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Indie Game Marketing Strategy

A Guide for Developers

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<p>Opinnäytetyön tarkoitus oli kirjoittaa markkinointistrategian ja sen soveltamisen ohje indie-pelien kehittäjille, auttaakseen heitä ajattelemaan strategisesti ja siten erottumaan kilpailijoistaan nykypäivän haastavilla markkinoilla.</p> <p>Kaikki tieto, paitsi lähteisiin viittaavat, perustuvat kirjoittajan viimeisen vuoden aikaiseen työkokemukseen indie-pelien markkinoinnin ammattilaisena, jolloin aihe tuli hyvin tutuksi. Lisäksi, tämä markkinointistrategia on tuettu SOSTAC®-mallilla.</p> <p>Lopputuloksena on ohje, joka käsittelee seitsemää, perus indie-pelien markkinointistrategian osaa, joiden tarkoitus on selventää indie-pelien kehittäjille: kuka heidän kohdeasiakkansa on, mitä kohdeasiakas mahtaa eniten toivoa indie-peliltä, kuinka saada kohdeasiakas huomaamaan indie-pelin ja kuinka kohdeasiakas saa pelin haltuunsa, sekä projektiin tarvittavat työkalut, materiaalit ja yhteistyökumppanit.</p> <p>Kirjoittaja suosittelee uraa indie-pelien kehityksen parissa ainoastaan henkilöille, jotka ovat valmiina tekemään paljon raskasta kehitys- ja markkinointityötä, sillä indie-peliala ei ole enää kultakaivos, vaan alalla ollaan rakkaudesta lajiin.</p>	
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<p>The purpose of this thesis was to write a marketing strategy and implementation guide for indie game developers in 2017, to help them to differentiate and compete in today's increasingly challenging indie game market.</p> <p>All the information and advice in the thesis were based on professional sources and previous studies in gaming and marketing strategy, as well as on the author's experience in working as an indie game marketer, researching and learning the knowledge first hand. The marketing strategy theory was structured and supported by the SOSTAC® framework.</p> <p>The resulting guide is one that covers seven components of a Basic Marketing Strategy for Indie Games, with the aim of clarifying to the indie game developer who their target customer is, what their target customer might most want from their game, how to best bring the game to the target customer's attention, how the target customer may gain access to the game, and the tools, materials and partnerships needed to achieve all of this.</p> <p>The author recommends that a career in indie game development only be pursued by those willing to put in the hard development and marketing work out of sheer passion for the indie game industry, as it is no longer the gold mine it once was.</p>	
Keywords	Indie game, digital marketing, marketing strategy

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1 Introduction

I started my business studies at Metropolia in 2014, choosing it over other schools because it offered both specialization in marketing and game industry related courses. I completed an 8-month internship at a game start-up and am employed by them to this day. While working as a newcomer to both marketing in the indie game industry, I became painfully aware of the scattered and unstructured nature of available indie game related marketing advice. I ended up applying much of what I was learning in my studies to my work as an indie game marketer, and forming my own methodology in the process.

Whilst I have a relatively well-rounded understanding of both marketing and the indie game industry, as well as the methodology I have unintentionally developed over the course of my young career, the marriage of the three could be fortified with more a more solid theoretical foundation.

For this thesis, I plan to widen my theoretical perspective of relevant marketing models and strategies, and deepen my knowledge of the indie game industry and market by studying information from a variety of primary, secondary and tertiary sources. I will then tie my findings to my existing, practical experience, to ensure a watertight finish.

My objective is to use this new knowledge to write a guide to creating marketing strategies for indie game start-ups. As mentioned, the information and advice out there in terms of indie game marketing is scattered, unstructured, and much of it, outdated. This is most likely because the indie game industry changes so quickly and constantly – a guide written today will only be helpful for a year or two, as unforeseeable new platforms, technologies and methods emerge to replace the tools we currently rely upon. This is also true for digital marketing as a whole. As marketers, we are in a constant race to stay with the times, and preferably, ahead of our competitors.

The changes in the indie game industry and market have led to a situation where the volume of new indie games has risen dramatically, and a large portion of the new games coming to market are not selling well. For indie games to even have chance at succeeding nowadays, they need to add processes like PR, marketing and customer

support to their repertoires, which used to be something that only large game companies and publishers did. (Galyonkin 2015 & 2016; Jonassen 2013.)

In this thesis I ponder the relationship between the fast pace of indie game marketing and the recent and ongoing changes in the indie game industry, explain why increasingly good and effective marketing is becoming ever more important for indie game companies, and provide a guide to forming an indie game marketing strategy. Based on how rapidly things are evolving, I expect the practical solutions I offer to only be fully applicable for a year, at most. However, I hope that I am able to offer indie game developers some deeper insight on strategic marketing, and thereby the longer-lasting ability to adapt to the changing times and practices, while maintaining a clear vision of the company's marketing objectives. That, after all, is exactly what marketing strategy is about.

I will begin by dissecting the theory of marketing strategy, before contemplating how to apply it to indie game marketing, and deciding what key components should be part of a basic indie game marketing strategy. I will then go through those components systematically, applying the SOSTAC framework to each one, and offering any other potentially helpful advice or information collected through my work experience.

2 Marketing Strategy

2.1 Defining Marketing Strategy

A marketing strategy is generally understood to be the roadmap for a company, based on assessment of their available resources, research and analysis of relevant data, to direct them to their goal, which is to understand and penetrate their target market, understand and reach their target customers, achieve a competitive advantage, and ultimately, increase sales. It can be a very heavy, detailed, long-term approach that includes research, analysis and planning which is my understanding of the 30,000-Foot Approach to the Strategic Marketing Process (Moderandi Inc. 2013, iv), or a more general and less rigid learning process that is separate from and precedes the actual planning of marketing processes, which is my understanding of Jean-Jaques Lambin's philosophy (Mongay 2006, 3-4). Although marketing strategy and marketing plan are

sometimes used interchangeably, a strategy is generally a more long-term vision than a plan, which supports and is a part of the greater marketing strategy.

As Dr. Mongay points out, the interpretations of the term marketing strategy are many. Stephen P. Schnaars [1991] goes so far as to declare that marketing strategy, as a concept, is not clearly defined at all. Although, in outline, experts' definitions of marketing strategy generally imply the same thing, the emphasis in those various definitions falls on different components within the marketing strategy (Mongay 2006, 8-13). I concluded that, in short, they are broadly divided in that some place more importance on the processes and others emphasise the ultimate goal or objectives, very much like people are universally divided in their 'means versus end; journey versus destination' views of the world.

Definitions of strategic marketing can also be divided into those that emphasise striving for competitive advantage, and those that emphasise the optimisation of resource allocation. It is suggested that in most cases, approaches to marketing strategy that focus on competitive advantage, however much they may vary, all contain three key components: environmental analysis, positioning and competitive advantage. The approaches that do not follow this three-component framework are typically the ones that stress resource allocation, which is said to be a less common philosophy. (Iyamabo & Otu-banjo 2013, 29-30.)

However, a research paper published by Journal of Strategic Marketing studied the dependency of the relationship between strategy and marketing performance on the resource bundle of a company, and concluded that company's performance is a function of the degree of correspondence between its resource endowment and its strategy profile. Their findings also showed that the professional and educational backgrounds of companies' management and CEOs strongly affect how strategies are built in said companies (Furrer & Alexandre & Sudharshan 2007, 161 and 176). This suggests that that, although a less common school of thought, the resource allocation perspective to marketing strategy may be more effective.

Being conscious of, and careful with, available resources is definitely a very important aspect of an indie game company's marketing strategy, for the simple reason that indie game companies are typically quite low on resources. On the other hand, with the indie game market being as saturated as it is, competitive advantage is equally important.

Luckily, the two approaches are not mutually exclusive, and I take both perspectives into consideration when putting together indie game marketing strategies.

2.2 Benefits

Having a marketing strategy in place acts as a sort of beacon for a company as they go about their marketing and business tasks, such as implementing their shorter term marketing plan. It forces the company to identify itself, as well as where it wants to go, which is an incredibly valuable learning process, particularly for a new company. It is effective in helping to streamline product development, as a fundamental part of creating a marketing strategy is to research the target market and the competition. This can prevent product design or development flaws that may be costly or difficult to repair.

A marketing strategy can also help communication within a company, as well as with external stakeholders, as the general direction and guidelines to get there are clearly established and available to all members of the workforce, as well as others whom it may concern. In addition to making a company money by scouting potential opportunities, a good marketing strategy can save a company money, as it will optimise the allocation of resources and identify potential financial threats to avoid.

2.3 Marketing Strategies in the Indie Game Scene

There are indie game companies that are established and not necessarily struggling so much in terms of financial or human resources. They have access to excellent marketing professionals and their strategies. However, the bulk of indie game developers are start-ups with little to no marketing education or finances to buy it. This means that many indie game companies are making do with the information they can find online, and many are foregoing creating a marketing strategy altogether, not seeing or understanding the importance of it.

In simple terms, indie game companies make and sell one type of product: games. There are, however, countless types of games and as many ways to distribute them, as well as numerous revenue models to choose from. This, in addition to the aforementioned low resources, puts the average indie game company in a position that is quite far removed from a typical company profile, for which a typical marketing strategy guide

is written. Creating a marketing strategy as a non-professional can be complicated enough without having to adapt the instructions to suit a completely different situation.

Some online marketing strategy guides for indie game companies do exist, as well as a handful of books. Whilst they offer some decent guidelines, they often omit topics that I find to be important and usually contain outdated or inaccurate information. I assume this is partly due to how fast things change in the indie game industry, and the fact that many of the guides are written by game developers, rather than marketing professionals.

2.4 Components of a Traditional Marketing Strategy

Just as there appears to be no official, fixed definition of marketing strategy, there is no official, fixed paradigm for a traditional marketing strategy. There are various approaches, of which a few examples are the 3-Component Definition of Strategic Marketing, the 3Cs approach, and the Marketing Mix Model. The fact that there are many ways to go about structuring a marketing strategy provides a lot of freedom and flexibility, but can also cause a lot of confusion.

The 3-Component Definition of Strategic Marketing suggests that marketing strategy is, regardless of the model or tool that is used, generally roughly divided into the elements of environmental analysis, positioning and competitive advantage. Environmental analysis encompasses all the practices and processes that provide information about the company's micro and macro environments. These processes often include things like SWOT and PESTLE analyses. The information gathered then lays the groundwork for the elements of positioning and competitive advantage. Positioning determines a company's stance and objectives in terms of the position their company or brand will take in the market. This is affected by factors like pricing and how the quality level of a product or brand is projected. The element of competitive advantage concentrates on differentiation strategy. (Iyamabo & Otubanjo 2013, 16.)

The 3Cs approach teaches that marketing strategy deals with the interplay of the three forces: The Customer, the Competition and the Corporation. Instead of adopting a linear, three-step approach, like the 3-Component Definition of Strategic Marketing, this business model divides the marketing strategy into three categories, which each have their individual linear processes. The philosophy behind the 3Cs is that only by careful-

ly covering each of the three bases (Customer, Competition and Corporation) in their strategies, can businesses gain a competitive advantage. (Ohmae 1991.)

The Marketing Mix Model with its original 4Ps or now revised 7Ps: Product, Price, Place, Promotion, Processes, People and Physical evidence, was originally created by Jerome McCarthy. There is talk of an 8th 'P', although some sources think it should stand for 'Partnerships', and others believe it should stand for 'Productivity & Quality', or even 'Performance'. (Chaffey & Smith 2013, 51-53 & 56; Professional Academy; SiteSell 2011.)

These three theories, models or tools served as the guidelines for the Basic Marketing Strategy for Indie Game Developers. The Marketing Mix with its 8th 'P' for Partnership was my original checklist when I began to plan the Indie Game Marketing Strategy components. The 3Cs reminded me to keep the three forces of Customers, Competition and Corporation in balance. Finally, the 3-Component Definition of Strategic Marketing, which I found last, prompted me to make sure that my Indie Game Marketing Strategy included components devoted to environmental analysis, positioning and seeking competitive advantage.

2.5 Components of an Indie Game Marketing Strategy

The following approach to planning a marketing strategy for indie games is one that, over time and without conscious effort, has become my go-to method. It is simply a combination of features from select, classical marketing strategy principles, applied to the circumstances of an indie game company. I will briefly introduce them here and go into more depth in part 4.

In a condensed form, a basic marketing strategy for an indie game should clarify to the developers who their target customer is and how to give them what they want, more successfully than their competitors. This means learning who their target customer is and what they most want or expect from a game. Once that is established, it is possible to consider ways to spark the customers' awareness, interest and desire, to eventually lead them to action (seeking to purchase the game). Making the game available on the correct channels and platforms is something to consider carefully, both from the perspective of cost-effectiveness and suitability to the game's style, and convenience to the target customer. Finally, there is the aspect of user acquisition, customer relation-

ships and business partnerships, which all need to be maintained and nurtured. Next I am going to briefly introduce the 7 essential elements of an indie game marketing strategy.

Including a short, executive summary of the complete marketing strategy is advisable, as this makes briefing new team members, potential partners or investors much easier. A marketing strategy can, of course, include more components, or omit some of the ones I have listed – strategies are unique to their creators; everything depends on the needs of individual companies, and the relative applicability of the components I am about to introduce.

First, pinpointing the Unique Selling Proposition (USP) is essential for any company or product. For an indie game to stand out in the current market, it needs to be nothing short of exceptional. The USP is something that should be established at the conceptualization level of the game development process, as it is vital information in terms of marketing a product and competing against other similar products. (Dreskin 2015, 9-10.)

The second crucial step is identifying the target customer. It goes without saying that a good product is created with the target customer in mind. Considering the target customer is, logically, also among the first steps in a marketing strategy. Only through studying the target audience and building an accurate demographic and psychographic profile of the target customer, is it possible to understand how to reach and influence them most effectively. (Peterson 2016.)

This is followed by defining the correct pricing and positioning. An indie game is not only defined by its genre. Correct pricing and positioning also play an important role in achieving maximum visibility and success within a chosen game category, and with the previously identified target audience. Pricing also has a direct effect on revenue, and should therefore be considered carefully. (Hietalahti 2006.)

The next step is to optimise a distribution plan. For an indie game to end up in the possession of a player, a distribution plan needs to be in place. There are many potential distribution channels available to the indie game company, of which it only makes sense to use the most optimal ones, with the friendliest effort-cost-benefit ratio. Calcu-

lating the strategic use of offers and promotions is also part of an indie game distribution plan. (Mills 2016.)

Then it is time to plan an online marketing strategy. For most indie game companies, there is no offline marketing strategy. The reason for this is that traditional, offline marketing typically requires resources that indie developers simply do not have at their disposal. However, social media marketing, content marketing and SEO (search engine optimisation) can be implemented with relatively basic means, as well as smaller scale, paid advertising. (Jonassen 2013.)

For an effective online marketing strategy, it is important to design marketing materials. Marketing materials are the various props used to support the general strategy, and they come in many forms. Because an indie game company will typically design and produce their own marketing materials, observing the principle of the friendliest effort-cost-benefit ratio strongly applies to this part of the strategy. (Jonassen 2013.)

Finally, arranging promotions and partnerships can fortify the position of a company. Press releases, public speaking and old-fashioned networking at events are some of the only affordable options for promotion that indie game companies have at their disposal. Other publicity efforts include partnerships with game journalists, influencers in the gaming community and potential new sales platforms. (Jonassen 2013.)

2.6 SOSTAC as a Tool for Marketing Strategy Creation

The SOSTAC® framework is a planning tool created by PR Smith. It stands for the six steps that form the framework: Situation Analysis, Objectives, Strategy, Actions and Control (Chaffey & Smith 2013, 3-4). It can be implemented from a business-wide perspective or applied to smaller, more specific areas, like marketing. I will include a brief SOSTAC® application in each part of the Basic Marketing Strategy for Indie Games in the guide portion of this thesis, and I recommend the same approach for indie game companies as they plan their marketing strategies, to ensure thorough and complete results. Figure 1 illustrates the SOSTAC framework brilliantly. A brief description of the components of the SOSTAC® framework:

The first step is situation analysis, and it answers the question 'Where are we now?'. It can include things like current performance, customer insight, marketplace opportuni-

ties and competitor benchmarking, as well as SWOT and competitor analyses. (Chaffey & Smith 2013, 3-4.)

The second step is objectives, which answers the question 'Where do we want to be?'. This can include things like defining the company's vision, aligning business goals and selecting KPIs (key performance indicators) and CSFs (critical success factors). (Chaffey & Smith 2013, 3-4.)

The third step is strategy, which answers the question 'How do we get there?'. This can include things like segmentation and targeting, positioning and the marketing mix (7Ps), engagement and content strategy, contact strategy and a multi-channel experience plan. (Chaffey & Smith 2013, 3-4.)

The fourth and fifth steps, often grouped together, are tactics & action. These answer the question 'What do we need to get there?' and can include things like a 90 Day Plan, plans for resource allocation, editorial calendars, media schedules and digital roadmaps. (Chaffey & Smith 2013, 3-4.)

The sixth and last step is control, which answers the question 'How do we monitor performance?'. It can include things like qualitative feedback, prioritized actions, viewing reporting platforms of various tools, regular reviewing of processes and monitoring customer engagement levels. (Chaffey & Smith 2013, 3-4.) An important part of Control is that it should reflect the goals set in Objectives.



There's no magic bullet for guaranteed commercial or marketing results, this infographic is designed to help you consider your own process for successful marketing. Combining PR Smith's SOSTAC® Planning System and Smart Insights RACE planning will give you a structured approach to help plan, manage and optimize your multichannel marketing.

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Figure 1. The Multichannel Marketing Growth Wheel by Smart Insights. (Smith & Swan, 2016.)

3 Background and Process

The motivation to study the topic of indie game marketing strategy and create a guide on the subject was based on need; the need for a fresh and more useful perspective, and perhaps, a more lasting lesson. Looking for advice as an indie game marketer usually led me to results that were incomplete or outdated, and thus, only half-solutions, as they forced me to look for more accurate information elsewhere. For example, a handful of the sources and tools mentioned in *The Indie Game Developer Handbook* by Richard Hill-Whittall (2015), published just two years ago, are already closed down, unavailable, or their function has changed.

I realised that the available advice mostly only serves to instruct, rather than educate. Instead of creating another guide with an expiration date, I attempted to add an element of teaching the reader to fish rather than giving them fish, meaning, teaching the indie game developer to think from a strategical marketing perspective, rather than telling them what tools to use and how. Instead of concentrating on the right answers, I have built a guide based on learning to ask the right questions. Concrete instructions and references to specific, online sources or tools were thus be left to a minimum, due to the perishable nature of the information. I did not, however, exclude them entirely, but focused on including ones that can be substituted or are likely to remain available far into the future.

The information in this thesis comes from a mixture of work experience and study of relevant sources. Although I did not consult any of my colleagues or directly ask them for information or input for this thesis, much of my work experience and the knowledge I learned from it, was gained from or alongside them. All direct input and guidance during the writing process came from my thesis instructors. The topic was not assigned to me – I chose it based on personal need, and based on my assessment of the marketing related needs of indie game developers. As mentioned, I attempt to advise the reader of the guide to understand their objectives and find a way to reach them, rather than listing instructions, and any practical instructions I do list come with a reasoning process designed to help the reader come to their own conclusions.

I limited my topic to just indie game marketing, rather than indie game development in general, as the entire indie game development process is incredibly broad. I also do not have as much experience with the actual development side of things, as I only work

alongside the developers and not with them. Although some sources, like Richard Hill-Whittall (2015), consider marketing a part of game development, I see it as a distinctly separate process that falls under the category of business development. This brings us to what I find is a fundamental issue or problem with indie game companies: all too often, they appear to fail to understand that the processes of developing a game and running a business are two very separate machines.

I considered narrowing my focus onto an even more specific topic within indie game marketing, but came to the conclusion that another incomplete or too specific guide would be useless. I did manage to limit the scope by choosing a specific angle though, which is the marketing strategy perspective. This allowed me to leave out any overly specific, step-by-step instructions or long lists of 'absolutely obligatory' tools of the trade, which would probably turn out to be useless within months.

I chose the strategical marketing angle because, although I do expect the information in my guide to become outdated eventually, I hope that it will do so more slowly. I also chose this angle, and a functional thesis in general, out of pure interest and the wish to develop myself. These are important lessons for me to learn, and the experience has been an incredibly valuable exercise. Teaching is an effective way to learn, and I felt that a functional thesis with the objective of teaching others would educate me in the process.

After I had decided upon my topic, I spent a rather long time collecting information and making mental notes, before doing any writing. I paid a lot more attention to my job and reflected on my tasks, considering the long-term, strategic perspective behind all my actions. I considered traditional marketing strategies and their applicability to the unique circumstances of indie game companies and their products, comparing them to my own methodology. I then began to write about the components of a basic marketing strategy for indie game companies, and challenged myself by using the SOSTAC framework to plan each one. After completing the guide portion of my thesis, I fortified my understanding of general marketing strategy theory before using it to polish the structure and content of the guide.

The structure of this thesis is a fusion of a report and an indie game marketing strategy guide. The structure maintains an otherwise typical format, with the exception that the entire marketing strategy guide is included in part 4. I feel this is necessary, as the

frame of reference gives insight and support to the perspective of the guide. As the guide is primarily written with a non-marketing professional reader in mind, marketing jargon is limited or simplified in the guide portion of the thesis.

4 A Guide to Indie Game Marketing Strategy

In 2008 a few indie game companies struck gold. With minimal marketing knowledge or business experience, they managed to create games that became global hits overnight, making millions. This caught the attention of aspiring game developers everywhere, and inspired them into action. The legendary indie game ‘gold rush’ began. (Vogel 2014.)

The controversial term ‘Indiepocalypse’ has been floating around the game industry ever since. It refers to a rumoured ‘bubble’ in the industry that is about to pop, much like the United States housing bubble of 2008. The earliest article written on the subject was in May 2014 by Jeff Vogel, an indie game industry veteran, and in it he predicted that the indie game ‘gold rush’ would cause an over-saturated market, followed by an eventual collapse. As shown in Figure 2, the rise in indie games pushed to market correlates with a steep fall in overall sales. (Vogel 2014). Whether or not the bubble has actually popped yet, or even exists, is still being debated, but what did come to pass was that indie game studios sprang up like mushrooms, and the amount of indie games being launched now is higher than ever before. This makes it increasingly challenging to differentiate from competitors, meaning marketing is not only no longer optional, it also has to be executed well.

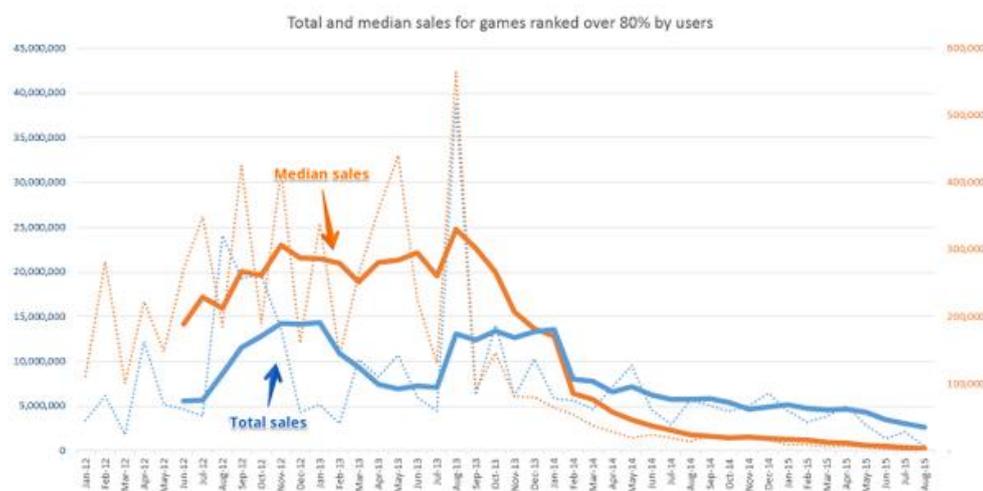


Figure 2. The plummeting of indie game sales in early 2014. (Vogel 2015.)

Marketing models, methods and practices obviously vary between industries, as well as between companies. What makes indie game marketing rather unique is the combination of a (typically) completely inexperienced company, with an entirely obscure product, in a heavily competitive market, with barely any capital or other resources to allocate to marketing. Any one of those ingredients individually could be enough to lead a company to failure. All of them combined creates a very bleak starting point, indeed.

Indie game companies can be as small as one-man or one-woman teams, but are usually made up of a handful of members. More often than not, a team consists of programmers, designers and artists. Marketing is often forgotten about or even purposely excluded. Reasons for this vary from not understanding the importance of marketing or assuming it is something to be dealt with in the last stages of pushing a game to market, to downright despising marketing.

When there is no budget to speak of, one is forced to get creative. Luckily, we live in an age when a whole marketing strategy can be executed digitally and with minimal resources, if necessary. It requires a certain amount of know-how and innovativeness, as well as recognising and using the correct tools. This thesis includes a guide as to what those tools are, and instructions to their effective use.

Despite the challenging times calling for new approaches and practices, a negative and suspicious attitude to marketing remains in some indie game circles. I believe this is fundamentally rooted in misunderstanding and, perhaps, disappointing personal experiences. Many indie game developers appear to mistakenly believe that a good game will market itself, or that indie game development is an art form, done for pleasure or personal growth, rather than for materialistic reasons, like monetary gain (Kerr 2015). They may take the view that marketing is akin to selling one's soul; that it is tacky, dishonest and desperate, and most of all, annoying. This, however, is only true of bad marketing.

The best marketing is both invisible and transparent. By this I mean it is simultaneously subtle and honest. The fact of the matter is that, without marketing, even the most legendary game of all time would, in all likelihood, go undiscovered and unappreciated.

4.1 Traits of a Marketable Game

Ideally, an indie game developer will consider marketing angles before even starting the game creation process. Often this is the case, although the developer may not be aware of it. Simply the act of choosing a game title that is attention grabbing and likely to pique the interest of potential customers or players, is already marketing. Considering what style of game mechanics or particle effects would impress the players and give them an enjoyable experience, increasing the chances of the game's popularity, is also marketing. The key to a more effective and structurally complete marketing strategy is being aware of and harnessing the fact that the marketing of a game-to-be starts before the game fully comes into existence. A developer should not make vital decisions, like naming their game choosing a style, on a whim. Taking advantage of in-game factors with future marketing in mind will really help down the line.

Thinking about marketing before or in the early stages of game development, and implementing things like a preconceived USP, saves a team from having to go back later and redo things, or to look for a hidden USP that they may have accidentally buried in there somewhere. Simple, absolutely fundamental in-game marketing efforts an indie game developer should focus on in addition to an exceptional USP are giving the game a good title, making the game visually appealing and creating it to run on the correct devices and platforms.

The title of a game, much like the cover of a book, gives people a certain impression of what it is about. Much like a book by its cover, a game will also be judged by its title. From a marketing perspective, a good title is search optimised, suitable in length, catchy and relevant to the game. Being able to market the product and thus start building anticipation and a fan base as early as possible is key, so I would argue that a placeholder or temporary name is not advisable. Wanting something to stick in the minds of potential customers requires exposure and repetition, and changing a title midway could break that important, brand-building chain. However, although it is a good idea to have a title locked down as early as possible, it can be changed over the development process if necessary, right up until the game is launched. Meaning, an ineffective title can and should be changed to a better one at any point mid-development, rather than left as it is. (Wood 2013.)

A game must be polished before release (Roy 2016, 274). Players expect games to look and feel good, especially ones that they have paid for. One thing that is almost always mentioned in reviews of excellent, popular games is the degree to which they are 'polished', meaning how amazing they look and feel. A game that looks and feels incredible but is lacking a little in the storyline department is typically forgiven much more than an ugly or buggy game with a great storyline.

This does not really place any limitations on style though, as games can come in basically any art style with any kind of mechanics and UI (user interface) under the sun. Whether it be a realistic, 3D-animated style or a 2D-cartoon-style game, it should not be left rough around the edges or looking or feeling unfinished. The end result should look polished and work smoothly, and the UI should not interfere with the gaming experience. (Maxim 2017, 7-8.)

4.2 The Marketing Strategy Framework

Many marketing strategy guides for indie games are actually marketing plans. The terms are actually not interchangeable, as many may think. The difference is rather simple: A marketing strategy is usually concerned with the end goal further in the future, whereas a marketing plan focuses on the actions taken over a shorter period of time, with the long-term end goal in mind. A marketing strategy may contain a marketing plan within it, or a marketing strategy may precede and lay the foundation for a marketing plan (Lake 2016). As indie game companies are often not in a position to plan too far ahead into the future, due to lack of business experience or the uncertainty of the market, I feel that a slightly shorter-term, strategy-plan fusion is appropriate.

Indie game developers, as anyone new to marketing, may be intimidated by the idea of creating a business or marketing strategy, fearing it to be a long, complicated and unpleasant undertaking. This is not necessarily the case. A marketing strategy can be short and simple, as long as it covers all of the essential components. In fact, the shorter and simpler, the better. The components I find most important for indie game companies to use in their marketing strategies are: Pinpointing the USP, Identifying the Target Customer, Defining the Correct Pricing & Positioning, Optimising a Distribution Plan, Panning an Online Marketing Strategy, Designing Marketing Materials and Arranging Promotions & Partnerships. The SOSTAC framework will serve as a structuring and planning tool for each component, as I go through them individually.

4.2.1 Pinpointing the Unique Selling Proposition

A unique selling proposition (or unique selling point) is the particular benefit that a product or service has to offer, which is provided by no other product or service. Communicating the USP is done to differentiate from competitors and is a key element of branding. (Entrepreneur.)

The USP of a game pinpoints the fundamental reason anyone would consider playing it. It is unique, meaning that no other game offers the same selling proposition, and it is a *selling* proposition, meaning its purpose is to compel people to buy and play it. (Dreskin 2015, 9-10.)

Situation Analysis: 'Where are we now?'

If the company were to attempt to sell the game in a single sentence, what would that sentence be? Considering this question will reveal the game's USP. If the point of the game cannot be expressed in a sentence, it either has an unclear USP or lacks one altogether, in which case the exercise of trying to condense the game's essence into a sentence should be repeated until a satisfactory outcome is reached. Sometimes making changes to the game itself is necessary to achieve a USP. A company that is still in the conceptualization stage of game development will have an easier time of this, as their situation will be much more flexible than that of a company with a game half built or completely finished.

Objectives: 'Where do we want to be?'

A game needs to be remarkable, and it needs to stand out from the crowd. It can be remarkably good (like *Skyrim*), it can be remarkably absurd (like *Goat Simulator*), it can be remarkably difficult (like *Dark Souls*), it can be remarkably beautiful (like *Badlands*) or have a remarkably creative idea or mechanic behind it (like *Angry Birds*). Whatever the USP of the game is, it must be remarkable. Without this point of focus, future marketing and sales endeavours will be more of a struggle than they need to be, and the game will be lost in an ocean of others exactly like it. A USP is necessary to distinguish a game from competitors' games.

Strategy: 'How do we get there?'

Coming up with a remarkable game idea can be incredibly difficult. The internet is full of countless resources and methods to help with coming up with marketable game concepts that sell. Three of the simplest techniques or exercises that can get a designer or developer started are:

- 1) Observing one's surroundings. Watching the surrounding world and everything in it can be very inspiring! A game can be made about basically anything. People are especially drawn to things they can relate to, like building a car and driving it through the Finnish countryside (My Summer Car), or things they wish they could do in real life but can't, like explore the depths of the ocean (Subnautica). Whilst directly copying movies or other games is bad form, taking inspiration from them is not.
- 2) Brainstorming outside of the box. Coming up with an idea like Super Meat Boy - a game about a character who is a bleeding piece of meat, trying to rescue his girlfriend, Bandage Girl - can simply not be done without thinking outside of the box. It is a cliché, but for a reason. Taking a moment to write down absolutely every idea that comes to mind, without censoring, can yield surprisingly remarkable results.
- 3) Asking others. There are more gamers in the world than game developers, meaning that there are more potential ideas floating around than there are people carrying them out. Asking people what they would definitely play or not play can uncover some holes in the market and inspire great design ideas to fill them.

Tactics & Actions: 'What do we need to get there?'

The USP should be pinpointed as early as possible in the game development project, and time should be set aside for the team to work on it if necessary. This means adding regular meetings dedicated to uncovering the game's USP to the team's project calendar. The teams should also prepare for the possible later need of a test group, either by looking for suitable candidates online in, for example, game development support forums like TIGSource or IndieDB, or asking friends and family to provide feedback.

Control: 'How do we monitor performance?'

At the end of the day, games are created so people may get enjoyment and entertainment from them. Keeping that in mind and keeping things relatively simple is a good way to go, considering future marketing and hype generation efforts. If answering a question like 'what is the point of this game?' or 'why should I buy this game?' is difficult, the concept probably needs to be rethought. Feedback from fellow game developers, as well as from a selected test group, can help to measure whether a USP is remarkable enough to succeed.

4.2.2 Identifying the Target Customer

Attempting to please everyone is a waste of resources and will lead to failure, as it is simply impossible. Identifying target customers and pinpointing the USP go hand in hand. Without knowing the audience, creating something that they can relate to and enjoy is successful accidentally at best. It is not uncommon to identify the target market or audience first and then design a game concept to suit that market or audience, but indie game developers often have a more artistic approach to game development, leading them to fall in love with an idea first and look for an audience to love it, later. Assuming the concept of the game is already decided upon, it is easiest to use the exclusion method to uncover the profile of a target customer. (Dreskin 2015, 11.)

Situation Analysis: 'Where are we now?'

The first thing to consider here is whether or not a target customer or a target audience has been identified. If not, analysing the customers of the game's closest competitors can represent a rough example of a target audience. If the feels that a target customer or audience has been identified, they should ensure that the profile of this target customer is accurate.

Objectives: 'Where do we want to be?'

The objective is to have an accurate demographic and psychographic profile of the target customer, in other words, knowing what categories such as age, gender and global location they fall into, as well as what their interests are and how best to reach and influence them.

Strategy: 'How do we get there?'

When identifying the target customer, it is a good idea to start by, firstly, considering who influences or makes the buying decision, secondly, who the end user will be, and thirdly, whether they are the same individual. It is important to factor these in when identifying the target audience. A few other things to consider are:

1) Who was the original target audience?

Usually, a game concept takes shape with at least a vague idea of a target audience in mind. This is a good place to begin.

2) Who plays similar games?

Analysing the audiences of similar games can indicate what types of people may be interested.

3) Logically, who would like or buy this game?

Deductive reasoning goes a long way. An alphabet-learning game with Moomins in it would most likely be bought by parents or teachers and played by young children, whereas an expensive, high-quality, horror game will most likely appeal to adult, hardcore gamers.

4) Who likes or hates it, so far?

If the game is present on the internet in any way, for example on social media or being discussed on game development forums, the general response can indicate what types of people may or may not be interested.

Tactics & Actions: 'What do we need to get there?'

When it comes to making educated guesses and estimations about a game's future popularity, data is required. This data can be sales figures and demographic data of

other similar game genres, data from Google Analytics or other analytical tools or manually collected data.

Control: 'How do we monitor performance?'

Before the game itself is available to play but as it begins to have an online presence and establish a following, it is already possible to gauge what kind of audience may be interested by looking at who shows an interest in following the development process. Using Google Analytics to track who visits the game's website and where from is a strong indicator of target audience, as well as Twitter Analytics, Facebook Insights and Instagram's Iconosquare for a deeper understanding of the game's social media audiences. It may be too early for strict KPIs (key performance indicators) when a company is only just trying to put a finger on their target customer profile, but constantly keeping an eye on performance data will, at the very least give clear indications as to what those KPIs could be in future.

4.2.3 Defining the Correct Pricing & Positioning

Price-wise, indie games go from free to upwards of 50 euros. The pricing of the game has to reflect the characteristics of the game, meaning play-time in minutes, platform, quality, etc. Pricing directly affects positioning. A game costing 50 euros, will lead a customer to expect a AAA (non-indie, high budget) game for console or PC, whereas a price of 99 cents will have a customer expecting an ad-free puzzle platformer for mobile. Once again, it is important to consider the type of game, the platform and the type of customer when choosing a pricing and positioning strategy, as well as the chosen revenue model. (Dreskin 2015, 11.)

Situation Analysis: 'Where are we now?'

Pricing and positioning are normally considered when a game is closer to completion and are largely determined by the game's design, genre, target audience and, simply, how good it truly is. There is also the game's revenue model to consider. If a game is free-to-play, freemium or episodic, it is the prices of in-game purchases, premium features or individual episodes that are being considered, which are calculated differently from traditional prices. As traditional pricing is based on just the one transaction per product, prices tend to be higher than with other revenue models. Situation analysis

requires an understanding of what the game, as an experience, actually is in its entirety, what it is worth and how it will be sold.

Objectives: 'Where do we want to be?'

As monitoring the performance of pricing and positioning can only be done after the game has been launched and officially available for purchase, setting numeric goals in terms of sold copies or revenue generated within a specific time period is a possibility. The ultimate goal here is to settle on a price that hits the sweet spot of being the highest price that most customers would comfortably pay, before it starts to turn them off.

Strategy: 'How do we get there?'

It is important to make an honest assessment of the game at hand, and think objectively about an appropriate price range. Relevant questions here include whether there are many other, similar games or whether it is one of a kind, as well as what impression the price should give and the type of customer it should attract. Comparing to games the same genre, similar in length and amount of content can also help to determine a reasonable price.

Tactics & Actions: 'What do we need to get there?'

Research, as extensive as possible, should be conducted before deciding upon a revenue model or pricing and positioning strategy, as permanent, huge changes to prices cannot be made in either direction without it looking bad. Data from sources such as Steam Spy can be used to understand the market.

Control: 'How do we monitor performance?'

Monitoring the performance of a set price can only be done after launch, when the game is officially on the market. Comparing actual sales figures to the goals and KPIs set in Objectives will express whether the pricing and positioning are effective.

4.2.4 Optimising a Distribution Plan

Platforms can be roughly divided into three, large categories: PC, console and mobile. Within those categories are, for example, the different consoles (PlayStation, Xbox, etc.) or various operating systems (Windows, Linux, etc.), but I will not go into further detail about those as from a marketing perspective, only the broader categories matter. If a game can be launched on more than one platform, it should absolutely be considered, and it is most efficient to consider these things early on, as it affects the actual development process and the concept in general. A game designed for PC, for example, can be tricky to have run smoothly on a console, as everything has been planned from a PC point of view. Each platform has a distinct player base and there is usually not much cross over, so branching out onto more platforms will mean a wider audience. Not all games are suitable for all platforms or operating systems though, and it is important to keep the style and limitations of a game in mind when deciding which platform to aim for, as well as where the game's target audience is likely to be. (Wikipedia 2016; Marchand & Hennig-Thurau 2013, 143-145.)

Games can be bought and sold either online or offline, with the offline sales market being reserved quite exclusively for AAA games, for obvious reasons. Offline sales require manufacturing and distributing physical products, for which large budgets and abundant resources are needed, and AAA games are often gigantic in size, making downloading to and storing them on devices a bit of a technical burden. Indie games are typically restricted to online sales platforms, which is not a problem as purchasing games online is the norm. Indie games are usually smaller in size anyway, making them more ideal to download and store digitally. Deciding which online platforms to include in the distribution plan is up to the team and is largely determined by the chosen hardware platforms and operating systems chosen for a given project. Examples of distribution channels are Steam, App Store and Play Store. It is also possible to go rogue and sell a game through one's own website, or to include a game in a bundle sale for a limited time. (Marchand & Hennig-Thurau 2013, 151.)

Offers are a good tool to perk up dragging sales figures. Offers include discounts, giveaways and free demos. Whilst giveaways and free demos may seem counter intuitive when the goal is to increase sales, they are a great way to generate hype and visibility, which can and often do translate to sales. Distributing free demos is a good trick to

building anticipation before an upcoming launch, giveaways are great way to extend the hype for a while after launch or to get some extra attention any time, and discounts are an effective tool to regain some lost attention and bump up sales in quiet times.

Depending on the distribution channel, seasonal offers may automatically take place. In addition to those, options include doing giveaways independently or through giveaway channels, distributing free demos and holding discounts. Offers should be used sparingly, as they give UA (user acquisition) a nice boost, but give off a cheap or desperate impression if used all the time and predictably, not to mention cause potential customers to simply wait for the next offer rather than paying full price. Offers are a valuable tool for fast visibility boosts. A free demo is great for several reasons, one of them being that they are easy to send to potential partners, like journalists or YouTubers.

Situation Analysis: 'Where are we now?'

Where is the game being sold now, and how is it doing? If the game is not being sold yet, do its features determine where and how it should be distributed? If the company wants to use a particular distribution channel or method, does the game need to be altered in any way to be suitable for said channel or method?

Objectives: 'Where do we want to be?'

For offers in particular, it would be wise to set numerical goals. The ultimate goals of a distribution strategy are:

- 1) To offer the game on the platforms that suit it best in terms of technical and in-game mechanical requirements, where most of its target customers are and where it is likely to generate the most revenue
- 2) To raise, prolong and maintain interest and hype

Strategy: 'How do we get there?'

- 1) Developing or altering features of the game to reflect the requirements of the chosen channels
- 2) Successful use of offers to raise, prolong and maintain interest and hype

Tactics & Actions: 'What do we need to get there?'

A thorough understanding of the differences between audiences of different distribution channels is needed, as well as an understanding of what types of games are suited for what platforms. The game in question needs to meet the requirements of both the audience and the platform.

Control: 'How do we monitor performance?'

If the game is available on more than one channel or platform, the results between those channels or platforms can be compared to determine which one is most effective, and why. Sales figures in general, compared to the sales targets set, can give some indication as to how suitable a sales channel is, or how effective a particular offer is.

4.2.5 Planning an Online Marketing Strategy

Online marketing is affordable and, on a small scale, can be handled by even just one person. The most important component of an online marketing strategy for indie game companies is a social media strategy. Other key components are website search engine optimisation and a paid online advertising strategy, if applicable.

I would not be a marketing professional if I did not invent my own framework. Hence, the 5Cs of Content Marketing. The 5Cs stand for the components: Channels, Content, Control, Correct and Cultivate.

Channels: There are countless of content platforms online, ranging from social media to video sharing and everything in between. Being present on all of them is absolutely impossible. It is important to consider the resources available and the ultimate goal of using a particular channel before deciding to include it in a social media or content marketing strategy. If a channel has a realistic potential in terms of bringing a company closer to its objectives within the available resources and existing limitations, it is a valid part of the strategy.

Different channels have different purposes, personalities and etiquettes, as well as different audiences. Think of them as various tools in a content marketing toolkit, to be used in different ways and circumstances.

Content: Once a company has decided which channels to include in its social media and content marketing strategy, it has to decide what type of content to generate for each of those channels. As a simple rule that applies to all channels, content should ideally encourage engagement and sharing. There are several things that motivate people to both. Often, the same content can be posted on all channels, but presented differently on each. For example, a screenshot of a glitch in the game would be posted as is on Instagram with or without a caption and with up to 30 hashtags, on Facebook with a couple of lines of light hearted text and perhaps a question for the community to engage with, on Twitter with a very short caption of a maximum of 140 characters and 1-2 hashtags, and on a 'devlog' (developer log) forum with a paragraphs of text explaining how this glitch came about and how it was ultimately handled. Research should always be done into the etiquette and best practices of different channels, before adopting their use.

Control: Much like the Control component of the SOSTAC® framework, this part is about measuring the success, in this case the success of the various social media and content marketing tactics in use. Only in this part it is not so much about reaching, for example, a certain number of likes (although there is nothing wrong with that), but rather looking at the different types of posts and content published and analysing how they were received by the audience. The point is for the company to really get to know their audience so that they can provide more of what they want, more consistently.

Correct: This is the natural, next step after Control. If a company discovers that a certain type of content or style of presentation is absolutely not working, it should no longer be used. Content or presentation styles that are well received, on the other hand, should be used more. Analysing why something does or does not work for a given audience is an important part of getting to know them.

Cultivate: Channels and their respective follower or fan bases must be maintained and nurtured to help them grow. This is done by being consistent in posting and responding, as well as honing and perfecting the content produced to suit the various audiences. It takes a lot of time and dedication to build an online community, and although it is

not directly the most effective part of the general marketing toolkit when it comes to increasing revenue, it is massively important in terms of brand image, credibility, customer service and customer relationship management.

SEO (search engine optimisation) should be a built in factor when creating basically anything that will end up online. After all, the purpose of putting something on the internet it typically for it to be found and seen by as many people as possible. Optimising content for search engines is therefore vital. In practice, this means learning what people search for – literally, what they type into the search bar - when they are looking for a certain type of result, and then to working those search terms into the landing page of said result.

Paid online advertising can take many forms, but what realistically applies to indie game companies with low budgets are paid social media advertising boosts and perhaps the occasional limited-time banner ad. Boosting posts on Facebook and Twitter is surprisingly cheap for the reach you can get, so those are definitely good options to consider. Websites like Reddit offer the option to buy banner advertising space for a reasonable price. Services like Google Adwords are also viable options that can be implemented on a low budget, but may need some practice to use to maximum effect and benefit. In general, paid online advertising is best used sporadically and with intent, for example to draw attention to certain campaigns or causes.

Choosing channels with care, creating content that generates measurable reactions from the public, considering those reactions and adjusting future content accordingly, and nurturing the growing online communities are the main components needed to succeed at social media and content marketing. All content should be search engine optimised to maximize reach and visibility. After all, those searching for a particular result truly want to find what they are looking for, so why not make it easier for them? Lastly, sometimes an extra boost is needed to achieve the widest possible reach. For such cases, some light, paid advertising can help a company reach their goals.

Situation Analysis: 'Where are we now?'

A description of the company's and the game's current level of online presence, content marketing and engagement or follower numbers, as well as an analysis of what a

few closest competitors are doing, and what potential opportunities or trends could be included as part of the strategy.

Objectives: 'Where do we want to be?'

This is a good time to consider what the company hopes to gain from social media, content marketing, search engine optimisation and paid advertising (if applicable), and how all of these online marketing methods can support the company's vision for their game. KPIs can include goals like a certain amount of followers on a social media account, to reach a specific level of engagement on posts or to get a particular amount of traffic on their website.

Strategy: 'How do we get there?'

- The 5Cs of Content Marketing
- Search Engine Optimisation
- Effectively used paid advertising or social media boosts

Tactics & Actions: 'What do we need to get there?'

Search engine optimisation should be factored in during the process of setting up websites and profiles, but does not need to be maintained as regularly as social media and content marketing. At least one member of the game development team should allocate some time to planning and setting up social media content and responding to customer engagement on a regular basis. Management tools like Hootsuite make this easier.

Control: 'How do we monitor performance?'

The built-in analytics on most social media platforms and content sharing channels report results that can then be compared to the goals set in objectives. Google Analytics is a good tool to monitor website traffic. New analytics tools are developed all the time, so researching what options are currently available is a good idea.

4.2.6 Designing Marketing Materials

Deciding upon and setting up company marketing materials is as good as obligatory. At the very least, an indie game company and the game they are promoting should have logos for watermarking pictures and videos, a decent website that is fully responsive, search engine optimised, visually appealing and pulled together, and a press kit for when the time comes to contact the press about an upcoming launch. It is also a good idea to collect interesting visual material and footage, like screenshots, video clips and game or concept art, consistently throughout the development process for use on social media in content marketing. Business cards are also marketing materials, and are useful for companies that include networking at events in their promotions strategies.

It is a good idea for an indie game company to establish a visual style quite early on in the design process, so that later marketing materials will have guidelines to follow. A logo is essential, both for the company and for each individual game. Once the style guidelines have been written, they should be followed consistently across all channels and medias. The purpose of this is to always be recognisable and distinguishable, to set the foundation for building a strong brand image and to make it easier to be noticed and remembered.

Once a logo has been designed, it should be used wherever possible. This includes all visual content put into circulation. All pictures and screenshots should always be watermarked with the company's or game's logo (see Figure 6). When posting on social media daily, a lot of material is needed. It is a good idea to start collecting and cataloguing pictures and videos early on, to use throughout the development process. There is an audience for mid-development updates, and many people like to follow a game's creation journey. Screenshots, concept art, sketches, gifs and video clips all go down well.



Figure 3. An example of my way of using a logo on a screenshot on its way to social media.

Whether a game company decides to sell their game on their own website or not, a website is mandatory, and it is a chance for the company to really make a lasting and accurate impression on prospective customers and partners. People will come across images and advertisements on the internet by accident, or not quite by choice. Visiting a website is often a more conscious decision, meaning, they typically want to see what is on it and are likely to really read what is written on it, care about what it looks like and care about how it works. A sloppy website will make a bad impression.

Fast loading time and full responsiveness are attributes of a good website (Chaffey & Smith 2013, 171-172). Principles of the conversion strategy and SEO should be applied to the written portions, in addition to making sure they are correct in terms of grammar and spelling. The text should aim to convert prospective customers or partners, and should help to make the website easy to find.

Stupid Stupid Games Ltd

stupidstupidgames.com

Factsheet
Description
History
Projects
Videos
Images
Logo & Icon
Team
Contact



Factsheet

Developer:
[Stupid Stupid Games Ltd](#)
Based in Helsinki, Finland

Founding date:
May 15, 2013

Website:
[/stupidstupidgames.com](http://stupidstupidgames.com)

Press / Business contact:
contact@stupidstupidgames.com

Social:
<https://twitter.com/StupidStupidGam>

Description

Stupid Stupid Games are the creators of the Agents of Armageddon universe. We make both PC and tabletop RPGs, together with comics, novels and card games - all set in the same universe.

In the Agents of Armageddon storyworld, the secret histories of humankind are revealed. Our various products are windows into the 250 000 year long timeline that is the Agents of Armageddon universe.

History

History

Stupid Stupid Games started as an overly ambitious student project in 2012. We knew

Figure 4. An example of an online press kit.

If a company decides or plans to have a relationship with the press, they should put together a press kit. This can be an online info package (Figure 4) or an attachable document. A press kit has all the essential information about a company and their products, neatly packaged in one place, as well as good quality pictures, logos and possibly videos that they can use in their stories. The better the press kit, the easier it is for the journalists to find the correct information and do their job, the more likely it is that they write a piece in the first place.

Business cards are also considered a marketing material, and are recommended at least for the CEO of a game company. They are great to be handed out at networking events or wherever else an opportunity arises, and will help with building connections and branding. Business cards should obviously also reflect the chosen style guidelines, like all other marketing material (Figure5).



Figure 5. The front of this business card reflects our company's and games style.

Situation Analysis: 'Where are we now?'

Most companies will have placeholder logos and art until they come up with a finalized style. The placeholders probably already have certain aspects to them that could inspire the final designs. Taking inspiration from competitors' press kit, game or website styles, or looking at them to identify what should be done completely differently to differentiate, can be helpful.

Objectives: 'Where do we want to be?'

Creating a visual style that matches and reflects both the company's vision and their vision for their game is the objective. It should have a distinct trademark or recognisable feature, if possible. The company and game websites should be fully responsive, search engine optimised and match the visual style guidelines of the company and their game. A press kit should present all the company's information in a format that is as accessible as possible for journalists.

Strategy: 'How do we get there?'

The team should explore and experiment with different logos, colours and styles before choosing one, and think about how the style will appeal to the target audience and compare against competitors. The visual style needs to be suitable and effective across all channels, and should be designed with that angle in mind. The website should be planned and designed to attract as much traffic as possible, and present a strong call to action.

Tactics & Actions: 'What do we need to get there?'

Websites for both the company and the game need to be set up as early as possible, and connected to Google Analytics for monitoring performance. Game companies typically have at least one artist, and that artist should set aside time to work on the designing and creation of the visual marketing materials. Screenshots and concept art should be collected from day one, for later use in content marketing or social media.

Control: 'How do we monitor performance?'

Google Analytics can report customer behaviour on the website, indicating whether anything about it should be altered. Qualitative feedback will express how the visual style guidelines are working for the public. This means doing actual surveys or asking friends and family for their opinions, and analysing the results.

4.2.7 Arranging Promotions & Partnerships

Promotions strategies typically include plans for elaborate trade show campaigns, publicity stunts, etc., as well as press releases. The only realistic options an indie game company with a low budget has available are press releases and actively networking and even speaking at events. There are several paid press release services out there, even ones on the cheaper end. If spending some money is an option, those may be considered. It can, however, be done for free.



Figure 6. Our CEO, speaking at Assembly.

Networking and public speaking are a must. The indie game industry is wonderful for many reasons, and one of them is the fact that the people are usually genuine, helpful and friendly. Game developers do not necessarily see each other as competition, to be suspicious or resentful of. There is more an air of support and learning from the community. Knowledge and advice are shared freely. Jumping into that pot of creative ideas and talent is not only fun, but can lead to great things. In short, turning up at events with business cards and an open mind can be very beneficial. At the very least, a few more people will be aware of the company's or the game's existence, and word-of-mouth is the most ancient and still one of the best free marketing tools on the planet. Public speaking at events is an option for the brave. It certainly gets more attention than just turning up. As Figure 6 shows, speaking at an event like Assembly can lead not only to visibility on the day, but a video posted online, which can widen the reach considerably.

A press release is a statement given to publications to announce or call attention to specific matter. In the indie game scene, this matter is typically an upcoming game launch. A press release should be relatively short, to the point and heavy on facts. The standard format is to start with a bold headline, follow that with the date and city, then a lead sentence to summarize the subject, followed by the subject itself in a clear and concise form, and ending with contact details. The ideal time to send out a press release is about 2-4 weeks before launch, to give journalists time to get to the email and process the information. (Sebellin-Ross 2013, 1; Santos 2015.)

Forging and maintaining fruitful partnerships is a big part of running a company and should be started as early as possible. For an indie game company, these partners are typically game journalists, game promoters, social media influencers, alternative sales platforms, YouTubers and Twitch streamers. (Santos 2015.)

This details the collaboration and partnership agreements a company makes with influencers, publications or organisations, for the purpose of gaining visibility, expanding reach, growing the fan base and ultimately, to increase sales. In the case of an indie game company, these influencers are mainly YouTubers and Twitch streamers, but can also be alternative sales platforms like bundle sale websites, etc. Forging and maintaining relationships with game journalists and other influencers is also an important part of indie game marketing. The main components to this part of the job are finding contacts, organizing and cataloguing contacts, contacting them and finally, maintaining the relationships. (Sebellin-Ross 2013, 1-3.)

Before starting what I call 'contact mining', a system should be in place for organizing and cataloguing their details (Sebellin-Ross 2013, 2). Tools suitable for this are spreadsheet tools like Excel, project organizing tools like Trello (Figure 7) or various CRM tools or software. It boils down to what the companies specific needs and preferences are, as well as whether they have a budget to allocate to the purpose. Spreadsheet tools and Trello are available for free and are highly customisable, but may be a little more inefficient to use as a lot needs to be done manually, in terms of inputting details and churning out reports. CRM tools or software are hardly ever free, although some do come at an affordable fee. Benefits include a certain degree of automation, built-in analysis and report generation. Many are too heavy for small start-ups, and some are combinations of CRM and ERP software (enterprise resource planning),

which emphasize areas of business that are not applicable to an indie game company, like HR, product manufacturing or warehouse logistics. It may take time to find the right tool or software. An example of a suitable and affordable tool is a social CRM tool called Nimble.

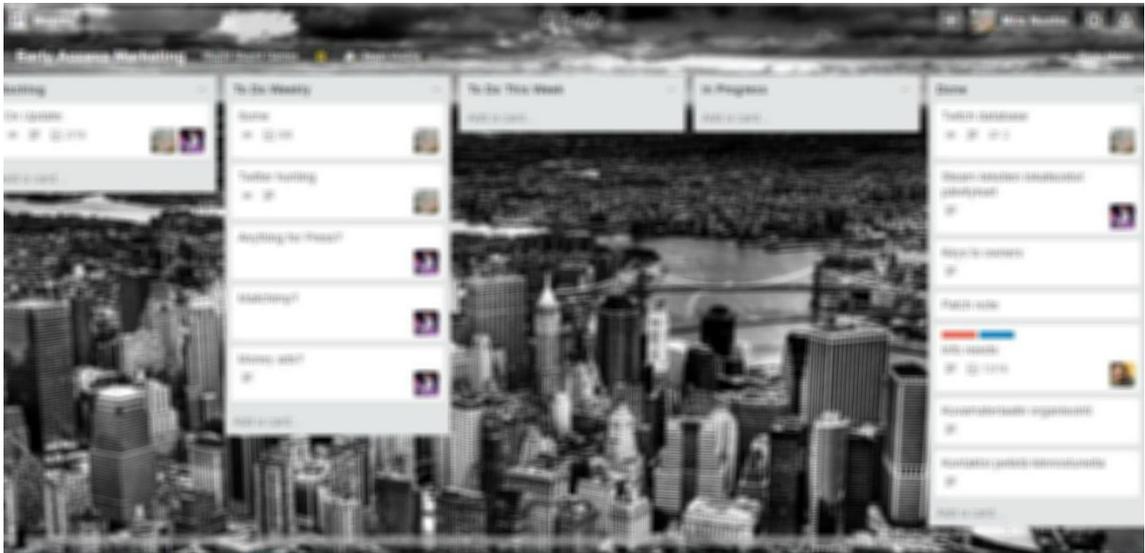


Figure 7. Project management tool, Trello. (Blurred for privacy.)

If using a spreadsheet, a good layout is (from left to right) a column for names, a column for URLs, a column for email addresses, a column for misc. information. This is sufficient as a basic set up. I recommend adding columns for links to each contact's various social media accounts, as well as choosing a system that makes sense to the user for when the time comes to mark them as they are contacted in turn. I do this by adding a narrow column on the very left, forming boxes to check as I go through them during the contacting process. Once a system is in place for starting a contact database, 'contact mining' can commence.

The process of finding potential partners and their contact details is relatively straightforward, but time consuming. The approach varies slightly depending on the type of contact in question. I will explain how to find the details of and how to approach game journalists, social media influencers or game promoters, alternative sales platforms, YouTubers and Twitch streamers.

Partnerships with alternative sales platforms can mean putting the game up for sale on multiple platforms permanently, or partnering with bundle sale or giveaway websites for a limited time period to boost sales. Because the contacting of and the relationships

with these companies are quite different to relationships with journalists and other influencers, I recommend a separate database or section within a database for them. An internet search will generate several results, and their websites are very self-explanatory when it comes to how to contact them.

Game journalists: A simple Google search will reveal a good amount of online indie game publications to start with. Most publications will have a 'Contact' page on their website, listing either their general contact details or in some cases, contact details of individual journalists and editors. Their contact details go into the contact database. If the journalists' professional social media accounts are not provided, they should be dug up manually and added to the database, as well as any social media accounts of the publication they write for. Not all journalists or publications reveal all of their contact details. Some sites will not have email addresses, but instead allow you to contact them via an online form. In such cases, the URL of the online form replaces the email address when added into the database.

Game promoters, excluding YouTubers and Twitch streamers, are usually either social media personalities and influencers or bots. This is particularly common on Twitter, though they may also run blogs. These accounts typically have huge amounts of followers and therefore are worth trying to make friends with. They may do anything from full game reviews to shout outs, mentions, tweets and retweets. Once again, a Google search will produce results, but a Twitter search may be more effective. A particularly good thing about searching through Twitter is that as you follow accounts, it will keep suggesting similar accounts to consider. In their description boxes, Twitter profiles generally have an email address or a link to an external website, which will then usually provide contact information somewhere. All the contact details go into the database.

YouTubers: There are many resources and methods for the indie game company to try when it comes to finding suitable YouTubers to partner with. Websites like Social Blade provide comprehensive lists and information, internet searches will give endless results, and a simple, quick search on YouTube will go a long way. Like Twitter, YouTube suggests and recommends channels based on your behaviour and actions. Most YouTubers will provide their email address and links to their social media accounts in the 'About' tab on their channel. The information can then be added to the contact database.

Twitch is still not quite a fully tapped market, when it comes to indie game marketing potential. That is probably because, as a platform, it is not as optimised for marketing as YouTube. Finding Twitch broadcasters to partner with is a slightly different process than finding YouTubers to partner with. First of all, Twitch.tv is quite complicated to navigate if you are used to YouTube. Finding broadcasters is not as straight forward, due to the layout of the site and how it is structured. Twitter is also a good place to find Twitch broadcasters.

To find potential broadcasters to contact, one of the easiest methods is to think of a games similar to the one being marketed, and find those games' channels on Twitch. There, all the people broadcasting those games can be found. Despite larger broadcasters having a larger fan base, smaller broadcasters often have a higher engagement rate, and are also typically more eager to work with indie game companies. There is also the option of contacting a broadcast team that does team-wide promotions, but they rarely come without a price tag.

The approach and style of getting in touch with a potential partner depends a lot on who they are, what field they are in and what you want from them. Contacting someone at the right time, through the right medium, in the right way will usually yield the best results. Deciphering how to succeed at this, though, can be a challenge. If an email address or online contact form has been provided, it is probably a good place to start. If not, contacting them through the medium they favour most is the logical next choice. A game promoter on Twitter should be Tweeted, a YouTuber should be private messaged on YouTube and a Twitch streamer should be 'Whispered' to (private messaged) on Twitch. If no response follows, other channels can be tried. (Santos 2015.)

The game industry is a global industry so potential partners will reside in many different time-zones. To maximize response rate, it is wisest to contact people at times of day when they are most likely to get the message. (Santos 2015.)

Once a relationship or partnership has been made, it should be nurtured and maintained, for the benefit of both parties. This includes basic manners, such as thanking partners for their support and feedback, engaging on their social media and sharing any content they post about the game being marketed. If partners include live-streamers like Twitch broadcasters, a team member should try to be available to watch

the stream and chat with the broadcaster and their audience. Any partners an indie game company makes are most likely in the process of building their fan bases and engagement rates themselves, and they should receive support in return. Should a partner suddenly make it big overnight, some success might rub off on the indie team that stayed in the new millionaire's good books. (Santos 2015.)

Having a lower budget means an indie game company has to get a little more creative and proactive when it comes to promoting themselves and their game. Mainly, it is about reaching out, whether it be to fellow indie game developers, potential customers or journalists. This, again, is something to be exercised diligently and consistently, because not every attempt sticks. Keeping at it will pay off in the long run.

Situation Analysis: 'Where are we now?'

Assessing current partnerships and the benefits they bring, which is usually more reach or credibility, and considering new partnerships or opportunities, such as events, and their projected benefits. It is also a good idea to get an overview of what competitors are doing.

Objectives: 'Where do we want to be?'

Defining goals such as a target number of YouTube videos made in a specific time frame or a certain number of public speaking gigs over the course of three months.

Strategy: 'How do we get there?'

Keeping a finger on the pulse of industry events and being proactive in networking environments. Having an effective and aggressive contacting strategy in place to reach and pitch to potential partners, using a properly planned pitch and having a strong and expanding contact database to communicate with.

Tactics & Actions: 'What do we need to get there?'

At least one member of the team should be willing and able to spend a significant amount of time looking for contacts, inputting them into the database, contacting them

and keeping in touch with them. The team should also prepare to go to events together, for which setting aside time and, in some cases, money are required.

Control: 'How do we monitor performance?'

Measuring whether the goals set in Objectives are met within their given time frames, keeping on top of a contact maintenance schedule and analysing data to discern whether the extra reach is resulting in things like more traffic or engagement.

5 Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to create a marketing strategy guide for indie games that not only functions as a manual, but helps the indie game developer to incorporate marketing and strategic thinking into their every-day development process. Indie game marketing is being forced to become more sophisticated, as the pressure to differentiate is rising and everyone is using the same, tried and tested methods to stand out from the crowd. My guide to marketing strategy, although containing many of those same methods, tries to go a little further, and help the indie game developer to think strategically and ask the right questions. I believe this is the only way to transcend the level of indie game marketing knowledge that is available online or offline manuals. Rather than trying to keep up, indie game developers, if thinking and strategizing the right way, can bring some innovation to their marketing plans.

I began by taking a closer look at the theory of marketing strategy, and trying to decipher its traditional components. I found out that marketing strategy is really not as exact a science as I had imagined, nor does it have an official formula. Rather, there are a plethora of methods and models which all serve as good guidelines, depending on the circumstances and preferences of the user, and the end result they are looking for. The components I chose for the basic indie game marketing strategy are a blend of ones suggested by other methods. I took inspiration from the Marketing Mix, choosing to include the 8th 'P' for Partnerships, and made sure that the components of my marketing strategy for indie games covered the elements of environmental analysis, positioning and competitive advantage (Iyamabo & Otubanjo 2013, 16; Ohmae 1991; Chaffey & Smith 2013, 51-53). The resulting formula is made up of the following six components: Pinpointing the Unique Selling Proposition, Identifying the Target Customer, Defining the Correct Pricing & Positioning, Optimising a Distribution Plan, Plan-

ning an Online Marketing Strategy, Designing Marketing Materials and Arranging Promotions & Partnerships.

Using the SOSTAC framework as a planning tool within each of the components of the indie game marketing strategy was a useful exercise for me during this study and writing process, and I believe it could well be a useful exercise for indie game developers, as well – especially those that wish to accomplish more than just finding a quick fix or solution to their marketing troubles. Applying the steps of situation analysis, objectives, strategy, tactics, actions and control to each area of the marketing strategy individually really forced me to consider them more deeply and thoroughly.

Originally, long before this thesis process, I fantasized about writing a book: the ultimate indie game marketing guide. However, while studying the online resources and the scarce, existing literature on the subject for this work, I came to the conclusion that writing such a book would result in another volume that would end up useless in a matter of months. This would then only contribute further to one of the problems I am trying to combat, which is the difficulty for indie game developers to find quality help and solutions for their marketing issues. This is where the inspiration to concentrate on supporting the development of strategic marketing skills came from. Indie game marketing advice needs to be taken to the next level, and I plan to study the subject further.

During this process I have learned a lot. I will now carry this deeper understanding back to my work as an indie game marketer. I personally do not believe in the collapse of the indie game market, and it turns out, neither did Jeff Vogel (2015). He simply stated that the indie game market was no longer a legitimate option as a get-rich-quick scheme, and that a career as an indie game developer should only be pursued by those who love game development enough to not mind the hard work involved.

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