Game Marketing
Best Practices

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Part I: Your Game

What kinds of games do well on Steam?

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According to SteamSpy, the overwhelming majority of players on Steam do not buy many games. In fact, they buy 4 or fewer. If they're in this demographic, you're not trying to market your game to them.

Based on data presented online, hardcore gamers (the ones that play major hits or buy a multitude of indie games) are very rare when compared to the overall audience.

Only one percent of Steam gamers own a third of all copies of Steam games, and 20% of Steam gamers own about 88% of games.

There are over 700 million PC gamers, but if you're making a game for Steam, you're only striving for the attention of about 1.3M gamers that are buying the majority of games.

If you're selling your game on Steam, you should appeal to the hardcore demographic if you want to get any traction whatsoever.

This means… roguelikes, RPGs, super niche visual novels if that's your target audience—or even meme-inspired games that may appeal to the right crowd.

But, don't do casual. That's more of a mobile thing. Before you even consider publishing your game on Steam, make sure you would be a good fit!

How finished should my game be?

Your game should have a polished vertical slice of gameplay. Slick visuals, slick gameplay, slick production values. Nothing seemingly unfinished or unpolished, and no placeholder "programmer art" graphics. These will put players off and discourage them from even trying the gameplay. Nobody wants to play an ugly game.

You can go extra light on the content, but absolutely do not skimp on the presentation. Take to Twitter or ask friends for their honest opinions. Find out what qualms people have with the game, and focus on eliminating any that are presentation or visuals-related.

What should I prioritize?

Prioritize the visual aspect over everything else. If you're horrible at this, find an artist and partner up, buy some asset packs, or contract a graphics person. After the visuals are polished, focus on refining the core gameplay loop. Make sure that the game is fun. Test it out yourself or with your friends. It doesn't have to be a super long, immersive experience—just enough to give people an idea of what they'd be buying.

If you and other players who test the game are not enjoying it…chances are it'll look bad in a trailer and won't be fun overall for players who check it out. You're trying to convince your playerbase that your project is worth being sold and played, so make sure you have a project that lives up to Steam's standards!

Protip: Play some of your favorite Steam games and have a pen and paper handy. Jot down your thoughts on what makes them so fun and compelling. Is it a neat mechanic? Polished visuals? A quirky hook? Try and identify what inspires you on Steam, and follow the footsteps of developers who have succeeded before you. Read developer blogs for other studios and find out how they refined their games, then see what works for you personally.

Polish, polish, polish

There's a saying in the game development community that for every hour that gets spent implementing a new feature, 10 hours should go into refining, polishing, and iterating on the new feature. This isn't just a joke or a gross misrepresentation—this is reality.

Polish doesn't mean what you think it means, however. It doesn't mean doing what you think looks good. It means doing what the audience wants. You're making a game for Steam, which means you want the masses to enjoy it.

Get feedback from others, draw inspiration from games in similar genres, and make sure that you watch a lot of videos about game feel. Jan Willem has some great videos on YouTube. Be critical of your own design, and be sure that your game feels and looks "alive" visually. Build visual interest with enough special effects, and when in doubt: add more screenshake.

Optimizing for trailers and screenshots

Make sure to take clean and well-framed screenshots. Bad screenshots will gimp good games. Make sure to remove unnecessary graphical interface and heads-up-display elements from all screenshots. A lot of major games publishers and creators do this for all of their projects, and it really immerses you in the world framed by the screenshot. For trailers, don't do it yourself unless you have a good eye for that kind of thing and have done trailers before. Pay someone else who has experience with the craft to do it for you.

Your trailer is one of the most important marketing materials for your game, and you only get one first impression—make it count. Having a sloppy trailer has single-handedly ended many careers for budding game developers. Your trailer will show off your game quickly and efficiently. If it's bad, your game will most likely flop. Don't let that happen to you.

Part II: Your Presentation

The importance of quickly hooking players

When it comes to shopping for games, players aren't looking to sit around and examine games in-depth for hours on end. They're looking to do a quick topical scan and quickly ask themselves questions in their heads. How do the screenshots look? How enticing is the logo? Does the description make the game sound enjoyable? How much pleasure would I get out of this game? Why should I care?

If you fail to answer these questions by having a super polished store page, they'll move on to the next game. A lot of users won't even watch your video or read your text in entirety. It's all about quickly hooking people who visit your page and convincing them to keep reading. If you can convince someone to check out your project in its entirety, you can more than likely convince them to buy your game. Here's some advice for making sure your initial presentation is as polished as can be.

Choosing the right screenshots

Protip: Remove the UI elements from your screenshots, and instead just focus on the character and the environment. It's one of the oldest tricks in the book, but removing the UI will psychologically hint to the viewer that it's an area to be explored, and less of, "I'm just looking at a screenshot of a game." It's very similar to looking at a photograph of a location in the real world and inspires much more wonder.

Make sure screenshots are carefully selected and curated. A good strategy is to play through the game for a few hours and just take as many screenshots as you can. Then, go back through and edit the best ones. Make sure you are prudent with how many you post—too many and it bores fans, too few and it looks suspicious, like you're hiding something.

Show off enough of the game and the core gameplay loop that people get a taste for it, and make sure you highlight some awesome scenarios and inviting settings to convince players that they need to experience it for themselves.

Creating a compelling trailer

Think about the message you want to to give and the players you are trying to relate to with your trailer. Theatrical trailers are a good way to show off game features such as story, graphics, and music; they create a marketable dramatization that will pull in players that prioritize these features. Gameplay trailers show off just that—awesome mechanics, moves, abilities and scenarios. They're great for showing off quick little snippets of what the player will actually be experiencing in the game.

Consider hiring a studio to help you with the trailer creation. A lot of developers try to make their first trailer themselves without considering the fact that there are a lot of trailer artists who specialize in making trailers for the Steam audience, and do it every single day. They know the playing field and are familiar with gimmicks and flow that optimize trailers for player enjoyment.

Writing strong descriptions

Write as best you can about the game, the development process, and the features it boasts. Draw comparisons to similar games or games that inspired you, and explain what elements you took from them. When it comes to early access, highlight your plans for future updates and what features you intend to add. Talk about what state the game is currently in, and what more you plan to add.

Be sure to mention any past projects or development experience you and your team have: players are reassured when they feel like someone with experience and knowledge is creating a project, as it is less likely you will fall through.

Just be genuine and tell players what your game is about at its core! Story, gameplay, design philosophy, scope, amount of content, and setting are all vital to discuss. Give players a holistic view of the experience they are about to immerse themselves in by supporting your game!

Feature lists that draw players in

Many times viewers will skip the longer paragraph description and go straight to the feature list. Feature lists go straight to the facts and are meant to be short and sweet. Using long sentences will completely deter the reader and defeats the purpose of feature lists. A list of five to ten bullet points is a good sweet spot.

Protip: Turn every "feature" of your game into an actionable activity for gamers. Convert each feature into a command using a verb and your feature list suddenly reads like the recipe for an amazing gameplay experience. Instead of "6 different weapons to choose from," say "Choose from 6 different weapons to kick ass with!" It makes players feel like they're the ones in control of the game, and it lets them imagine exactly what they will be doing in the game. If you can get the player visualizing themselves in the game and playing it, you've got yourself a YES vote!

To GIF or not to GIF?

GIFs are a marketer's best friend. Use tools like GIPHY to create short GIFs (less than 15MB in size for Twitter and other social media) showing off juicy snippets. GIF and video content really does well when it comes to games, as they are super efficient ways for players to see some interesting aspects of your game in a short period of time.

Protip: Sit down with a recording software like Bandicam or Hypercam, and just record gameplay for 5-10 minutes. Then, use Photoshop or other tools and cut out little snippets—5-15 seconds is a pretty sweet spot for GIFs. The more footage you have, the more moments you can GIF.

Another cool idea is to add text overlays highlighting the primary features of the game in your GIFs. This can help direct players' attention, and tell more of a story than just the visuals alone. You can turn your trailer clips with text overlays into neat GIFs if you need some easy content.

Part III: Your Marketing

Why marketing?

It's a dog-eat-dog world out there when it comes to Steam and indie games in general. If you don't do any marketing and sit there wondering why you're not getting any traction… I have a simple answer for you. You need promotion to ensure success, because that's how everybody gets noticed! From car companies to musicians, it's all about things like social media, outreach, and press coverage.

You, as a developer, have two jobs to do—you need to not only create a badass game, but you also need to help push that badass game out to the masses! Here are some pieces of advice for an effective marketing campaign.

The need to start early

Too many developers make the mistake of waiting until the game is about to launch online to start thinking about marketing or promotion. The second you have a solid idea and a plan to flesh it out, you should start marketing. Throw a quick website together in Wordpress, or even just make a Twitter handle for your game. The sooner people hear about your project, the better.

Big franchises do this all the time—as soon as they have concept art, trailers and initial screenshots to show the public, they do so. Granted, they have fanbases they spent years growing, and the twenty followers you'll snag being a new game on Twitter will pale in comparison to the size of the audience at an E3 launch announcement, but it's still the same principle. Passionate gamers will follow projects from inception to launch, and support you all the way. Start early and make sure you post occasional updates and screenshots of development. Be honest!

Run a developer blog

Developer blogs—devblogs for short—have become a staple when it comes to indie game production nowadays. In an age where anybody can start a Tumblr or Wordpress site in a matter of minutes and with zero cost, there's no excuse for keeping your fanbase in the dark.

Try and write posts at least once or twice a week updating fans about development. Share screenshots, anecdotes, funny bugs, new builds, videos…pretty much anything and everything you can get your hands on! Fans will really connect with your message and vision for the game, and give you great engagement.

Plus, if you need beta testers or want to do a soft launch, who is more excited about your game and more willing to test it out than someone who has been tracking it since day one?

Tweeting to spread the word

Use popular and trending hashtags to raise awareness about your game and studio. Engagement is a two way street; to receive comments, re-tweets, and followers, you'll have to do the same in return. Post daily! Video and GIF content are proven to receive much more engagement than a static image.

You can promote new updates and content on Twitter as the short-form nature of the platform lends itself more to self-promotion. Don't get arrogant though! Twitter is a platform where just one retweet by a prominent influencer can get you lots of attention—be that good or bad.

Try and Tweet at big influencers like YouTubers, journalists and industry veterans to get them to notice your game. It may not always happen as these people are very busy, but it's worth trying to get on their radar! Worst case scenario, they just ignore you. In which case…try again!

Facebook long-form content

Facebook is a great place for long-form content and deep engagement with fans. As I'm sure those of you who have added your parents on Facebook know, the network lends itself greatly to deep discussions and debates in the comments of posts. The Sharing feature is also a very powerful way to build legitimacy and gain traction.

Experiment with things like polls, Q&A sessions, blog posts and other deeper content. Facebook is a place people go to for finding and connecting with friends, so try and post something they would talk about with a friend! Don't be overly promotional either. Twitter is more forgiving when it comes to shoutouts and promotions, but Facebook will leave you with no traction and a lot of people ignoring or blocking your posts if all you do is promote repeatedly. Think about posts before you share them—"Would I personally share this to my profile?" If the answer is no, re-think!

Protip: Facebook's front page algorithm favors video content heavily. If you have trailers or other videos, make sure you post them directly to Facebook instead of sharing them via YouTube, Vimeo or any other app. You'll get much more attention! Facebook Live is also an important tool, as all people who like your page will get notifications if/when you go live, so consider the platform for live video Q&A or development look-ins.

Choosing the right networks

Social media has become a varied landscape with endless amounts of tools. Establishing an identity on Facebook and Twitter is important, but there are so many other social networking platforms out there that you can use to build a dedicated and informed audience throughout your marketing campaigns.

Networks like Instagram, Snapchat, Pinterest, etc., will diversify your social outreach and give your game more spread out attention. Try to diversify the content you share on these varied platforms as well, giving your fans incentive to follow you on multiple networks.

Steam group promotion

Many Steam groups are quite prolific when it comes to promotion. Explore the Steam community hubs and seek out groups that focus on bringing attention to new developers and games. Do not do huge giveaways of copies of your game in these groups, as a trend of giveaways before the game is even launched can really hurt sales upon release. Just do some gentle shoutouts, or consider purchasing a copy of a popular or AAA game and hosting a giveaway to promote your project.

Reddit and niche communities

Reddit it a good place to get feedback on your game, to find out what players want to see, and improve features that respond to market demand. It's also a great place to find trolls. When you come into contact with a really ugly one, just grit your teeth and take the backlash. Lashing back will only hurt your brand's image. It takes longer to repair a reputation than it does to create one.

Try and stay patient if you get negative feedback. Remember that all criticism should be seen as constructive criticism—if someone is pointing out something they dislike about your game, and it's gaining traction, don't just brush it aside as someone being mean to you. Learn from what players dislike about the game, and use that information to your advantage. Having no feedback is so much worse than having bad feedback—how do you know what to improve on?

Some awesome communities are: gamedev, gaming, indiegames, gamemarketing, gamedesign, games, playmygame and genre specific subreddits (e.g. roguelikes, rpg_gamers, JRPG). It may even be worth it to post onto bigger legacy games subreddits that your game is similar to, but be aware of specific subreddit rules and make sure that self-promotion is allowed! Otherwise, mods and users alike will bury your game in obscurity through the power of downvotes.

Using videos to your advantage

Video content is one of the most increasingly important parts of a game's early identity. Videos are easy for fans to engage with and the quickest way to showcase what your game has to offer.

Videos could be simple "Let's Play" experiences where you and your team play chunks of your game to showcase the fun of playing your game or they could be complex behind-the-scenes videos to showcase the development process.

Throughout a Steam campaign, video may be the only way gamers get to truly see what your game has in store, so while you don't want to take too much away from the ongoing development process, spending some time on video production is key.

If you're going to do unfiltered video, make sure the game's production value—visuals especially—is polished down to a T. Grab a nice vertical slice and record lots of footage. Be especially prudent if your game is not complete yet. You don't want to give people a bad impression!

Twitch.tv and other live streaming services are also available to you as a developer, though it is risky to stream too much gameplay if the game is still early on. You can stream development, do Q&A sessions, or just show off brief sections of gameplay to build hype. Or get creative and integrate Twitch.tv APIs into the game—a lot of developers actually allow Twitch chat to help control and affect in-game events!

Reaching out to journalists

Key journalists get over 100 pitches a day. So don't get discouraged if you send out a dozen emails and do not receive any coverage. Just keep trying! In order for the "big fish" to cover your game, the small ones will need to bite first. Reach out to a wide variety of journalists.

Send out press releases often, especially on big events such as launching your Alpha, Beta, Early Access, and Full Release. Coverage is coverage, and as your game and community grows, you'll likely be seen by more popular journalists. Keep your press releases short and to the point.

> **Protip:** Make sure you send press the following.
> -3-4 images of gameplay
> -Logos and banners
> -Description of the game
> -Bullet point features
> -Social media channel links
> -Steam and other store links
> -Link to a presskit with lots of resources
> -Download link to play the game or a demo

Building connections with YouTubers

YouTubers are your best friends. YouTube has become one of the biggest gaming platforms in recent history and people who create content on the platform have grown to have subscriber bases larger than some countries (read: Pewdiepie!) Utilizing the outlet is key and really interesting demos featuring the best vertical slice of your game can do extremely well on the platform. People only want to watch about 10 to 15 minutes of video at a time and if you have a demo that can hook people in that amount of time, send it out to as many YouTubers you can.

Find the niche market of content creators that fit the genre of game you're developing and give them a look at your game. Try to ignore subscriber numbers and instead focus on the personalities you think would love your game! You might just get lucky and find your game going viral and being covered by some of the bigger names on YouTube.

There are also a number of interview shows and podcasts that have a presence on YouTube that could be worth your time. Obviously again, we don't want to take away from development time, but offering your time up for interviews and videos of the sort will help your campaign through promotion and through developing your outward-facing personality. If gamers can tell you're just a person like them with a love for the industry, they'll feel even more likely to support you!

Responding to feedback

Communicate with the community. Feedback is extremely valuable and can be used to your advantage. Gather feedback about your game in order to improve it. Don't put out a game that has no demand! As mentioned under the Reddit section, there will always be trolls. Be the bigger person, backlash will only hurt your studio's image. If anything, just agree to disagree.

Just remember: there's no way to win an argument on the Internet. Fighting just draws out the conversation and builds negative attention. You're probably going to get at least some bad reviews and negative feedback, which is absolutely fine. Nobody is perfect! What's important is that you take the good and the bad feedback in stride, and learn from them. Keep calm and develop on. Good luck out there!