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PRINT

How To Pitch Your Project To Publishers

By Cameron Davis

[*Having trouble getting your projects signed? Experienced game industry pitchman Cameron Davis, formerly of Krome Studios, delivers a guide to how you can up your game and get your project signed with sensible -- but somewhat elusive -- information*.]

The creation and presentation of the pitch is one of the most important parts of developing the structure and success of any video game, yet is routinely overlooked by designers and producers. Considering that most games don't pass the initial pitch stage, you would think there would be more discussion of the subject. I'm hoping to address some of that here.

Now, let me be clear from the outset: there is no exact science to creating the perfect pitch. However, there are a couple of guidelines you can follow in order to increase your success rate, and many of them come from outside the world of games.

Primarily, a successful pitch comes from being a good salesman first and foremost. This is why I think many pitches fail. It's not for a lack of talent, passion and creativity, but we, as an industry of developers, are absolutely *hopeless* at selling ourselves.

Before the Pitch

So you've had a positive conversation with a publisher, they've expressed some interest in what you and your team can do, and a meeting time has been set up to discuss a potential new project. Congratulations, you've just jumped over one of the hardest hurdles in the industry! Now comes the hard part -- actually *doing* the pitch.

Know your audience. Every publisher has a unique approach to rounding out their roster. For example, Warner Brothers Interactive Entertainment isn't known for realistic sports games, just as a place like Atlus isn't the flag-waver of the first person shooter genre. So before you start writing the pitch, find out what they *are* interested in and play to their strengths. Not only will it establish that you're a good fit for them, but it helps narrow down the scope and style of the project before you start work.

Know your product. This is salesmanship 101 stuff but missed all too often. Everyone from your team presenting the pitch should know every aspect of what the game is going to be about, even if that isn't part of their area of expertise. This is important because it tells the publisher -- even on a subconscious level -- that the team knows the game and believes in it together. If you don't, bite the bullet and solve that issue ahead of time. It may lead you to change things that would have caused major project issues months down the track.

Further to that, if you're pitching for a license, you should know everything about that license -- even stuff that isn't related to the game. If it's a cartoon, watch a bunch of episodes. Study other products that bear that license -- toys, books, clothes -- and note what common themes you find in the presentation of characters, logos, and dominant IP features. (For example, Barbie never frowns). You want to assure the publisher and licensor that you care about and understand the brand they'll be entrusting you with for the game.

One more note on this point -- make sure you develop the *elevator pitch* version of what you're selling. This is an old advertising term where you have the time it takes to get on and off an elevator ride to convince the person you're in the elevator with to invest in your idea. Hence, it needs to be short, memorable and fire the imagination. The most common form of this is the *x meets y in z world* formula.

For example, the elevator pitch I used for *Viva Pinata: Party Animals* was "*Mario Kart* meets *Mario Party* in an episode of The Amazing Race". The use and combination of established properties, genres and tropes might sound trite, but it gets your idea across a lot quicker. Even if you don't use the elevator pitch in front of a publisher, developing it is essential just so you can establish what the key pillars of your game are internally. You can also use the elevator pitch to start the ball rolling on your larger pitch.

Prepare something special. Remember, the pitch is basically you asking someone to give you a large amount of money to make something that doesn't exist yet -- but *should*. You have to make every element of your pitch go towards that goal.

The best way to get this across to your audience, in order of preference: interactive gameplay prototype, non-interactive video presentation of gameplay, concept art and environment views cut like a trailer (no more than two minutes, since YouTube has taught us that attention spans plummet after that point), and spoken presentation with supporting materials.

The most basic version is the written document with some concept art, which usually contains an executive summary of the game, a briefing of the main "Unique Selling Points". For example, the USPs for *Just Cause 2* would be: a huge open world, the grappling hook, an over-the-top Hollywood movie experience.

Finish up the document with a one to two page gameplay walkthrough. The latter section would be written from the point of view of the player, describing key gameplay mechanics and event sequences they would experience during a particularly interesting moment in the game. No matter the medium, it's always good to promote the best aspects of the game, elaborate on the unique selling points and offer the promise of the game being even better than what you've shown – i.e., the first rule of show business: leave them wanting more.

(A small point that many people forget with interactive or video presentations -- *always* have music and sound effects in them. It makes the world of difference to how professional it looks.)

Don't get bogged down in minor details. I've seen so many pitches where they spend time extolling the virtues of a revolutionary AI pathing system, or a new whiz-bang environmental destruction simulation model, despite the fact that those features have almost nothing to do with the core gameplay mechanics.

If it's a minor part of the experience, your publisher will assume you're going to come up with realistic AI behavior and a new physics system during the course of development anyway. If it's not, then you should ask yourself if it belongs in the pitch at all -- or if you need to start again and make it a focus of your new development.

Bring everything and ensure contingencies. Just because they're a big fancy publisher with more lawyers on staff than people in your entire team, don't assume they have everything they need for you to do your pitch.

If you have a demo or video, take a powerful laptop with a big screen, long lasting battery, and everything saved to it. Pocket wall projectors are getting cheaper by the day, and you'll kick yourself for not having one when the local one has died or doesn't work with your file for some reason.

Take printed copies of your written material with you (this is important later, too). Make sure your co-presenters have a copy of everything too, in case of hard drive corruption. Assume you will have no internet access to get another copy from home.

Save video files in nearly every format you can think of, including a smaller version for your cell phone. In the worst case scenario, you can then at least hand someone your phone and let them watch your trailer on that. It's better than letting your presentation be completely ruined by unforeseen technical hiccups.

Practice. Most pitches take around five to 15 minutes, depending on how interested the publisher is, your reputation as a developer, and how busy the time of year is. Typically you'll be lucky to have five minutes of quality time at something like E3, so it's critical to have your presentation down pat and within a small time frame. If you're given extra time, expand on key points but make sure you cover everything in the minimum amount of time.

Rehearse your presentation over and over again to anyone that you can get to sit down and listen. Note when they start to look bored – that's a sure sign that you're retreading old ground and you need to switch to a new topic before that point. If

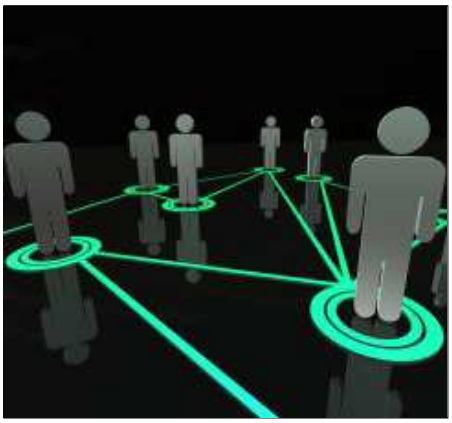
you have a gameplay prototype, practice playing it in time with you or your co-presenter's dialogue to ensure you're demonstrating the features they're currently talking about. (Bonus points if you're *both* playing a multiplayer game and you include some scripted smack talk).

Remember the key points from your college debate class -- explain what you're going to be saying, say it, then tell them what you said. Present your main arguments for your game (i.e., the unique selling points) up front and return to them throughout your time talking.

During the Pitch

Face time is critical. Yes, we have email and Skype and all sorts of wonderful technological bridge-builders that allow us to communicate across distance or time barriers, but nothing matches the immediacy and value of being in the same room as the people you're meeting with.

For one thing, you're guaranteed far more of their attention, and you're less likely to be interrupted as their staff knows they're in a meeting. There's also always more opportunity to discuss your ideas afterwards in a face-to-face situation.



This, more than the chaos and loot on the show floor, is why E3 and GDC are important events. So, dress well. Get that haircut you've been putting off for the summer. Have business cards ready to hand out when asked for one. Greet everyone with a handshake and a smile. Make small talk about the convention / flight / rental car mixup / local sports team.

Read How To Win Friends And Influence People, it's probably the greatest book ever made on how to be a nice person in a social or business situation -- and you really want the publisher to think you're a nice person at the start of the meeting.

Confidence. I get that you're nervous. There's a lot of money and time invested in this pitch and you want to get it right. However you have to put that out of your mind and act like you've already won the day. You might not believe it, but the people you're meeting with actually *want* to see you succeed more than anything. It's their job to find a developer to make their game, and they're rooting for you to be the one. If you're confident in your game, they'll be confident in your ability to make it a success and, in turn, that their job has just been made a lot easier.

So with that in mind you're already walking into a receptive room. Smile and look happy. Think about what you're going to say before you say it -- a small moment's silence while you collect your thoughts is *always* more preferable to a protracted "Ummm", stammering, or worse, changing your mind and contradicting yourself.

Public Speaking Skills are important. Most people hate public speaking, and it's something many of us in the industry are not trained in at all. So, unless you want to hire a professional actor to broadcast your message (and Jerry Lambert's busy at the moment), why not brush up on your skills at your local Toastmasters? It's a non-profit organization with chapters all around the world devoted to helping people become more confident public speakers and presenters. The skills you develop here will help you talk to your team during development, too.

Body Language. How your present yourself is just as important as what you're presenting. There's plenty of books in your local library (and many more articles about it for free on Google Books) that cover the subject, and you'll be well advised to read at least one.

Here's a primer: Don't cross your arms, maintain eye contact with who you're speaking to (if there are lots of people in the room you're addressing, change who you're looking at regularly), and if possible show your hands to indicate openness and trust.

Matching the behavior of the people you're speaking to (i.e. laughing when they laugh, talking at their volume level, assuming their posture) is also a time-honored tactic, as it lowers the defenses of your subject.

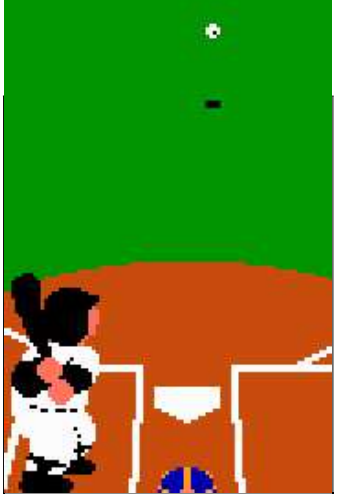
After the Pitch

After what must have felt like an hour, you've finally stopped showing off your game. Before you run out of the room and head towards the nearest bar, you'll need to stick around and see what questions they have for you. Here's what stands between you and the post-meeting beer.

Improvisational Skills. Or, to be less eloquent but more accurate -- *learn how to BS on your feet*. You should never *lie,* of course. However, it's a great skill to have an answer to something, no matter the question. One of the first skills media advisers instruct politicians is to just answer the question you *wanted* to hear, not necessarily the one they actually asked.

For example, if you're asked what the target demographic will be for the game is, and you don't want to narrow it down yet, explain that you make games that are open for any audience and you'll welcome publisher input on this matter. That's prevented you from defining the target audience and thrown the problem over to the publisher in one sentence.

If you don't know the answer to a question that's completely out of your department, talk about how you have people on your team back home that can answer it, and you will get back to them. The key isn't correctly responding to the question, it's assuring the publisher that you have the resources to find the right answer. For tips on how this works, watch a



press conference on C-SPAN to witness the skill of answering questions on your own terms.

Provide support material. It's best practice to leave behind something the people you're talking to can show their teams or upper management and encourage more support. Have a copy of the trailer you've prepared on a USB device, DVD or similar for them to watch again later. Print and *professionally* bind a copy or two of the pitch document for them to read in more detail.

You'd be amazed how much further printed material goes in terms of information and retention and getting noticed -- the document is always there on the publisher's desk, not invisible in a pile of email. Also be prepared to follow your pitch up quickly with scheduling and cost proposals to help them make their decision.

Establish timeline for follow up. Of course, all of this work amounts to naught if you don't get any result out of it. Make sure you discuss when it would be suitable to contact the publisher again to discuss if the project will be greenlit and that both parties stick to that timeline. After all, you have a team back home that need to know if they're about to start work on a new project, or prepare the hot oil for your return.

Good luck! After all of this you're still at the mercy of publisher management shakeups, the fickle tastes of the target audience changing completely, and competition from development teams in Southeast Asia that will do everything you're promising for half the price. Oh, and the daunting task of actually making good on all your wild promises...

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