

Marketing the Indie Video Game

Methods of achieving success in an overloaded market

By Grayson McKim

Abstract:

The independent video game market has been on a downward trend for several years. While the tools for game development have become accessible to anyone with a computer, a dying interest in small-time games juxtaposes the thousands of new indie games that hit this market each year. This research hopes to investigate how two specific independent video game developers have designed, developed, and marketed their games towards great success. These case studies demonstrate the great-making qualities of most indie games, such as tight, simplistic design, and nostalgic art styles. Academic works interpreted in reference to these games will extend the discussion in academic style. The product of this research will hopefully help small-time developers find success, bolster the industry, and lay the way for future research in this field.

Introduction

When video games first became a form of mainstream entertainment, their creation and development were hardly something that a single person could accomplish. However, this is hardly the case today. The rise of free-to-use game development software like Unity have opened up the market to anyone who's interested- many of these programs incorporate features like visual programming that allow people who aren't familiar with computer programming to still be able to make their dreams come to life. Unfortunately, with this accessibility has come a deluge of half-finished games, diluting the video game market with thousands of unimportant titles that have set up a market where indie games struggle to gain notability¹.

Indie video games already have a hard time as it is, competing against big releases made by triple-A studios. As such, there has been a massive downward trend in the indie-game market. While video games in general are thriving, this subsection of the industry appears to be on its way out².

There are several concerns here. First off, indie video game serve as a very important role in game development: they are often the games responsible for introducing new, boundary-pushing content. Whether this comes in the form of new game mechanics, art styles, or even genres, the sheer number of indie video games allows for massive amounts of ingenuity, making them an essential part of the progression of video games³. Second, indie video allow for the telling of personal stories- the fact that only a few people are responsible for the development, or even a single person in the case of *Undertale*, means that the game tells a story that hasn't been corrupted by corporate shenanigans or muddled with the stories of hundreds of other co-

¹ Crogan, Patrick. "Indie Dreams: Video Games, Creative Economy, and the Hyperindustrial Epoch."

² "Analysing Indie Game Marketing Trends: What You Should Know Going into 2019."

³ Wesley, David, and Gloria Barczak. *Innovation and Marketing in the Video Game Industry: Avoiding the Performance Trap*.

developers⁴. Finally, the indie game market serves as an entryway into the video game industry; it's where prospective developers can test their mettle and prove that they are capable designers. This competition drives out the less talented and ensures that those in the industry are well qualified⁵.

The importance of indie video games is therefore established, making their eminent demise quite concerning. This warrants a discussion about the future of indie video games- **can they achieve success through proper marketing technique usage and by embracing the video game qualities unique to indie games?**

Background

Jennifer Whitston's "The Missing Producer: Rethinking Indie Cultural Production in Terms of Entrepreneurship, Relational Labour, and Sustainability" provides a fascinating look into the indie game development system. Untethered to corporate production styles, the original success of indie games is partially attributable to their lack of a producer, a role that put significant creative restraints on developers⁶. Now, however, this alternative development system has lost its original shine, and indie game studios are now struggling to cover all the work associated with this position. This led to me to the question, "in regard to producing a successful game, to what extent should indie games embrace their uniquely indie qualities?"

A further delve into this topic has demonstrated a large amount of research on the discrepancies between indie and triple-A releases, the most significant of which being marketing strategies. There is much literature on video game marketing, but the models and diagrams

⁴ Toby Fox. *Undertale*

⁵ "Analysing Indie Game Marketing Trends: What You Should Know Going into 2019."

⁶ Wesley, David, and Gloria Barczak. *Innovation and Marketing in the Video Game Industry: Avoiding the Performance Trap*.

featured in these works has an overbearingly strong emphasis on large-scale games⁷. Indie game marketing, on the other hand, is a field devoid of research up to this point, making it a great potential field of study. This develops the question from the previous paragraph into my research question (which was stated at the end of the introduction).

Without direct research in this field, seminal works from general video game marketing are necessary to my research. These sources set up compare and contrast situations between large studios and indie ones, delving into production systems and setting up the ways in which indie video games differentiate themselves from larger releases⁸. They also serve to suggest methods that indie developers may wish to incorporate into their own systems, in the case that certain aspects of the indie style don't contribute towards its success.

Also necessary are academic works about indie games themselves. Although indie marketing sources don't exist, works about this industry's production cycle do. They will provide the other end of the comparison mentioned above, discussing the shortcomings and advantages of indie development⁹. Certain topics, such as LGBTQ+ representation, extend my question beyond just research, shedding light on the efficacy of the prominent themes in indie game development¹⁰.

Methods

As discussed in the section above, my work will draw from both seminal works in the overarching study of video game marketing as well as from the smaller but more specific works

⁷ Wesley, David, and Gloria Barczak. *Innovation and Marketing in the Video Game Industry: Avoiding the Performance Trap*.

⁸ Conway, Steven, and Jennifer deWinter. *Video Game Policy: Production, Distribution, and Consumption*.

⁹ Crogan, Patrick. "Indie Dreams: Video Games, Creative Economy, and the Hyperindustrial Epoch."

¹⁰ Ruberg, Bonnie. "The Precarious Labor of Queer Indie Game-Making: Who Benefits from Making Video Games 'Better'?"

that have to do with indie video games. However, since this research is much more practical than theoretical, my assertions will principally have to do with several case studies of successful indie video games.

After developing a foundation with academic / popular media sources, I will go on to a case study of the game *Celeste*. Released in 2018, this platformer (a category of games that are reminiscent of *Super Mario Brothers*, where the main goal is to travel across “platforms” to reach a destination) managed to succeed despite platformers being one of the most over-produced and under-purchased indie sub-genres. Many attribute this success to the game’s phenomenal themes, controls, and sense of challenge, which were met with rave reviews from many game reviewing entities. However, I also want to investigate how the game managed to find any audience willing to play it, because even the most amazing games must be played to be widely recognized.

After this, I will go on to a case study of the game *Undertale*, a cult-classic indie role-playing-game that was developed by a single person- music, graphics, and mechanics. My analysis would shed light on the alternative routes developers can take towards success. While *Celeste* may have proven that traditionally well-made games can find success in this tight market, *Undertale* proves that the traditional “goodness” of a game is not the only factor in development that contributes to success. This will help in determining whether the indie qualities of a game are responsible for its success, or if this is dependent on an outside force.

Finally, I will synthesize a final answer to my research question based on what was reasoned.

Expected Results

Preliminary research in game development has demonstrated a bit of ambiguity- determining the success of a single strategy is difficult since they don't exist within a vacuum. This isn't to say that conclusive research is impossible, just difficult. I expect to develop a comprehensive list of what qualities of indie video games work, and which do not. Based off my current research, I expect that the production systems of indie game development will come under scrutiny, and that the practice of inclusivity and diversity will be conclusively beneficial

Regardless of the results, this work will lay groundwork in the research field of indie game development, which, up to this point, has not yet been explored thoroughly. More research could potentially be inspired by this work.

Conclusion

The indie video game market is currently struggling, and if it continues its current trend, we will lose the fresh voices that it incorporates into the video game industry. Therefore, I want to investigate what makes indie games work in the hopes of contributing to the industry's resuscitation. Drawing from seminal works regarding general video game marketing as well as more specific indie-based pieces, I hope to develop a theoretical understanding of indie video game marketing. This understanding will then be crystalized into a practical one through several case studies of modern-day indie games that have found success. I will then condense this information into the comprehensive list I mention before. This will hopefully aid small-time game developers in their journeys, help resuscitate the indie game industry, and serve as a foundation for more indie game marketing research.

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Budget

Video Games:

Celeste	_____	\$20
Undertale	_____	\$10

Working Hours:

Research	x 15	\$210
Writing	x 10	\$140

Transportation

Miscellaneous	_____	\$50
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Total: \$430