

Business for Indie Developers

GAM 334

Tuesday 5:45pm-9:00pm

Office Hours: Tuesday, 4-5:30pm

Instructors

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Course Description

Business for indie game developers, as a phrase, can be read in many different ways -- and we will be covering everything that falls under that umbrella. Through lectures, group work, discussions, and the knowledge passed along by guest speakers, we will look at how indie games fit into the industry's landscape and why they're poised to get bigger and bigger. We'll also explore how to keep an indie game company running successfully for as long as its employees desire. As a practicality-minded course, students will walk away with an analysis of a game-design document for marketability, a business plan for an indie studio, an understanding of building and maintaining relationships with the media, and an arsenal of best practices. You'll also be able to answer this important question as it applies to your career: What are the representative characteristics of an indie game company that help make them successful?

What This Course Is

This course is designed to maximize a young indie game company's chances for success. Success, as we define it, means keeping your company running for the foreseeable future, to have it be creatively fulfilling as frequently as possible, and for you to steadily releasing games you're satisfied with and excited about. We'll be exploring the nuts and bolts and general wetwork that goes into running and building an game indie studio and building and maintaining relationships with the press around your company and products.

What This Course Isn't

We have more than a decade of professional experience in the games industry and will be having guest speakers in to share their perspective on the work they've done, but this class **is not a job fair**. We also won't be sharing the "secrets" of successful companies because there *are* no "secrets," but instead best practices that, when employed repeatedly, will keep you moving forward.

Learning Goals

- Students will develop a rich understanding of the game industry's marketing tactics, and will be able to analyze trends and strategically curate marketing approaches that work best for future indie-scale projects.
- Students will learn how to objectively view their games to properly present them in manners designed to gain media exposure from writers.
- Students will be able to identify the representative characteristics of an indie game

company and its product, and use them as a basis for a sound business strategy.

- Students will understand the characteristics that go into managing and maintaining a small business, enabling them to maximize a young company's potential to survive and succeed.

Required Texts

- *The Referral Engine*, John Jantsch
- *Slicing Pie*, Mike Moyer

We also recommend (but don't require)

- *The Lean Start-Up*, Eric Ries
- *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*, Anna Anthropy

Assignment due dates/rubric

- Writing exercise/thought questions will be due, when assigned, the following **Sunday at midnight**.
 - You will be expected to do one of these week, with a minimum of an insightful two-paragraph comment adding to the existing discussion. Additional comments will be taken into consideration for your grade (and are encouraged), but will not need to follow any length requirements.
- The mid-term project (marketing plan) is due **Week 6**.
 - Your marketing plan should follow the template provided in-class during **Week 2**. You will be graded based on creativity of ideas, a strong demonstration of your understanding of what works and what doesn't in game marketing already, and a bold willingness to try something new.
- The final project (business plan) is due **Week 11**.
 - Your business plan should contain revised marketing plan based on our feedback, as well as a comprehensive and adaptable business plan based on a template (to be provided) as well as in-class instruction. Insights gleaned from the online discussions and readings should also be a discernible influence on your final project. You will be presenting your final assignment to your peers, as well as a group of industry professionals. Their comments will be taken under advisement for our final grade.

Week 1. What is Indie? & Linking Into Community

We will collaboratively analyze two tentpole indie games that have achieved major success and explore what it means to be an indie developer. We will do an overview of the Chicago game developer scene, how to get involved, and where to get started.

Assignment: Create a Twitter profile and follow 30 local game developers (I don't care if you follow me, but send me a Tweet @jaymargalus so I know you did this). Find two local games events (non-DePaul) that will take place in the next two months, and bring them to class next

week. Online, provide meaningful reactions to thought questions posted.

Reading: Fuck Videogames. <https://tinysubversions.com/fuckvideogames/>

Week 2. On & Offline Presence

We'll discuss developing your voice and sharing your message via social media, a website, and in-person.

Assignment. Create a company/personal portfolio website. Respond to thought questions posted online.

Reading: Read chapters 3-5 *The Referral Engine*.

Week 3. Marketing and promoting your game

We will take a closer look at how to better understand segments of gaming audiences -- and explore what happens when companies big and small miss their mark. Also cover where to showcase your games.

Assignment. Respond to thought questions posted online. Start marketing plan.

Reading: Read chapters 6-8 *The Referral Engine*.

Week 4. GSD (Getting Stuff Done)

We will discuss managing your time, best strategies for staying organized, and for keeping yourself on track.

Assignment. Organize a plan for your next week of work in Basecamp and share a screenshot on D2L.

Reading: None.

Week 5. Staying Motivated and Managing a Team

We'll cover managing and collaborating with a team. We'll talk about the importance and how-to's of creating and manufacturing marketing and development milestones for both internal use (to keep the team motivated), and external use (to keep people excited and informed about your game).

Assignment. Thought question responses online. Leave comments online about what you learned from *Slicing Pie* and what the benefits/drawbacks of the shared distribution method.

Reading: Read *Slicing Pie* (the entire book -- it's short).

Week 6. Transitioning from Marketing to Selling

We will discuss how to form a corporation once you start taking on money, how to structure shares in a company, taking care of day-to-day business matters, and how to know when you

need an outside contractor to handle the more complicated business matters. We'll cover transitioning from marketing and promoting your work to getting ready to sell and maintain it. Discuss Slicing Pie and how you would apply the methodology to your company.

Assignment. Submit marketing plan. Business plan assigned. Thought question responses online.

Reading: None.

Week 7. Distribution and how it works on every conceivable platform

Consoles are rethinking the old distribution model, and indie devs should, too. We'll weigh the pros and cons of all the most popular (and some of the least popular) methods of getting your game into players' hands.

Assignment. Thought question responses online.

Reading: None.

Week 8. Funding & Monetizing

We will discuss the different methods for raising and making money both before and after your game's release. Topics will cover crowdfunding, alternative (legal) money-raising methods, and game pricing and life extension with DLC and beyond. We'll go over how to recognize and avoid obnoxious monetization methods.

Assignment. Thought question responses online.

Reading: None.

Week 9. Contractors, Contracting, and Professional Allies

We'll talk about how to find and maintain contracting work with outside vendors. Just because you're indie doesn't mean you have to go it alone. We'll review the types of professional allies you should be tapping for help (accountants, lawyers, freelance devs) and what you can and should not expect from them.

Assignment. Keep working on business plan.

Reading: None.

Week 10. Distribution, Alt-Games, What Comes Next

What other kinds of games can you release? Also: Putting it all into perspective. The concepts we discussed and the projects you've been working on aren't just university assignments -- they're tools you can use to better attack your career.

Assignment. Keep working on business plan.

Reading: None.

Week 11

Present and turn in business plan.

Grade Distribution

- 30% online participation
 - Ongoing meaningful discussion of readings, thought questions, and interim assignments will be critical to demonstrating a meaningful comprehension of the subject material.
- 20% meaningful in-class participation
 - **Not** just attendance. You might have heard the phrase “90% of success is just showing up,” but that isn’t the case here. We want you to attack in-class discussions with sincere enthusiasm and insightful comments.
- 20% marketing plan
- 30% business plan

Attendance

As this course is designed to prepare you for life as a working game developer, we expect you to treat this course as though it’s your job. A major part of any job is showing up. So show up as if your grade depends on it.

Late Assignments

Late assignments will not be accepted without an appropriate, documented excuse. Assignments are due at the start of class unless otherwise stated.

Academic Integrity

This course will be subject to the academic integrity policy passed by faculty. More information can be found at <http://academicintegrity.depaul.edu/>.

The university and school policy on plagiarism can be summarized as follows: Students in this course should be aware of the strong sanctions that can be imposed against someone guilty of plagiarism. If proven, a charge of plagiarism could result in an automatic F in the course and possible expulsion. The strongest of sanctions will be imposed on anyone who submits as his/her own work any assignment which has been prepared by someone else. If you have any questions or doubts about what plagiarism entails or how to properly acknowledge source materials be sure to consult the instructor.

Using and citing electronic sources - In conducting research for this course, I encourage you to consult those standard reference tools, scholarly projects and information databases, and peer-reviewed academic journals that may be found on the Internet in addition to traditional print resources. Keep in mind, however, that those electronic sources must be acknowledged. Please see the Modern Language Academy Handbook, section 4.9, for information on the correct citation of these sources.

Withdrawal

Students who withdraw from the course do so by using the Campus Connection system (<http://campusconnect.depaul.edu>). Withdrawals processed via this system are effective the day on which they are made. Simply ceasing to attend, or notifying the instructor, or nonpayment of tuition, does not constitute an official withdrawal from class and will result in academic as well as financial penalty.

Retroactive Withdrawal

This policy exists to assist students for whom extenuating circumstances prevented them from meeting the withdrawal deadline. During their college career students may be allowed one medical/personal administrative withdrawal and one college office administrative withdrawal, each for one or more courses in a single term. Repeated requests will not be considered. Submitting an appeal for retroactive withdrawal does not guarantee approval. ☐ ☐ College office appeals for CDM students must be submitted online via MyCDM. ☐ The deadlines for submitting appeals are as follows: ☐ ☐

Autumn Quarter: Last day of the last final exam of the subsequent winter quarter ☐

Winter Quarter: Last day of the last final exam of the subsequent spring quarter ☐

Spring Quarter: Last day of the last final exam of the subsequent autumn quarter ☐

Summer Terms: Last day of the last final exam of the subsequent autumn quarter

Excused Absence

In order to petition for an excused absence, students who miss class due to illness or significant personal circumstances should complete the Absence Notification process through the Dean of Students office. The form can be accessed at <http://studentaffairs.depaul.edu/dos/forms.html>. Students must submit supporting documentation alongside the form. The professor reserves the sole right whether to offer an excused absence and/or academic accommodations for an excused absence.

Incomplete

An incomplete grade is a special, temporary grade that may be assigned by an instructor when unforeseeable circumstances prevent a student from completing course requirements by the end of the term and when otherwise the student had a record of satisfactory progress in the course. CDM policy requires the student to initiate the request for incomplete grade before the end of the term in which the course is taken. Prior to submitting the incomplete request, the student must discuss the circumstances with the instructor. Students may initiate the incomplete request process in MyCDM.

- All incomplete requests must be approved by the instructor of the course and a CDM Associate Dean. Only exceptions cases will receive such approval.
- If approved, students are required to complete all remaining course requirement independently in consultation with the instructor by the deadline indicated on the

incomplete request form.

- By default, an incomplete grade will automatically change to a grade of F after two quarters have elapsed (excluding summer) unless another grade is recorded by the instructor.
- An incomplete grade does NOT grant the student permission to attend the same course in a future quarter.

Students with Disabilities

Students who feel they may need an accommodation based on the impact of a disability should contact the instructor privately to discuss their specific needs. All discussions will remain confidential. □ To ensure that you receive the most appropriate accommodation based on your needs, contact the instructor as early as possible in the quarter (preferably within the first week of class), and make sure that you have contacted the Center for Students with Disabilities (CSD) at:

□ Student Center, LPC, Suite #370

□ Phone number: (773)325.1677 □

Fax: (773)325.3720 □

TTY: (773)325.7296