Postmortem: Intergalactic Crime Prevention Unit's First Year

By Tim Turner

"I am going to be a game developer, even if it kills me."

-Chris Aardappel, Technical Agent, Intergalactic Crime Prevention Unit

A little over a year ago I left a stable job [at *Oasis* creator Mind Control Software] to start my own development shop. This risk fraught path was, at best, a leap of faith. About five years ago I experienced the worst; I had to close the doors of my first start-up. So I was well aware of the stakes. However, my desire for creative expression both in product development and in business operations was something I couldn't hold in check. I had an excellent relationship with my previous employer and had done a lot to help grow his business so I was able to leave on good terms and with some of the tools I needed to get up and running.

Starting my new endeavor I had several things going for me. Over the previous year I established many strong relationships within the casual games business community and shipped a couple of games in that space. I created several game concepts, designs, and prototypes that the owner of the old company did not intend to use and he gifted them to me when I left. To make that even more exciting I was granted license to use the company's proprietary 2D game engine. I was also allowed to take home some office furniture that was unused. This included several desks, white boards, book shelves, and filing cabinets which nicely outfitted the 350 square foot office in my home.

An engineer left the company shortly after I did and wanted a small project to work on as a portfolio piece. We had worked together on two previous titles and he had experience with the engine so we set to work right away on one of the game concepts. It seemed that fate was with me because at about the same time an artist friend called me to let me know he was going to leave his job and ask if I had any leads. Within a month of starting I had an office set up, a complete game design, an artist, and an experienced engineer working on a stable platform.

Each of us had a little money to live off of but not enough to comfortably self-fund development of our first game, so I began to look for funding. I called most of the publishers in the space, had a bunch of meetings, and…nobody threw money at us. The game we were working on was a solid design, but not terribly original and so every single company I pitched said, "I would love to distribute this game but am not interested in funding it at this time."

A few months into the project we still didn't have any money. The artist had to delay his start date so he wasn't working full-time and the engineer hit some hurdles that stunted our technical progress. It was a demoralizing time. It was unclear how long it would take before the artist was really available. I took a part-time contract helping a friend at a mobile games company, and the engineer took a full-time job. The only saving grace was that the engineer had permission from his new company to moonlight with us as long as the work did not compete with their console business.

The artist was eventually able to start full-time, but technical progress had slowed to a snail's pace, so I hired an additional engineer. I turned my business development focus away from funding for our existing work and started picking up work-for-hire gigs. By the six month mark we had settled into a steady routine of contract work, with our original development occurring in the background. By the nine month mark we had a suite of playable prototypes that I was able to shop to publishing partners while we paid the rent with our work-fore-hire contracts.

The work-for-hire business was brutal for us at best. Trying to compete with overseas bids was difficult, and we didn't have the freedom to turn away bad deals. Over time we found ourselves deeper and deeper into unhealthy relationships. Things got so bad that I counseled my team to circulate their resumes "just in case."

Of the prototypes I was shopping, there was one title that garnered uniformly positive responses. Nobody had offered terms, but I was consistently asked to come back for follow-up pitches. I got a lot of "this looks really good, but we would like to see more of X," and so we would tweak our pitch and come back. Finally, seven days before our one year anniversary, we signed a deal with a publisher for an original game.

What Went Wrong

1. Poor Financial Forecasting at the Beginning

Unless you are an industry rock star or win the karma lottery, it simply takes A LONG TIME to put a deal together. Three months of savings does not buy you enough time to develop a pitchable prototype and shop it around for funding. Even if your pitch is ready, everything takes

longer than you expect. We met with our current publisher at least six times before we shook hands and agreed to make a game together.

2. Bad Choice of First Title

The first game we began to build was a solid design, but not very original. It was a typical iterative improvement on an established mechanic; not a knockoff, but not groundbreaking. It would be a good third or fourth release to generate revenue, but not a knock-your-socks-off debut. When setting up a new shop your first title will define you. We wasted many months on a title that, ultimately, we decided would not serve us well as our initial commercial release.

3. Splitting Focus

When money didn't immediately start pouring in, we began to explore various contingency plans. We built additional prototypes, created more pitches, and generally attempted to be all things to all potential partners. Had we kept our focus on our initial game we would have shipped it long before we actually got an original title funded. In our case this was probably okay, because that title was a poor first choice, but the lesson holds true anyway: start with laser beam focus and establish yourself, *then* diversify.

4. Desperate Partner Choices

I have a friend who likes to say, "The only thing you get from doing work-for-hire projects is older." He's only half right. The best case scenario for this type of work is that you keep your roof up and get a little experience. That isn't a very good prize when you risk time, money, and potential legal issues. It would be grossly inaccurate to say that all work-for-hire is bad, but it is critically important to mitigate as much risk as possible. Make very careful partner choices and invest in the relationship cautiously.

What Went Right

1. Investing in Ourselves

From before I even started working, I was careful to pay forward at every possible opportunity. When I left my last company I negotiated technology, office furniture, and intellectual property as part of my exit package. When the design was complete on our first title and the technical process bogged down, I hired another engineer and built prototypes of other designs. Since the new engineer hadn't worked on our existing platform we built our prototypes using an alternate technology to increase our capabilities.

Taking every opportunity to increase our business assets gave us the freedom to pursue multiple opportunities. This freedom allowed us to survive as a company while we worked towards our bigger goals.

2. Employing Solid Business Development Practices.

In the 'developer' section of many publisher websites you will find something to the tune of "we are always on the lookout for talented developers, if you have a great game send email to nobodychecksthis@wearekindabusy.com." I don't know any success stories that start that way.

Nobody cares that you are making a game. Nobody cares that the game is awesome and that it will sell a zillion units. Everyone in the industry has a job and is busy, and even if you make the coolest game ever you will fail as a developer if you don't it make it your job to make other people care. Network, follow up, take notes, call back, be professional, have the materials, do your homework, keep current, and so on and so forth.

With the fifteen or twenty companies I communicate with regularly, I make sure to keep an open dialogue with the relevant decision makers. Find out who is in charge and call them direct. If they don't answer then call back later. Take notes while you talk. Find out what they need. Thank them for their time. Set a time to talk again, and when you do, make sure to be armed with what they need based on your previous talks.

For more detailed information, go watch *Glengarry Glen Ross*. Seriously.

3. Go Big or Go Home

I hate to sound cliché but I was very serious earlier when I spoke about bringing your A game. I would say the biggest factor in our success to date has been our commitment to being The Guys That People Want To Work With™. Here are the key things we focus on.

First, we watch all of the game sites. New games come out all the time. If someone asks if we know such and such a game the answer is, "Saw it, played it, analyzed it, what do you want to know?"

Second, we over-prepare for everything. If I go into a meeting to pitch a concept or defend an idea, the very least I bring is a PowerPoint and a thorough knowledge of the topics at hand. Typically I will have one-sheets for everyone in the room, a slideshow, supporting art, and documentation.

Third and, for this article, last, we put in the time. It isn't that hard to be mediocre. You can see how easy it is to fail by looking at the dried out husks of the developers who came before. Rising above the masses takes a bit of luck and a lot of work. The first thing I do in the morning is read game business news and the last thing I do before I go to bed is check my email. I check Gamasutra several times a day. I monitor IM constantly and am seldom away from my computer for more than an hour or two. My cell phone is on, charged, and with me at all times. I even play *World of WarCraft* in windowed mode so I can work while I play.

Conclusion

It is not impossible to get a lucky break to make a game or start a company. It just doesn't happen very often; the odds are against you. If you are serious about wanting to get any independent game studio up and running you need to do everything you can to stack the deck in your favor. Of course you are passionate, everyone is passionate, so be professional too. Make sure you have enough time and money to roll the dice more than once. Be creative in looking for opportunities and building up your value offering. Watch the industry around you and adapt accordingly. Most importantly, learn from your mistakes so that if you fail you at least you will walk away better prepared for next time.