rudimentary at this point. As mentioned above, there is only one level, which the user will have to play over and over. There are only a few enemy types available, and they are not particularly challenging or interesting in terms of gameplay. Additionally, many games in this genre feature so-called "boss fights," where the player has to defeat a large and difficult enemy at the end of the level. *Space Fighter* has not implemented this concept, and it should be a requirement before releasing the game.

Lastly, the game fits into the genre of vertical scrolling shooter. As can be seen in the chart presented in Part I, this is not a very popular genre on the PC. Unfortunately, there is little that can be done to really change the genre of the game, as that would require a complete redesign and redevelopment of the game. The game will have to rely on the other elements to help make it successful.



Publishing the game

The best platform for releasing *Space Fighter* is probably through the website Desura. Desura focuses on independent games, so users of the site will be used to the level of quality presented in the game. Additionally, the users of Desura are probably more likely to experiment with games they purchase. The smaller marketplace of Desura also means that there is less competition for *Space Fighter* in the marketplace. However, the lower amount of users means that there is less of a possibility that the game will be noticed by players. If the game does become popular, it may be possible to develop a more advanced version or sequel that can be released on one of the other more popular platforms.

For the submission process to Desura, several things are required. This includes additional art and video for the game. Icons, box art, screenshots, and game video will all need to be developed before the game can be submitted. Written materials will need to be created as well, including a written description of the game, as well as system requirements and other game details. Once these are complete, the game can be submitted for review by Desura. If the game is eventually accepted by Desura, the game files will need to be in a form that users can download and install on their home PCs. This may require an installation package or other form of file compression that will need to be developed.

At this point, the actual marketing of the game must be considered. Simply featuring the game on the Desura site is unlikely to get it played or noticed by many people, as the marketplace has many other games on offer. A website and social media presence must be

developed to enhance the game's market appeal and offer information to users. Additionally, people and sites should be contacted and made aware of the game's release. A list of relevant sites and important people to contact will have to be created and maintained. These organizations and individuals can review the game or feature it on their own sites.

Lastly, an important consideration is the price point for the game. A quick glance at the offerings on Desura and other platforms show that many independent and small market games are available for very little money, and many games are available for free. *Space Fighter* is clearly not a AAA level game, so the price point will need to reflect this fact and meet the market expectations set by other independent games and games in this particular genre. This will need to be a carefully thought out process, but not really necessary until it is decided by Desura that they will publish the game.

Conclusion

Before a game like *Space Fighter* is released to market, it must be evaluated for its potential marketability upon release. This evaluation process needs to consider the graphics, sound, gameplay, and genre of the game. If the game passes a thorough evaluation, it can be sent to a publisher for consideration. The decision of which publisher to choose for submission has many variables to consider. Each platform has different levels of popularity and different markets that they appeal to. The revenue sharing considerations can also differ, and some distributors even help with marketing and media. *Space Fighter* is probably best released on the Desura platform for now, but needs further development of the game and other materials to be ready for a proper release.

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