

Community Building for Indie Game Developers

The EEE approach to community building:
Evaluate, Establish and Engage

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1 - Abstract

EN:

Countless games are created every day by independent game developers. But even if you are a gamer, chances are high that you will never hear of them. Only very few of these games will reach a big enough audience to cover their development costs. Most of them will fade and be forgotten, not due to a lack of quality but a lack of visibility.

Building a community around a game in development is an excellent way to connect with people early on. Having a loyal fan base is not only beneficial for the financial success of the game, but provides the developer with constant feedback and can serve as a great motivator to push through the tough times of development. This thesis introduces the EEE approach of community building: Evaluate, Establish, Engage, and demonstrates its effects in different examples and experiments.

DE:

Täglich werden zahllose Games von unabhängigen Spiel-Entwicklern veröffentlicht. Doch niemand wird je von ihnen hören. Nur sehr wenige dieser Spiele schaffen es, genügend Leute zu erreichen, um ihre Entwicklungskosten wieder einzuspielen. Die meisten verschwinden und geraten in Vergessenheit, nicht aufgrund ihrer schlechten Qualität, sondern wegen fehlender Sichtbarkeit.

Bereits während der Entwicklung eines Spiels eine Community aufzubauen ist daher ein guter Weg um mit Leuten in Kontakt zu kommen. Eine treue Fangemeinde ist nicht nur vorteilhaft für den finanziellen Erfolg eines Spiels, sondern versorgt den Entwickler auch mit konstantem Feedback und Motivation. Diese Arbeit stellt das Konzept der EEE Methode (Evaluate, Establish, Engage) für Community Building auf und demonstriert seine Anwendung anhand verschiedener Beispiele und Experimente.

2 - Intro

2.1 Starting Position / Context

The era of indie games is in full swing. Hundreds of games are released every day, all competing for the players' attention. Being a game developer myself, I am familiar with the struggle of getting your game noticed in the crowded market. During my bachelor studies in Game Design, I released two games in the App Store and on Google Play. While they received highly positive reviews, they didn't sell well. This sparked my interest in marketing and business strategies.

As a game developer, working on my own products and hoping to make a living by doing so, marketing is a field I need to understand better. For this reason, I have been observing other indie game developers and trying to learn from their approaches ever since.

After finishing my bachelor I joined Blindflug Studios, a game studio in Zurich, for an 8-month internship in marketing and PR. During this time I discovered my passion for community management. Seeing fans being passionate about Blindflug's game, asking for new features and having eager discussions, was eye-opening to me. This was something I wanted to achieve for my own creations!

I have a strong interest in supporting our local game industry in Switzerland. Chapter 5 - "*Evaluating: Analyze your development community (Example Switzerland)*" focuses mostly on local topics an example for community analysis, while the rest of this thesis can be applied on an international level.

From a research point of view, there is a lot of material available in the form of blog posts. There are currently no books about community building for indie game developers available. The master thesis "Full Color Planet" by Swiss game developer Jeremy Spillmann was an inspiration for this thesis.

2.2 Research Question

How can indie game developers build up and maintain a community for their game?

2.3 Assertions

I make following assertions:

- Community building and a good connection to your audience are an essential factor for success in the market.
- Forming an indie game collective increases the visibility of its members.
- Building a community around your game/studio is highly profitable for operations like Greenlight and Kickstarter.

2.4 Methods

This thesis uses quantitative surveys in order to raise data of the Swiss game industry. Qualitative surveys, mostly in form of interviews, have been used to gather individual opinions. Alongside passive observation on many games, marketing trends and community

building efforts of game studios, different experiments have been performed to examine the assertions.

2.5 Project Goal

After finishing this thesis I want to be able to call myself an indie game community building expert. I want to understand and learn as many strategies and approaches as possible. It is very important for me to support the two studios Capsule Games and Team Niche I'm helping out with marketing and community management in a professional and efficient way. I hope to boost their reach with the gained knowledge during the course of writing this thesis. This thesis will be turned into a guide for aspiring indie game developers with a focus on game developers from Switzerland.

2.6 Target audience

Any game design graduate or unexperienced indie game developer should be able to pick up this thesis, read it and find suitable strategies that will help them build up a community for their game project. To developers who are already experienced in community building, the most interesting part of this thesis are the experiments in chapter 7: Engaging your community. All strategies used in this thesis are zero budget approaches.

2.7 Definition: Community

In his book "*Tribes - We Need You to Lead Us*", Seth Godin describes a community (or in his words, a tribe) as following:

"A tribe is a group of people connected to one another, connected to a leader, and connected to an idea. A group needs only two things to be a tribe: a shared interest and a way to communicate." (Godin, 2008, 1)

Multiple community examples are brought up in this thesis. The word takes on different meanings, describing a following or a group you are part of yourself. Most frequently, the expression "community" will be used to describe a group of people that is frequently interacting with the game developers. The focus of these interaction lies on the game in development. You might also call this group an "active fanbase".

The community model described in this thesis closely resembles Etienne Wenger's definition of a community of practice: "*Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and who interact regularly to learn how to do it better.*" (Etienne Wenger, 2013)

2.8 Definition: Marketing Strategy

The website Easy-marketing-strategies.com defines this term as following: "*A marketing strategy is a process or model to allow a company or organization to focus limited resources*

on the best opportunities to increase sales and thereby achieve a sustainable competitive advantage.” (Kazoo Associate, 2014)

I agree with this definition. As an indie game studio this should be seen in the context of your lifespan. For example, it might make sense to release a game for free, not generating any sales, in order to build your studio's reputation and build a fanbase.

When referring to “marketing strategies” this thesis talks about strategies to increase a studio's sales, reach or reputation. Only zero-budget and low cost approaches are reflected in this thesis since it addresses students and freshly funded studios who don't have many resources yet.

2.9 Definition: Indie Game Developer

According to Wikipedia, Independent video games are video games created by individuals or small teams generally without video game publisher financial support.

This thesis understands the term as following:

An indie game developer is a game developer that works on his/her creations independently of a higher instance. The main motivation for an indie are his/her vision to create something new, often accompanied by the desire for the product to be unique and special. Indie developers might choose to collaborate with investors or publishers at some point, often for financial reasons. Indies strive to earn money with their creations for the main purpose of being able to stay independent and create more games.

3 - Why Making A Great Game In Your Basement Is Not Enough Anymore

3.1 The visibility problem

During the creation of this thesis, “A Practical Guide to Indie Game Marketing”, the very first book specifically about indie game marketing, has been published. Joel Dreskin, the author states that: *Marketing can be as essential for a success of your game as the game itself. Poor planning or neglect with marketing can kill an indie studio’s dreams just as much as a sloppy approach to development* (Dreskin, 2015, 25)

Dreskin’s words are my reality. The game our team created didn’t even come close to covering its development cost. We failed to reach our target audience, we failed to get more than a handful of small journalists interested and we didn’t even think about the right timing for our release. As it happens to most games (especially on the super crowded mobile market) we drowned in the masses. All in all, each of the team members earned about 200\$ with the game they invested so much work in.

We are not the only ones. According to Emmy Jonassen (Independent video game marketing consultant) 95% of all indie games are not profitable, 80% operate at a loss. (Emmy Jonassen, 2013)

This statement by Eric David, staff writer for SiliconANGLE, also hits the nail on the head: *Creating a video game is easier today than ever before thanks in part to easy, free to use game engines like Unity, but unfortunately, selling a video game is as hard as it ever was, maybe harder. The explosion in independent game development has led to what some have called the “indiepocalypse,” where the market has become so crowded that even good games are struggling to break even.* (Eric David, 2015)

3.2 Publishers don’t guarantee success anymore

The role of publishers in the independent game market has changed. Just a few years ago, the release of a game followed a strict ruleset.

Ben Kuchera from Polygon states: *The role of a publisher used to be simple, although the business itself is complex. They would fund your game, they would make sure it was released on consoles or the PC and in exchange they would often own the intellectual property behind the game and take a cut of profits. You needed a publisher to get on consoles and to make sure your game found an audience. They held the keys to the kingdom. This is no longer the case, and the idea of what a publisher does or doesn’t do, or whether they’re ever needed for smaller developers, is rapidly evolving.* (Ben Kuchera, 2013)

Many game developers believe that working with a publisher will solve all their marketing problems, but indies are not the only ones struggling with the rapid increase of released

games. Publishers also need to come up with new approaches. While some of them do a great job of adapting and finding new ways to communicate with their audiences, others are losing their connections. Working with a publisher can be a great way to spread the word about your game, but it is no longer a safe bet to get noticed.

3.3 Your success is up to you

With all the big gatekeepers being gone, the only thing that keeps you from being successful is yourself. As indie developers, we no longer depend on opinions that publishers or news sites may have about our games. The only ones that really matter are the players. This allows us to try different approaches and switch strategies whenever we like. So why not try out some new and crazy approaches in order to make our game/studio known?

As indie developers we want to bring our visions to life. We want to make a profit from our games in order to create more games and focus on our passion. Marketing has become an essential skill in the world of game creators, whether we like it or not. But there are other things to marketing than being on Twitter and shouting about your project on release day.

There is no single right solution for everyone. Our games and our personalities vary greatly. And while there are a few basic rules every indie developer should follow (Having a press kit and landing page, etc.) there is no common recipe that applies to everyone. We communicate in different ways and have different strengths and weaknesses. It turns out that for me, the most exciting part of marketing a game is building a community around it. I love to create a game together with a loyal group of people who share your ideas and passion. Imagine to wake up in the morning, mooping because you have to fix that stupid bug you couldn't figure out yesterday, but then finding the sweetest fanart ever waiting in your mailbox. These are the things that keep me motivated. There are a lot of indie games which are going down the community path. Things like Steam Early Access make this approach easier than ever.

4 - The EEE approach

4.1 - The “us-state”

This intro gives you an overview of what you can expect to learn in the following chapters. Building communities is an art for itself. Bringing people together, making sure they communicate nicely, having them by your side at times when you need their support.

Who are these people who love what you are doing? Why do they love it (and you)? And where are they hiding? I am convinced that every good game can build up a community and profit from it. And I believe that most of the great games that are out there could become financially self sustainable if they could only reach their audience!

When I started to write this thesis, I didn't understand what I was doing. Chatting with people, receiving feedback, being voted for during a competition. It felt like some people care about what we were doing. But I didn't know why and I couldn't make them feel that I enjoyed their participation. When building a community, my goal is to unify people in a cause. We are the game's creators. They are the game's players. It takes time and effort, until finally these two parties become us. Us, the people who love this game.

In this thesis I analyzed the process of reaching the “us state” and broke it down into three steps. Together, these three ingredients form the EEE approach: Evaluate, Establish and Engage.

4.2 Evaluate

Before starting to build your own communities, it is important to reflect on what it means to belong to a group. All of us are part of multiple communities. It might be the cactus forum you browse every day, your weekly Friday night magic or the occasional coffee breaks you enjoy with other freshly-baked moms at Starbucks. Many different aspects define who a community is and how it works. *5 Evaluating: Analyze your development community (Example Switzerland)* provides a list of factors that are relevant to consider.

4.3 Establish

The base to build your own community is laid out. *Chapter 6, Establishing: Building a community around your idea* offers advice on to build it up: How to find members for your group, advice on talking to your audience and ways of strengthen their feeling of belonging.

4.4 Engage

After you managed to build a loving community that you care about and that cares about you, it's time to see what you can achieve together. Chapter 7, *“Engaging: Setting the community into action to achieve a goal”* documents different challenges an indie game developer is faced with and how the presence of a fanbase can help achieving them. This includes challenges in development, marketing, PR and funding.

5 - Evaluating: Analyze Your Development Community (Example Switzerland)

5.1 Seeing yourself as part of the group

So you want to build a loyal following of people around your game?

The first step of any community building effort is realizing what a community defines. We as game developers are part of a local as well as an international community of game creators. Every country seems to have an indie game scene nowadays. Some might still be very small, whereas others consist of thousands of members.

A great way to start your indie career is becoming a part of your local game developers community. Do you know the people around you? Do you know what their goals and interests are? If the answer is no, you may want to start building up your local network because it will definitely come in handy. Especially if your industry is small (like ours in Switzerland) you want to know as many fellow game developers as you can. Who knows who might be your next team mate, boss or mentor? Knowing about the others' talents and problems and providing each other with support is the first step for all community members to become more successful. It is never too early to start supporting others, even if you haven't finished your first game yet.

To improve my understanding of my local industry, I analyzed my surroundings and found out a lot of things that will be useful in the future. The details provided in this chapter are especially interesting for members of the Swiss industry, but I encourage everyone to get an overview of the different factors that have been taken into account for this community analysis.

5.2 Understanding the local industry: Case study Switzerland

Partnership:

This analysis was realized in partnership with the Swiss Game Developers association, Pro Helvetia and gamespace. It not only provided me with the basic knowledge I needed but also has collected important data that is used for political and economic affairs by my partners.

Part of this analysis was carried out as a quantitative survey via internet. Swiss game studios were asked about the number of their employees, their office location, the amount of games they developed so far, etc.

In order to gain qualitative survey data, I interviewed eight Swiss game studios, asking them about their successes and challenges. This chapter contains lists (some compiled by me, others taken from reliable sources) to inform you about local events, education and opportunities.

5.3 Starting point

During the 1980's the first pioneers made their way up the hills of the Swiss game industry. They set up camp and started developing games for Amiga, C64 and Atari ST. Many great games like „Traps'n Treasures“, „War Heli“ and „Insanity Fight“ were released in the following ten years. Some of them even got to the top charts.

But after some time the consoles the pioneers developed for lost their popularity. Development kits for newer consoles were very expensive and the developers, which were mostly still students or young adults, could not afford them. And so the pioneers disappeared alongside their machines.

5.4 Recent development

A few years ago, the Swiss game scene has been resurrected. A handful of committed studios ignited the spark and proved that it was possible to make a living out of games in Switzerland. Most of these studios still exist today and form the backbone of our local industry.

Recently, the number of small studios in Switzerland has increased. Lausanne and Geneva have joined Zurich in its pole position as leading city of Swiss game development. This development becomes obvious when analyzing the data gathered in chapter 5.8 - *“Swiss game industry data”*. In the last three years, local developers started winning more and more international prizes, which has lead to an international reputation.

5.5 Education

Within the last few years, a big part of the people working in the Swiss game industry have graduated from the following schools.

- ZHdK (Zurich University of the Arts)

The ZHdK offers a bachelor and master degree in game design. In the bachelor, students get a broad education in all sectors relevant for game development (storytelling, programming, graphics, sound design, game mechanics). In the master's program, students apply with a thesis subject on which they work during the whole duration of their studies.

Most of the game studios based in Zurich are formed of ZHdK alumni.

- SAE Institute (School of Audio Engineering)

At the SAE in Zurich, students set their focus to game asset production (game art & 3D animation) but they also learn about game mechanics and a bit of programming.

- ETHZ (Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Zürich)

The Computer Science Master of the ETHZ offers a Game Lab in which the students develop their own games. Some students of the ETHZ have joined or even opened their own studios in Switzerland.

- HEAD (Haute école d'art et de design Genève)

The Media Design master students at HEAD are famous for their experimental and artistic games. Many of their projects are mobile games, mixed-reality or VR experiences. Quite a few studios have emerged from this course.

- EPFL (École polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne)

The products of the Media & Interaction Design bachelor at the EPFL are also located in the mobile, VR and interactive objects sector. A few studios have emerged from this school. The EPFL is hosting many game related events and helps locals get into the industry.

5.6 Festivals/Events

- [Game Developers Swiss Romande](#) (Meetup, Lausanne)

Meeting at the Qwertz Café in Lausanne, this monthly meetup is the most important one in the romandie. Everyone is free to come and present their current project or tell the others about a related topic.

- [gamespace](#) (Meetup, Zurich)

The most active game meetup event in Zurich is called gamespace. Once a month they host an event which can either be a mini-gamejam, a public presentation of Swiss game projects or a discussion round. Besides the monthly meetup, gamespace also takes part in the organization of bigger events, like the Global Game Jam.

- [Gaymes Exhibition](#)

The lesbian and gay film festival Zurich included an exhibition about LGBTQ themes in video games in their 2016 festival, in cooperation with the ZHdK.

- [gameZfestival](#) (Festival, Zurich)

The gameZfestival is organized by the ZHdK GameLab and takes place every year at the Walcheturm in Zurich. International speakers, a unique exhibition and a flair for retro games are the core of this event.

- [Global Game Jam](#) (Game Jam, Zurich/Lausanne)

Every year, locations for the Global Game Jam are hosted in both Zurich and Lausanne.

- [Ludicious](#) (Festival, Zurich)

Thanks to its international game competition and close relationship to the city, the Ludicious festival is well known both nationally and internationally. The festival takes place at the Kasernenareal in Zurich and offers talks, an exhibition and lots of networking possibilities.

- [SGDA](#) Meetups (Meetup, Zurich and others)

Spread over the year, the Swiss Game Developers Association hosts different events and meetups all over Switzerland.

5.7 Survey: The strengths, weaknesses and future of our industry

Through a survey, eight Swiss game studios (from both the French- and German-speaking parts) were asked three questions about the local industry.

Strengths: What do you most appreciate about the Swiss game industry?

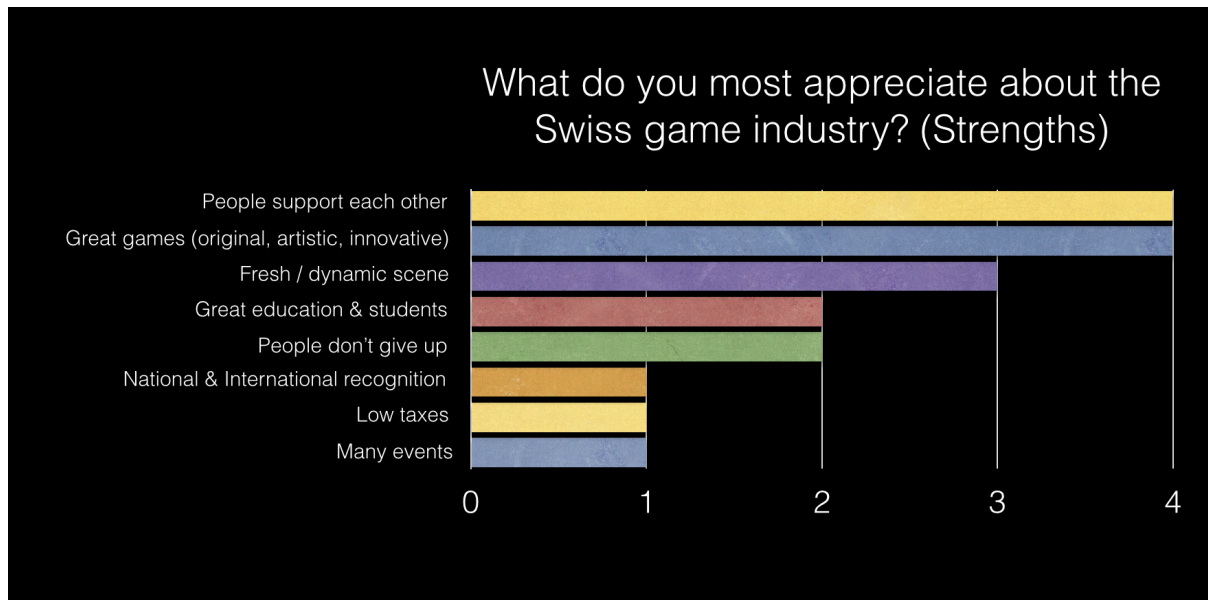


Figure [1] Strengths of the Swiss game industry

Top three answers:

- People support each other
- We make great games. Our games are original, artistic and innovative.
- We have a fresh, dynamic game developer scene.

Selected Quotes Strengths:

- "A strong collegial network, working together to grow as a scene"
- "People are searching for new ideas, niches and are innovative"
- "ETH and other Universities have potential to "create" high qualified graduates"
- "And there is a very dynamic scene with a lots of associations like meet-up and SGDA, it really give the feeling that we're all working together to develop this industry"

Weaknesses: What is not working out currently? What has to happen so we can grow?

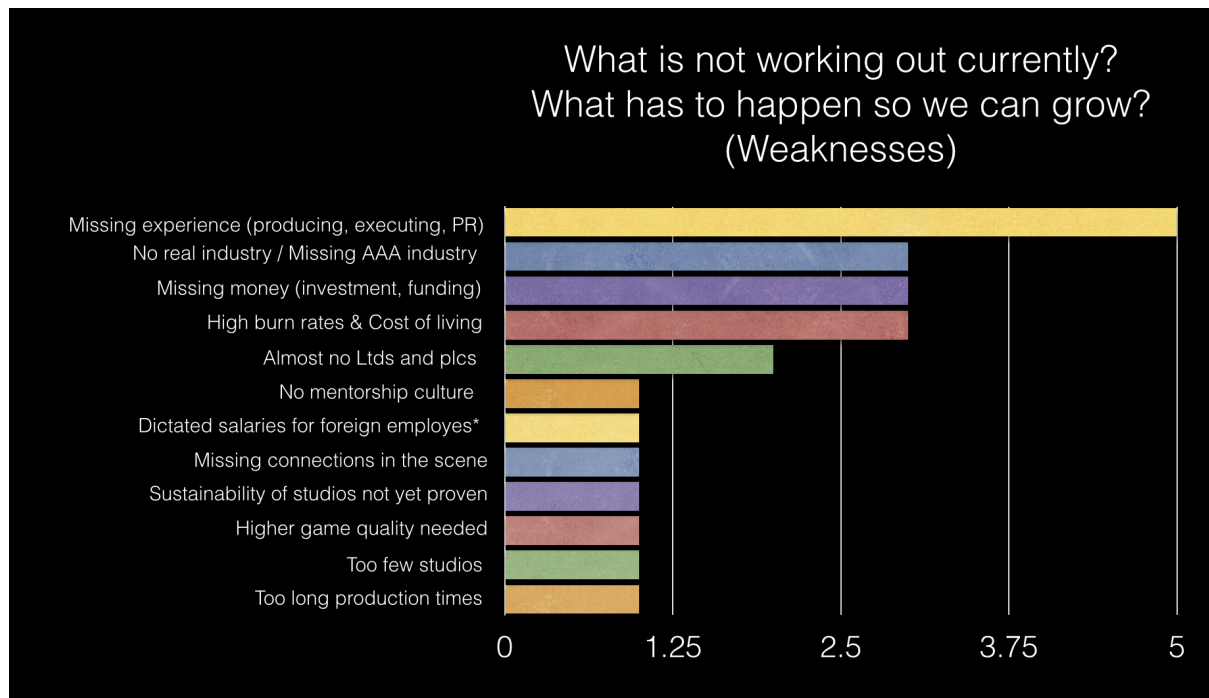


Figure [2] Weaknesses of the Swiss game industry

Top four answers:

- We lack experience in producing, execution and PR.
- There is still no real game industry with AAA title.
- We don't have enough money due to the lack of investment/funding
- It's hard to run your own studio because of high burn rates and cost of living

Selected Quotes Weaknesses:

- "People and companies are forced to take side jobs to finish the projects which stretches production times from months to years - while timing is crucial for most projects to be successful"
- "Almost no experienced people on executive levels, that have contact to important curators, stakeholders and investors"
- "A relative low number of officially registered studios (gmbh's, AG) which results in a low overall sector job employment value & sector income"

Future/Potential: What will the industry be like in 5 years?

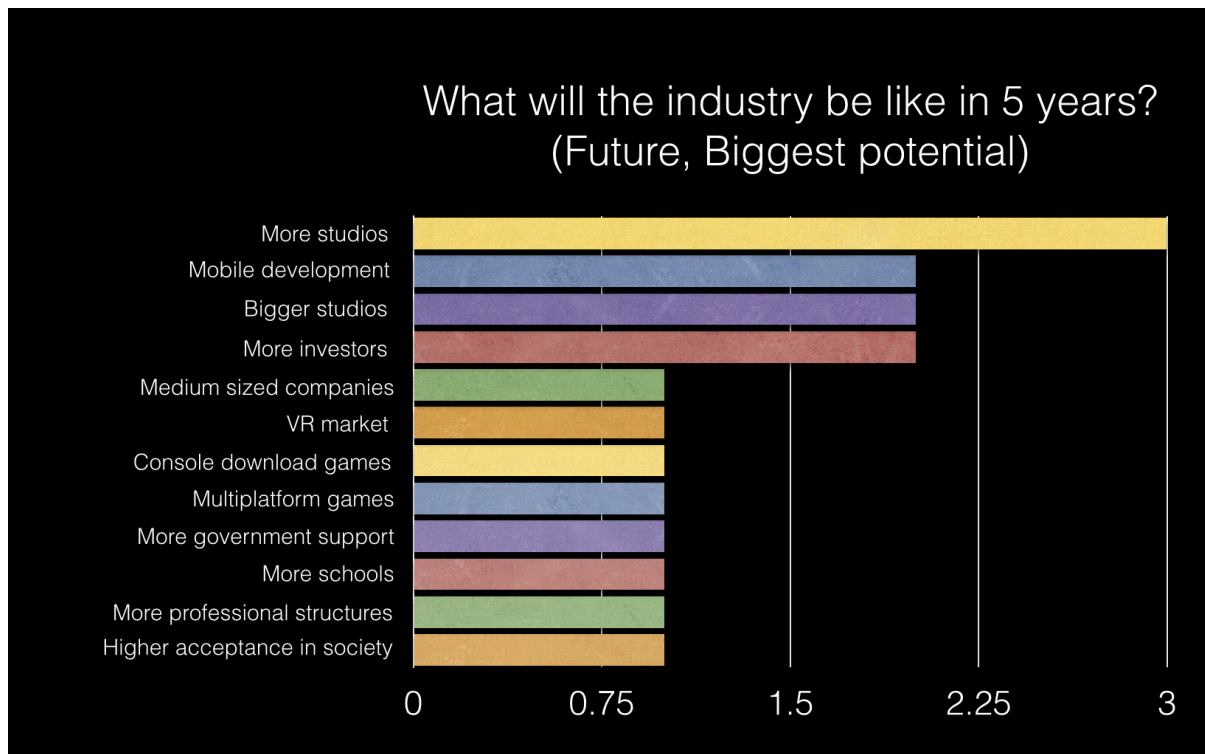


Figure [3] Future of the Swiss game industry

Top four answers:

- There will be more studios.
- Mobile development will be a focus point.
- The studios will become bigger.
- More investors will be willing to support Swiss games.

Selected Quotes Future:

- "A steady rise of quality mobile games being produced as an entry point"
- "We need to attract investment capital and properly distribute the funds to the right projects. As the industry is very much hit driven, we need people to be able to invest into several promising ideas instead of projects"
- "Some of the indie/entrepreneurship projects may grow, but will not become really big players like the f2p industry in germany. But I can imagine some "medium-sized" game companies to exist in 5 years from now"
- "More investors, more (and most of all bigger) companies, joining our forces, and to be more accepted in the Swiss society"

Interview summary:

A lot of great, artistic and innovative games are made in Switzerland. The members of the young and dynamic indie scene are supporting each other whenever they can. Unfortunately, a great deal of knowledge concerning PR and execution is missing, alongside the presence of big, successful game titles. Many studios are lacking funds, since both investors and government support are hard to come by. Even though the burn rate and cost of living are high in Switzerland, there will more game studios be founded in the near future. Existing studios will grow in size and attract more investors.

5.8 Swiss game industry data

In collaboration with my partners (listed at the beginning of this chapter) I created a new system that allows everyone to get an impression of the size and matter of the Swiss industry in a single scroll-through. The infographics on the page are generated from data that is collected in an online table which is filled in and updated regularly by the Swiss game studios. Whenever the date in the table is updated, the info graphics automatically adapt their values. This visualization is used as a data source for media and politicians. The link can be found in the “Lists and Links” section below.

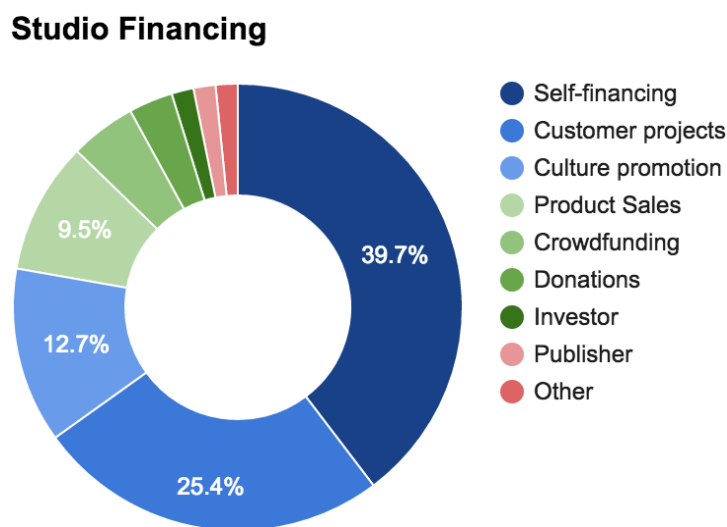


Figure [4] Example graph made from the collected data

5.9 Lists and Links

- [Games made in Switzerland](#)

A long list of games made in Switzerland.

- [Swiss Game Events](#)

A list with upcoming and past game events.

- [Swiss game industry data](#)

The data collected for this thesis can be found here: sgda.ch/stats

(Visit bit.ly/eeethesis to use these links)

5.10 Conclusion

There are a lot factors that can be taken into account when analyzing a community. Doing this kind of research will often let you come across interesting people and projects. Having an overview and better understanding of your local game scene will benefit your upcoming efforts of building your own fan base by providing you with information on where to ask for advice and other resources.

6 - Establishing: Building A community Around Your Idea

6.1 Can I build a community around my game?

Every game can build its own community. How this community works greatly depends on the developers communication strategy as well as the game itself. A procedurally generated roguelike can build up a community at an early state of development and improve the game alongside its fan base, as the game studio Vlambeer has proven with their projects [Nuclear Throne](#) (Vlambeer, 2016) which generated over one million dollars of revenue while being in Early Access.

A narrative game that reveals its real genius through a plot twist after five hours of storyline will have trouble to involve people in an early stage, unless it has another hook to grab them by. Early in development is not the only time a community can form, it can happen at any point of the game's lifespan. This thesis has a strong focus on community building during the game's development process, gathering feedback and ideas from players early on.

6.2 Example projects introduction

I collaborated with two Swiss game studios and tried to support them in marketing and PR topics. Neither of these studios have a marketing professional in their team. I actively contributed in the teams by planning PR campaigns, finding strategies for community building, organizing events, etc. The following community building examples will be based mostly on the findings working with these two projects. In order to comprehend the decisions I made in the following chapters, both games are briefly introduced.

6.2.1 Niche - a genetics survival game:



Image [1] Promo artwork for Niche, made by Stephanie Stutz and Severin Walker

Niche is a personal project of mine which started as a school project during my bachelor semester in the „procedural game design“ course in late 2013. After some experiments I

decided to make it into my bachelor project. After graduating, the idea of the game and what it might become kept haunting me so I kept working on it and built up a team.

After receiving an amount of 25'000CHF of cultural funding from the Pro Helvetia in April 2015, we rebuilt the game almost from scratch to bring the concept closer to our core vision.

The core vision of Niche is to let the players find their own unique strategies of survival. Players take control of their own tribe of animals. When giving the game to 100 players and letting them play for one hour, each tribes has taken on unique shapes and colors due to the players decisions and play style.



Image [2] Promo artwork for Niche, made by Team Niche

Niche is a hybrid game consisting of elements from the simulation, strategy, roguelike and puzzle genre. Focusing on the scientific topic of population genetics, Niche has a strong educational factor while being an entertainment game at its core. Niche tries to appeal to a broad audience of players. The cute, colorful graphics are appealing to a younger audience, while the scientific references and the strategic gameplay attract older players.

The first prototype of Niche originated from structure strategy games like Anno and Settlers. While these games are great fun, the continuous destruction of the environment is not as pleasant to look at as the original state of the world with its forests and wide meadows. In these games the player uses nature as a resource for their own goals. Niche turns this concept around. In Niche, nature is a given thing you can not influence but have to adapt to instead. While playing Niche, the player is introduced to the scientific mechanics of genetics (featuring dominant-recessive, codominant inheritance, etc). The game also features the five pillars of population genetics (genetic drift, genetic flow, mutation, natural selection, sexual selection). All knowledge is interwoven with the game's mechanics.

Since the individual animals have a restricted lifespan (about 10 minutes in the game) the players don't attach to them strongly. Niche is about forming a bond to the animal tribe as a whole. Keeping valuable and rare genes in the gene pool to pass them one to the next generation is essential. The main objective of the player is to keep their tribe from extinction. If the player loses all their tribe members, the game is over and the world the player used to life in is lost forever. The game starts from the beginning, in a new world, leaving the player only with the genes they unlocked.

Niche was inspired by Spore (Maxis, 2008), Creatures (Steve Grand, 1996) and Don't Starve (Klei Entertainment, 2013).

6.2.2 Tower Offense:



Image [3] Screenshot of Tower Offense, made by Capsule Games

Tower Offense started of as a bachelor thesis at the Zurich University of the Arts. Robin Bornschein developed the prototype together with his friend Dominic Müller. After graduation, the two kept working on Tower Offense and expanded the team with our classmates [Gian Jenal](#) (Sound Design) and [Andreas Halter](#) (Graphics). We all know and trust each other which lays a solid base for the freshly formed [Capsule Games](#) team.

Capsule Games received an amount of 43'000CHF of cultural funding from the Pro Helvetia in April 2015.

Tower Offense is a game for casual and experienced players alike. It is extremely easy to pick up, yet offers great strategic depth. It is both suited for quick bursts of action, as well as being played for hours on end. The local multiplayer game mode has proven to heat up the audience at any event. A match averages at 5 minutes, making it perfect for public tournaments. The single-player mode, which is currently being built, will not only give players

a chance to improve their skills at home, but also offers a rich gameplay experience with unlockable blocks, arenas and other features (such as special game modes), as well as doubling as an interactive tutorial for new players.

The average Tower Defense player will find some degree of satisfaction in competition. They are not completely new to gaming, having had experience with games on a casual or regular level. They like games that need a bit of thinking, but have been wishing for a more action-packed model than classic turn-based strategy games can provide. They may also fall under the term of 'collectors', finding joy in completing collections of any sort, or in earning new content through gameplay. It's a broad audience, and one that has shown to be mostly playing PC games.

The game plays in real-time. Players need to build structures out of single blocks by moving their cursor over any spot adjacent to previously placed blocks or the ground/ceiling, opening their build menu, and selecting any block of their choice. Most blocks can be activated after their cooldown period has expired. Some will fire projectiles while others might spawn deadly creatures or toggle other effects. The build menu provides short descriptions of what each block does.

Tower Offense can be compared to the games Awesomenauts and TowerFall.

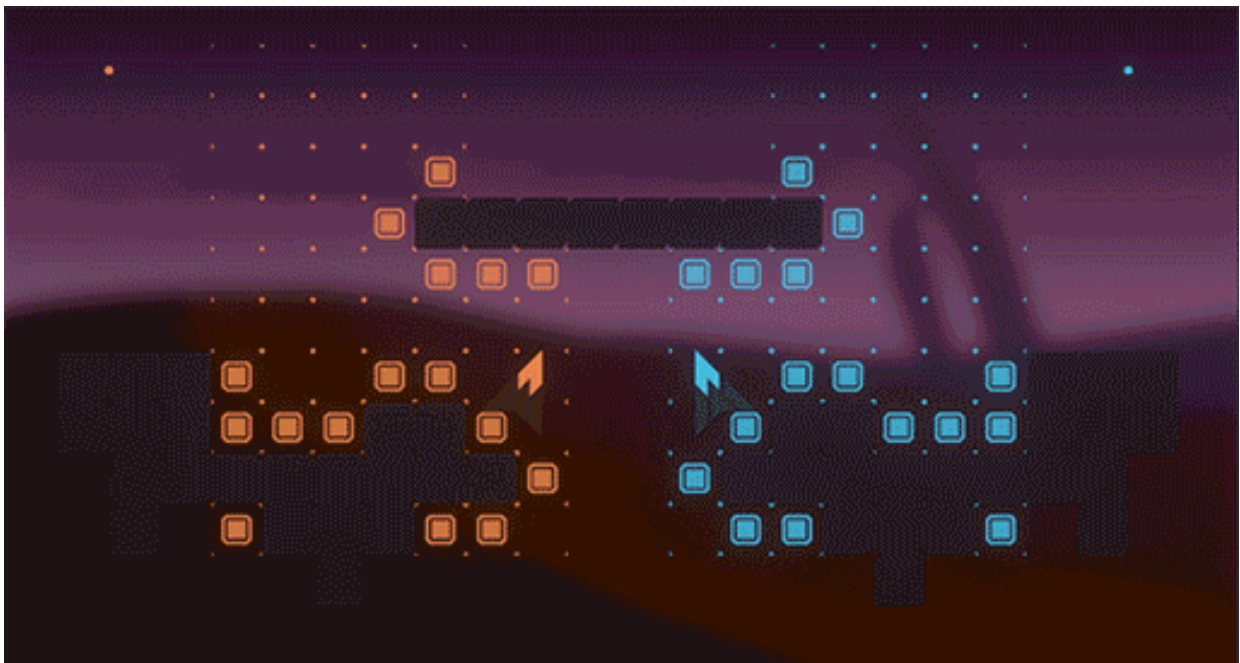


Image [4] Animated image of Tower Offense, made by Capsule Games

6.3 The importance of feedback

Many indie game developers believe that their first game has to be perfect. For them, showing it at an early state is unacceptable and does not reflect the final product at all. That might be true, but a product can greatly benefit from early feedback. Imagine the moment when your precious game is finally done. You place it in front of a player for the first time,

filled with pride and expectations. The players clicks around for a few minutes, can't figure out what they are supposed to do and turn away disinterested. Of course all can go exactly as planned. You may want to work on the game by yourself, not letting anyone touch it until it is fully polished and perfect. This is a path you can take, but with this attitude it will be hard to build up a community.

People love to give feedback if they are interested in something. Being asked for their opinion makes people feel important. It also makes them feel like a part of the project, especially if their feedback was actually implemented. They made the game better. That's a thing they will be really proud of and that connects them to your game. Some may even develop a sense of ownership.

6.4 Building a local community

When starting to build a community it often makes sense to start on a local level. There are plenty of people around you that will be interested in your game. Friends are automatically attached to the game because it means something to you, and you mean something to them. Close friends will lend their support no matter how bad the game is. Unless they can be very neutral and honest, they are not the best source to gather feedback from though. Asking people that don't know you and that haven't played the game before are usually a great source for good inputs.

6.4.1 Playtesting at local events:

For both Niche and Tower Offense we often visited a local coffee shop where a lot of gamers spend their Friday evenings. We simply brought our games and let people play. If they were interested in the game (not only if they liked it, but also if they provided good feedback) we asked them if we could note down their name and email address. At this point there is no need to know what exactly you are going to do with these informations. Just make sure to collect them for later. Actually watching people playing, seeing their reactions and hearing them swearing is worth a lot and will teach you a lot about the current state of the game. An online community does not provide this kind of direct, immediate feedback.

For many developers (including myself) it is hard to sit next to people who are playing their games without constantly giving them advice on how to play. While this is allowed in early phases, while the game does not have a tutorial yet for example, it should be avoided later in development. Before every testing session, make sure to know what you'd like to find out and stick to the plan.

Watching people playing and enjoying it can be a great source of motivation. It might encourages you to fix that bug or add that new feature and come back for another round of testing next week. Especially in early stages of development, this kind of interest and a few encouraging word can motivate developers to continue their current project instead of coming up with the next idea and never finishing anything.

People will be very happy to see their feedback come to life which depends their relationship with you and the game. One dedicated fan is worth a lot more than a hundred who don't really care when it comes to really helping you in times of need.



Image [5] People playing Tower Defense at Real Life Cafe

Local community does only consist of fans and playtesters. Sometimes a game needs expert feedback. Thanks to our research of the local industry we know just who will be interested and qualified to help us with that.

Target audience:

After building a solid base and iterating over the game with playtesting for a while, it's time to start getting in contact with the game's target group. Optimally a target audience is defined before the development starts. Indies often skip this step alongside doing a market analysis. Indies want to create what they believe should come to life and that is fine. If the game is made for people like yourself, start thinking who you are and what you like. Identify places you like to visit and go look for players there. Also sometimes your target group turns out to be a group of people you didn't expect to like your game at all.



Image [6] Niche's target group...



Image [7] ...turned out to be bigger than expected

Tower Offense's target group is male, between 20 and 30 years old and has a fable for multiplayer games. What better place could there be to meet this target group than a LAN party? During the course of the past year, we asked local organizers if they would sponsor us a small table for Tower Offense at their LAN. They were happy to get in contact in local game developers and happily offered us tables, monitors and sometimes even included Tower Offense in their tournament system. We exhibited the game at five LAN parties, Switzerland being the biggest one so far. At Switzerland Tower Offense held a tournament on the big stage and the winners even received a bit of prize money, sponsored by the event.



Image [8] Video Link to the Tower Offense Switzerland tournament

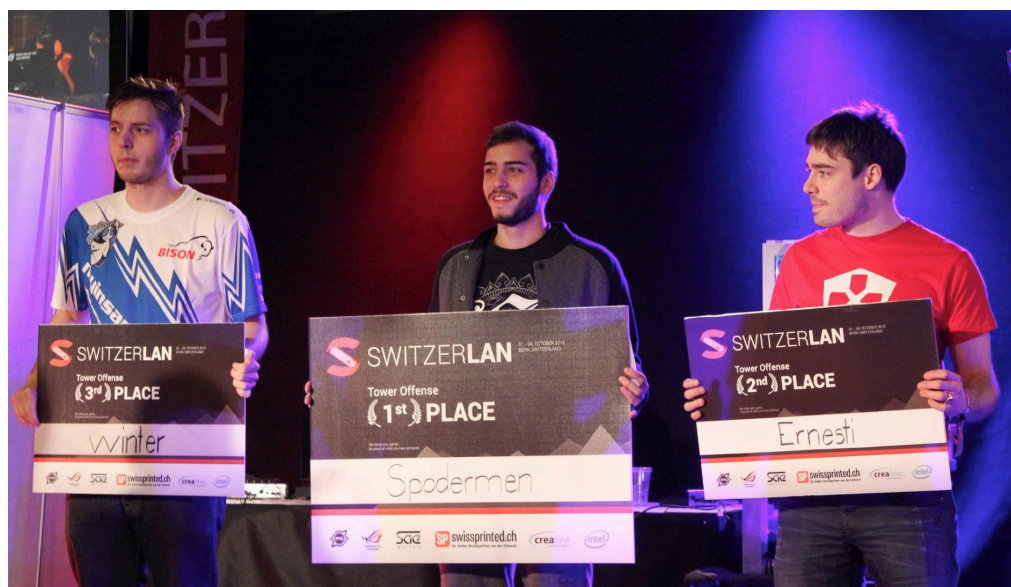


Image [9] The winners of the Tower Offense tournament at Switzerland.

Doing this tour through the LAN parties of Switzerland brought us closer to our target group. We received a lot of feedback to improve the game and collected email addresses from all the testers (who might be our future customers) to keep in touch.

There is only one thing we needed to do in order to take this important step of connecting with our target audience: Ask for support. Think about the places you'd like to show your game and ask the organizers or whoever is in charge if it's possible to come and exhibit/talk about your game. The worst thing that can happen is not receiving a response or being declined. Even if the place/thing that interests you seems like a very big deal and way out of reach just ask.

6.5 Setting up a community HUB

After running around at all these local events and meeting lots of people, it is now time to sit down and think. Having all these new contacts is great and communicating with them is easy because you already build a base of sympathy by meeting them personally. But even though they live close it will be hard to go have a beer with all of them to stay in touch. It's time to start thinking about opening a community HUB where everyone can come together. But how? There are countless options. One option would be to open up a forum. Opening a forum gives the creator full control over its members and content. The problem with forums is that people need to actively visit the forum page in order to see updates. Unless people are very invested in an idea and have a strong urge to discuss, they usually won't bother. Another example of the countless options is running a blog on [IndieDB](#), which describes itself as "A platform to connect independent developers of games with players, from the day they start developing their game to the day they release it". How about running a [tumblr](#) site to keep people engaged? What about a [Facebook group](#)? A [Subreddit](#)? [TIG Source](#)? This list goes on forever and choosing can seem impossible. It is important to note that this decision is not binding. Changing platform or opening a second HUB at a later point in time is possible. But starting somewhere and not losing contact with your testers is essential.

6.5.1 A game for yourself?:

If you are developing a game that should address people with similar interests and behaviours as yourself, choosing a platform/site you are already using can be beneficial. Being comfortable with customs and communication strategies makes it easier to delve right into the task at hand: Keeping people involved. In case of having chosen a specific kind of target group and not being a part of it yourself, it is now time to do research on where the target group can be reached.

6.5.2 Your official community base:

For both Niche and Tower Offense we decided to open a Facebook group. This was mostly my decision, because I would take on the role of Community Manager and Facebook is the platform I use most. While it worked out well for Niche, a lot of the people who had played Tower Offense at LAN parties didn't have Facebook accounts or didn't want to use them. This demonstrated my poor understanding of our target group. We soon switched strategies and opened up a Subreddit for Tower Offense.

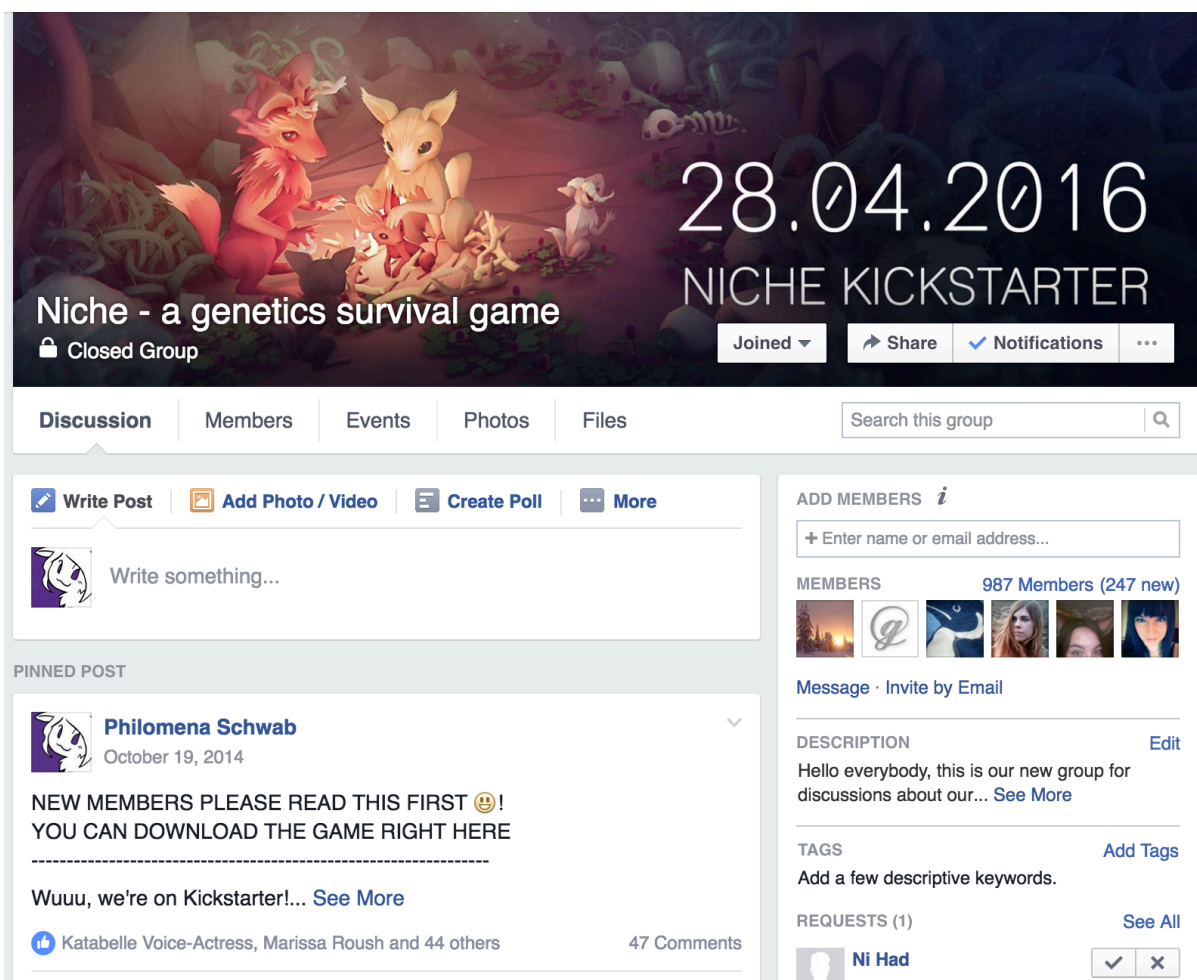


Image [10] Screenshot of the Niche Facebook group

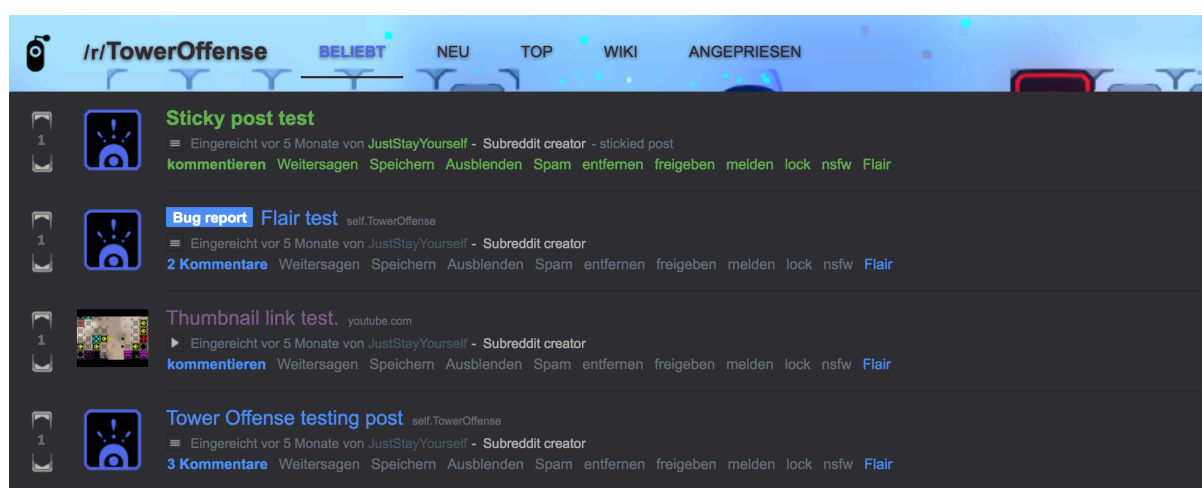


Image [11] Screenshot of the Tower Offense Subreddit

Again, don't be shy to ask people. Send out messages to all the email addresses collected during playtesting and at local events. Most of the people will be happy to hear from you and

happily join your newly opened community HUB. Congratulations, you now have an official fanbase.

6.6 Building an international community

After having set up an online HUB for our community, nothing keeps us from expanding our focus from a local to an international fanbase. Visiting local events and staying in contact with local testers, gamers and experts is important and beneficial. However it is important to understand that game development is an international business. If your goal is to establish a sustainable income with your game, focusing on a local community only will limit your reach. There are exceptions, especially if your game is very targeted at a certain region, but normally, reaching beyond your borders is an important thing to do.

Sitting in front of a computer and having so many options can be overwhelming. You could invite everyone to your community! Let's invite President Obama, Queen Elizabeth and Justin Bieber! Yes, that's the spirit. It's worth a try. Everything is always worth a try as long as you are not harassing anyone.

6.6.1 Related communities:

Finding and involving people who might be interested in your game is a major part of community building. But where are those people? For Niche, we defined related interest groups by asking the small, local community we established in the previous chapter, about what kind of books, movies, comics, etc they liked. Apart from having a fun discussion, there were a few books, fandoms and games that were mentioned repeatedly. Since Niche is my own project and is greatly influenced by things I personally like, a lot of the mentioned topics were things I am a fan of too. This made it very easy to enter forums and other platforms of the mentioned because I could relate to them.

Before starting my master's at the Zurich University of the Arts I did a game marketing internship at a local game development studio. During this internship my job was to promote a mobile game to whose topic I didn't have a personal relation. The topic was something I was actually rather disinterested in and even though I managed to connect with the audience and community to a certain extent, it never really felt that we understood or liked each other. This is where I see a great benefit in indie developers doing their own marketing. Especially if the game being developed is closely tied to its developers interest. Nobody can talk about your game like you do. People that are experienced in PR are most likely better at writing press releases and other promotional material, but they don't understand your game's vision, humor, story and atmosphere as good as you do. My advice would be to ask for help when it comes to the formulation of important texts (for your press kit, kickstarter, website, etc) but other than that I believe that a developer communicating directly with their audience is the most effective way to get people truly involved.

It was easy to find potential interest groups for both Niche and Tower Offense. For Niche I focused heavily on the fandoms mentioned above and tried to reach people that are interested in biology and zoology. As a result our community became a colorful mix of biology teachers, dog breeders, game lovers and fantasy animal book readers.

For Tower Offense the community is still rather local, since the game is multiplayer but doesn't have an online matchmaking system yet. There are plenty of possibilities though. The e-sport scene is getting bigger and bigger and there are countless forums about this topic that can be used to find interested people. Posting in forums and existing groups sounds like a good way to recruit new members for your community. It is, but you have to be careful in how to address people and make sure your post doesn't just come across as spam. It is best if you involve yourself in the group and get to know their customs instead of randomly popping in and shouting about your game. Every community is a small universe with its own ethos and rules.

6.7 Events & Exhibitions

This chapter focuses on game related conferences and festivals. Exhibiting your game does not usually result in sales but is a great tool for community building. As mentioned earlier, meeting people in person forms a strong bond which is much harder to achieve with an online acquaintance.

6.7.1 Staying in touch:

After having followed the instructions in chapter 6.4 - *"Building a local community"* you already have experience with exhibiting your game thanks to doing local playtesting. After exhibiting Niche and Tower Offense countless times at local and international events (we travelled to India, South Africa, America and many cities in Europe) one simple rule that I stated in chapter 6.4 has been ignored painfully often. Indies usually do a great job at being nice and polite with people who come and play their game at an exhibition, but they do a poor job at staying in contact with them. Handing out business cards is a start and most indies think it is enough to stay in contact. But usually, people don't bother sending you an email after the conference to ask how your game is doing and if there is anything they can do to support you. It does happen sometimes and when it does it is the sign of big commitment. However, in most of the cases you will not hear from the people you met at an exhibition again. Even worse, there is no way for you to reach them anymore. Exhibitions are good for one thing: Networking. You will meet a lot of new people who might be your players, other developers, industry experts etc. Make sure you can reach these people again by either getting their business cards or their email address. Ask them if it's ok to use their email address to send them occasional newsletters about the game.



Image [12] A simple newsletter signup list, used by Niche

6.7.2 Your booth is a party:

Chris McQuinn states in his talk “Indie Game Public Relations: 5 Years of Painful Lessons” that a booth at an exhibition should feel like a party. People should be able to feel good energy coming from the developers. “If you are not having fun, nobody else will” (McQuinn, 2014)



Image [13] Chris McQuinn talking about 5 years of painful lessons

I strongly agree with McQuinn’s opinion. Putting more energy into our booth’s design resulted in more interest for both Niche and Tower Offense. For Niche, we challenged players to complete a certain task (increasing their animal group size to 10) and promised a free Steam key to anyone who would master it. As a result, people started teaming up. They sat in front of the screen together (even though Niche is a single player game) and discussed highly focused how to beat the challenge. This energy and interest attracted more

people who stayed to watch whether the strategizing team would succeed. Having multiple members of your team (or other helpers) is very beneficial if there are many interested people around. Ask observers to join your newsletter.



Image [14] Niche booth at the Game Developers Conference (GDC)

There is one thing that absolutely kills the attention for any booth: Having no players. If nobody is playing your game, approach people actively and ask them to give it a go. Don't waste the precious resources you invested for your booth. Shyness is no excuse.

When setting up your booth at an exhibition, make sure to stand out in some way. Having a small screen and no additional material makes you invisible if there are other, better equipped game developers around you. There are plenty of things you can do, even at a very low cost. Using banners, posters and other image material as an eye catcher is very effective, especially if your game has an interesting art style or you have great promo art to show off. Try to come up with decorations that are both appealing to the eye and reflect the mood/setting of your game. For Niche we shipped artificial turf, bought candy that looks like the berries in the game and made three figurines based on the animal models. Additional promo material, such as buttons and stickers are also well received by interested people.



Image [15] Niche figurines, made by [Little Bitty Creatures](#)

6.7.3 Visiting:

If you are not exhibiting your game at an event you are attending, there are still many great ways to use this opportunity for community building. Go talk to other developers, play their games and ask them about their experiences. If you wanted to be an exhibitor yourself, ask them how they did it. Ask them for advice on how to exhibit games and reach people. Indie developers are usually very transparent and willing to share information on what they do. Learn from them and share your experiences if they are interested. This newly gained knowledge will certainly be beneficial.

6.7.4 Costs:

In comparison to exhibiting your game locally, going to conferences is expensive: Booth costs, equipment costs, travel costs. Keep your eyes open for special offers, such as competitions, scholarships or national delegations for a chance to save costs.

6.8 Communication

Communication is an essential point in community management. This chapter is an insight of experiments I tried for Niche and Tower Offense and does not reflect all elements of this gigantic topic.

6.8.1 Belonging:

The first finding I'd like to discuss is the usage of a special name to address your community. The famous German Youtuber Gronkh for instance uses the term "LaFamilia" to describe his viewers. For Niche, the term "pack" was introduced to address its community. After a while, people picked up the term and started to call each other "fellow pack member". This analogy began to spread. Soon the term "howling" popped up as a synonym for spreading the word

about our Kickstarter. People started to use animal related images and GIFs to express emotion in the playtester group. The group started to develop its own language, insider jokes, customs and rules. All these factors strengthen the feeling of belonging which is, according to Jono Bacon, the core of community building:

“At this point in our journey, it is clear that belonging is our goal. It is that nine-letter word that you should write out in large letters and stick on your office wall. It is that word that should be at the forefront of your inspiration behind building strong community. If there is no belonging, there is no community”. (Jono Bacon, 2009, 5)

6.8.2 The kind of people you attract:

Speaking from the experiences I made, there are two main factors that define what kind of people join a games community. First of which is the game itself. Each game attracts a certain kind of people, which might or might not be the actual target group. The second point is the developer's way to communicate and act. A great example of a huge, but still peaceful and exceptionally generous community has formed around the indie game Stardew Valley (Concerned Ape, 2016). Since the developer is tending to his community in an attentive and friendly way, the players want to return this friendliness. There have been many articles published on game sites who describe the phenomenon that the Stardew Valley community is actively fighting the piracy of the game by investing their own money and buying the game for pirates:

“...overall, the sentiment around Stardew Valley is an astonishingly kind one. It's the online equivalent of those [“pay it forward”](#) chains that start at coffeeshops, where people decide to foot the bill of whoever is next in line. Famously, these chains can go on for hours, as people become inspired by the generosity of others around them. I've never seen anything like it for games, though, which makes me think that Stardew Valley's community is shaping up to be a special one.” (Patricia Hernandez, 2016)



Image [16] Stardew Valley by Concerned Ape

6.8.3 *Your core community:*

In the early stages of community building, when the group is still small, developers have the chance to get to know these very first, precious people that invest their time into hanging out in your tester group instead of riding a rollercoaster in Disneyland. Welcoming each new member of the group personally is a great way to make him/her feel valued. I recommend doing this as long as you can keep up with it. For Niche we established a very close relationship with the first ten members that joined our group. The group has grown to over 1000 members which made it harder to communicate with everyone and to keep up with all the questions that being asked. Luckily, our early members jumped in and helped us out, without us asking them to do so. They welcomed new members, answered questions and offered support so that new members could feel like they belong.

6.8.4 *General advice:*

Answering questions timely and constantly proving that you are present and approachable, will deepen the trust your community meets you with. It is important to always stay calm and polite, no matter how much a certain person or comment might upset you. Better take a step back and answer a question later, if you feel like that you are in an emotional state. So far, there haven't been any arguments in neither the Niche nor the Tower Offense community. That is why I can't say much about how we handle them. I certainly wouldn't shy away from banning people from the groups if they continuously misbehave.

6.9 *Indie game collectives (Example Playful Oasis)*

In chapter 6.5 - "*Building an international community*" we talked about finding potential how and where to find members for your newly founded community. For Niche I invited people that are interested in nature and biology. At some point of this process, I had an idea: Why

not getting in touch with other developers who work on similar games? It sounds like such a simple idea, but you would be surprised at how many developers focus on only themselves and tend to stay concealed within their boxes rather thinking outside of it.

6.9.1 Reaching out:

I started writing mails to other nature game developers and asked them about their projects and experiences. They were all very responsive and friendly. We started a chat group on skype where we would meet from time to time and discuss the latest updates of our projects. At some point we started talking about cross promotion, since one of the games was going to run a kickstarter soon. We all agreed on giving the project a shoutout. After a while we started discussing the possibility of opening a platform where nature game lovers could gather and discover our projects. After reading about the visibility problem in chapter 4.1, you certainly understand where this idea came from. I loved the idea and got to work immediately. After setting up a wordpress site (assisted by my friend Patrick Seibert), designing a logo and commissioning my friend Stephanie Stutz to create a beautiful header illustration, the site was pretty much done. After countless discussions we also finally agreed on a name. The new site for biology and nature games “Playful Oasis” was born.

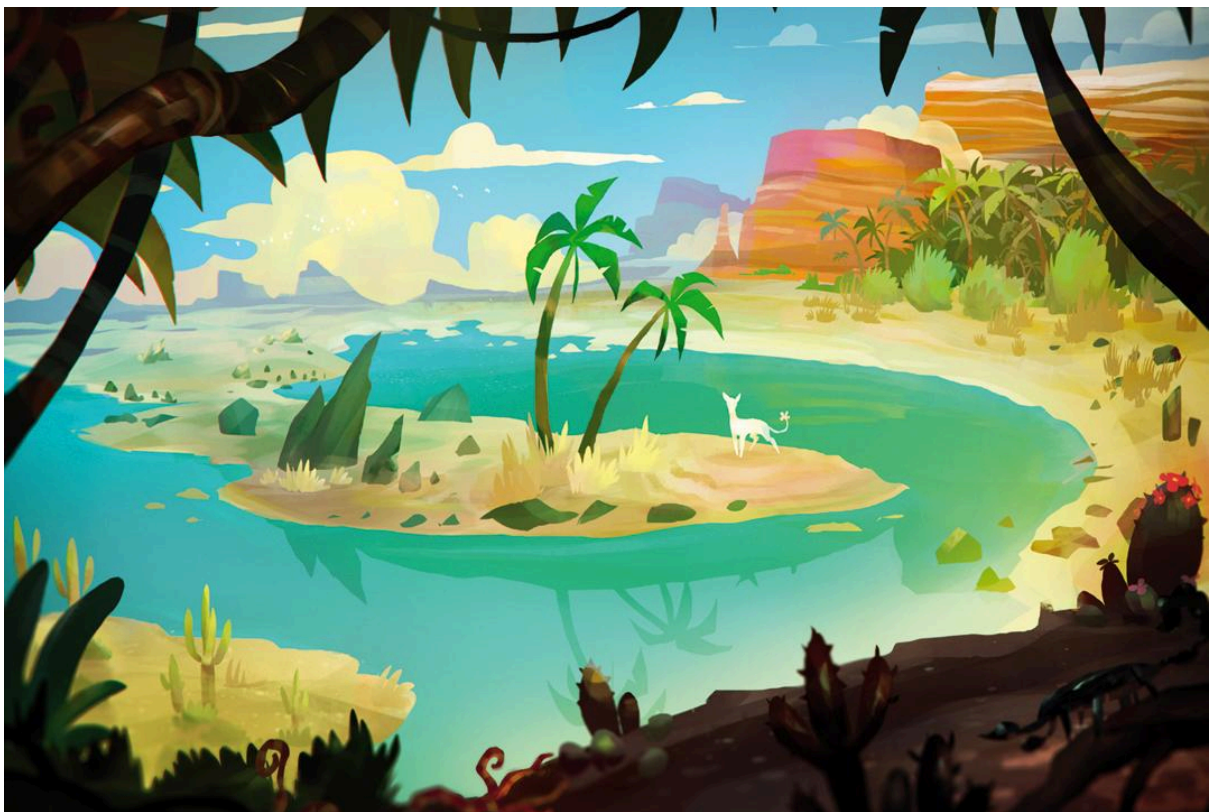


Image [17] Beautiful artwork for Playful Oasis by Stephanie Stutz

The plan was to use the page as a shared portfolio, as well as a news site and a shared blog. In the beginning some of us wrote a few articles about nature related games. But as the indie life is a busy thing, these articles soon came to a halt. The site evolved to be mainly a shared portfolio for all its members. We also opened up a Twitter, Facebook and Tumblr

page that all members received the logins to.

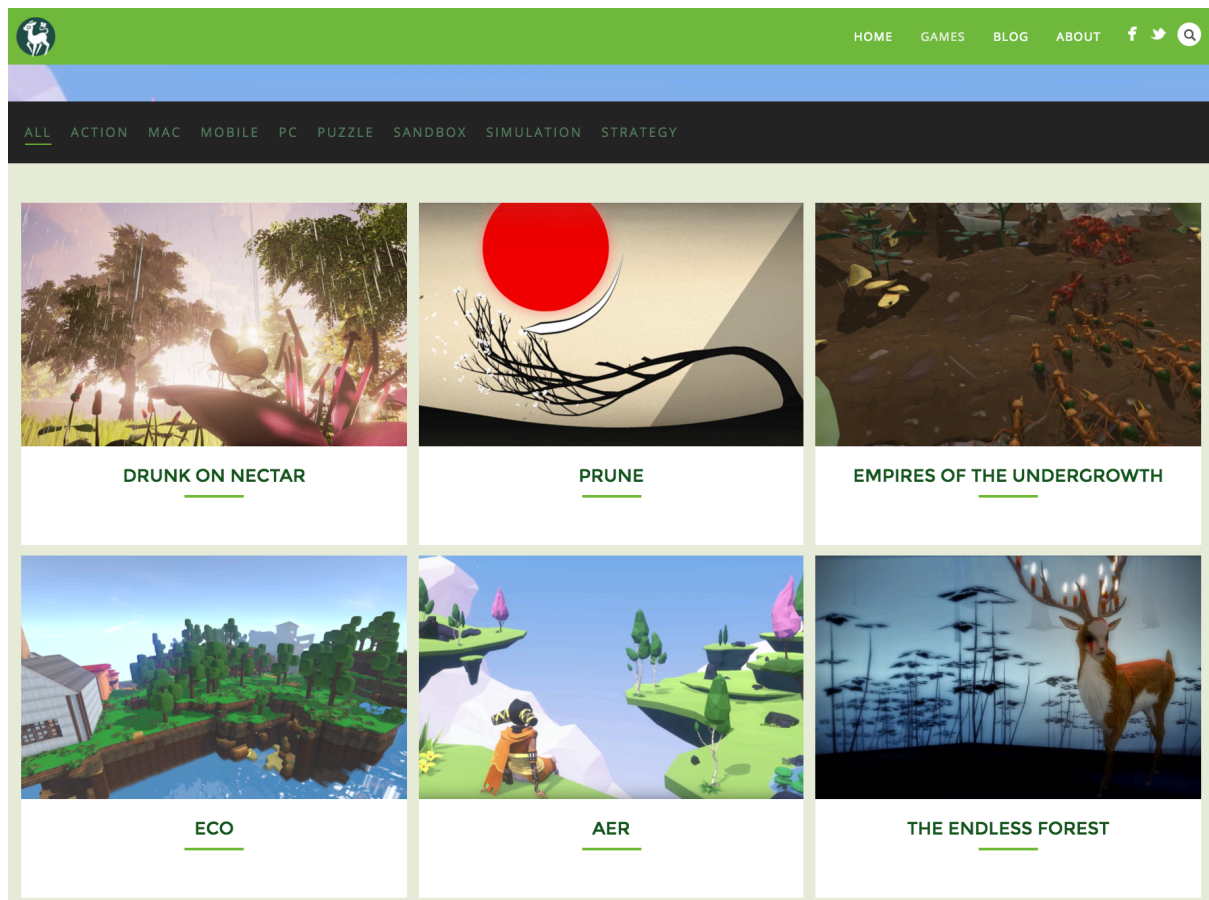


Image [18] Games on Playful Oasis

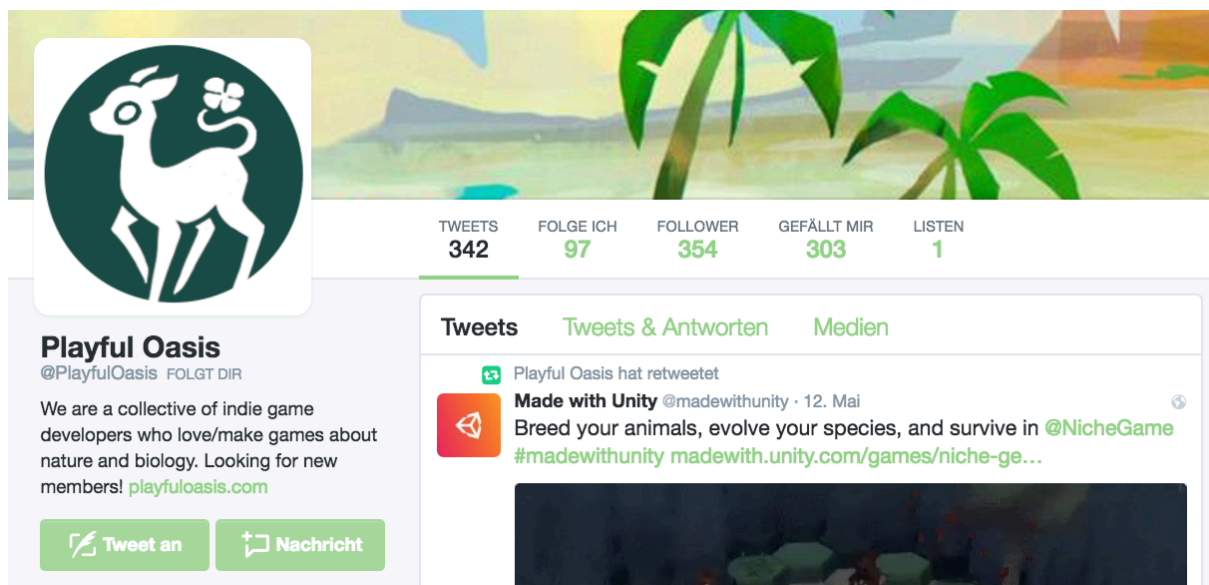


Image [19] Playful Oasis on Twitter

6.9.2 Growing:

Growing quickly from three to more than twenty members, each being a team working on their own nature game, skype no longer fulfilled our needs of a structured communication. We thought about opening a forum first, but due to the limitations we talked about in chapter 6.5 - “*Setting up a community HUB*” we decided on a Slack group instead.

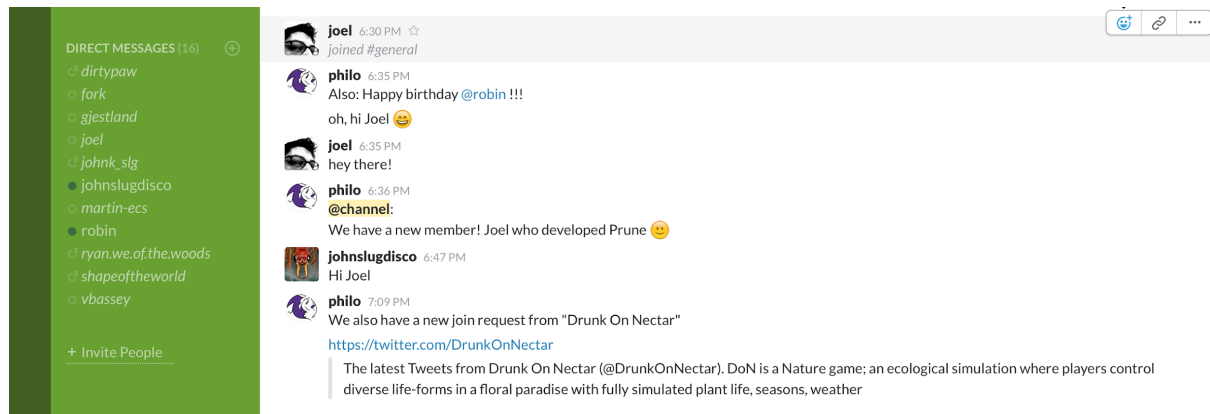


Image [20] The Playful Oasis Slack group

6.9.3 Reflection:

After running the Playful Oasis group for over a year now, investing my Saturday afternoons in the project, I have to say that I’m really happy with the outcome. The hardest part of managing the group is keeping members active and engaged as well as setting up website profiles for new members. But the reward of having like-minded people to turn to and ask for advice as well as the fact that I made new friends is absolutely worth the effort. I highly recommend teaming up with other developers and forming a collective. There are way too few of them out there.

6.10 Conclusion

Establishing a community consists of many fragments. Starting on a local level by involving people from your area can be a great source of early feedback and motivation. After having gathered a few interested people, giving them a place to get together and talk about your game is the next step. Since games are an international market, reaching beyond your borders is inevitable to run a self sustaining business. There are countless already established communities in the web that will be very interested to hear about your game. Find out who and where they are and include them in your group. The nature of your game and the way you communicate with your fan base will highly influence the kind of people you attract. Another great way to find new members for your group is to exhibit your game at events and festivals, both locally and internationally. The design of your booth will greatly influence your success at events. And last but not least, forming an indie developer collective is a great way to increase your reach.

7 - Engaging: Setting The Community Into Action To Achieve A Goal

Getting to this point was a tough piece of work, but here it is: Your very own community. Now that you have a bunch of people who can't wait to see what kind of feature will be added to your game next. There is a lot of energy surrounding you and your game, let's see what we can do with that.

7.1 Tons of feedback

Once you have an invested bunch of people surrounding your game, feedback will flow constantly. As stated earlier, people love to tell you about their opinion. If people trust you and they share your vision for the game this is a great environment to work in. A good sign to see if the community's and your interests are in sync is to evaluate feature requests. Requested improvements and enhancements should either be aligned with what you wanted to implement anyways or provide new ideas that you think are a good fit for the game. If this isn't the case, which happens especially with very early versions of games, inform your community about your vision more clearly.

7.1.1 Listening to feedback:

While Niche's players seemed to be one big group when the community HUB first opened, they started dividing into smaller interest groups after a few weeks. One half of the community love the constant challenge of survival and requested the game to increase its difficulty. I named them "The Survivors". The other half complained about the constant challenges the game threw at them. They want to be left in peace and breed their favorite creature. I named them "The Breeders". It is hard to meet the expectations of both groups and our team is still struggling to do so. Feedback can be overwhelming. Always make sure you think about what to implement twice.

The developers of Darkest Dungeon (Red Hook Studios, 2015) faced a similar problem. A part of their community demanded to increase the game's difficulty more and more. Not all players seemed to enjoy the changes. There was an uproar that spread across gaming media:

Developing games in public is a strange thing. [Darkest Dungeon](#) seemed to be advancing smoothly through early access, earning plaudits from its very first version, but in the past month its Steam reviews have started to take a turn for the worse. The culprit is a set of newly introduced features that make the game harder, including corpses and heart attacks. In response to the angst, developers Red Hook Studios have just [released a patch](#) that allows you to turn those two features off. (Graham Smith, 2015)

7.1.2 Creative members:

There will always be some especially creative community members who want to share their own ideas for your game. They sometimes come up with great new ideas. Try to be honest when they ask for your feedback. Discuss about their ideas potential and problems. You

might stumble upon something important. Allowing people to create mods for your game and share them with another is a great way to keep your community active and engaged.

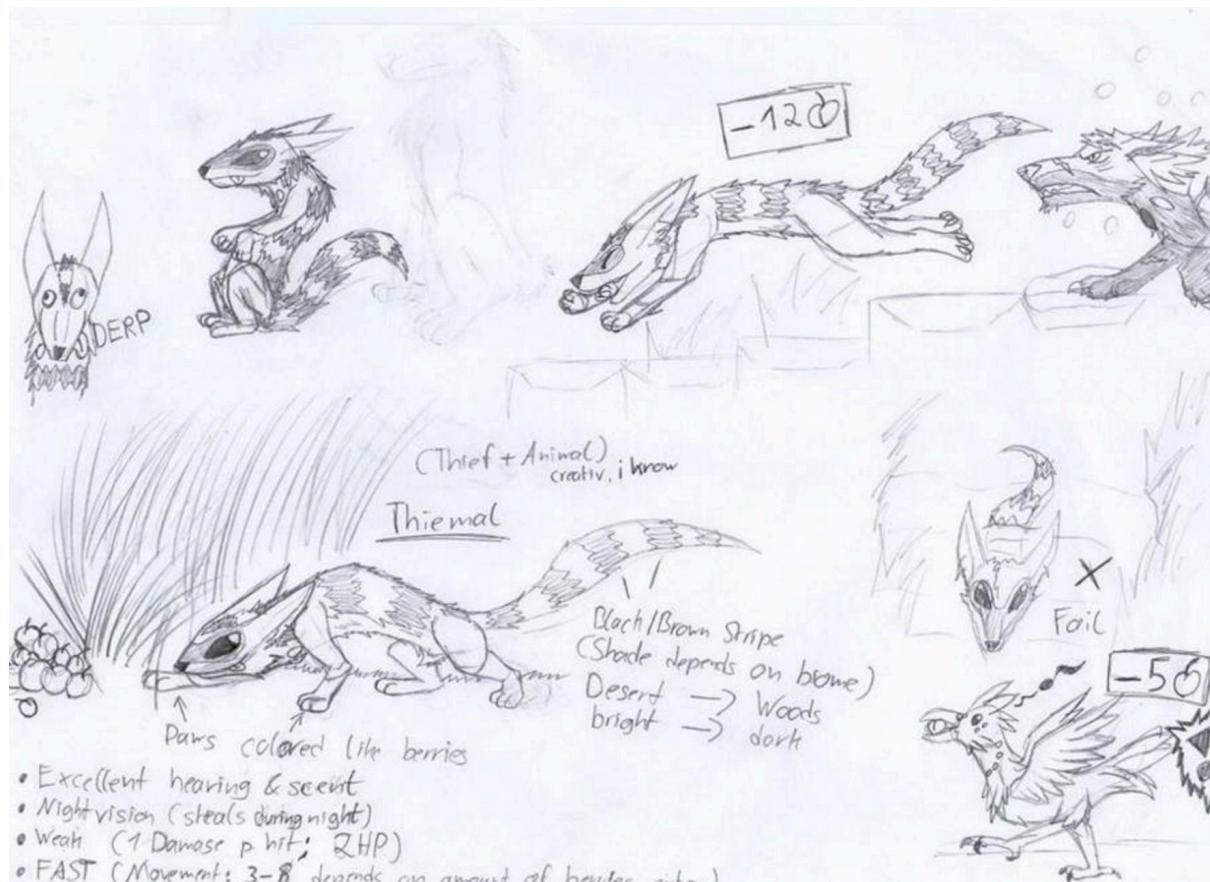


Image [21] A community member's suggestion for a new enemy type

7.2 The first challenge - Steam Greenlight

Our still fresh communities stand in front of it's first challenge: Helping both Niche and Tower Offense to get through the Steam Greenlight process. In order to prepare for this challenge, this chapter first analyzed:

7.2.1 What is Steam:

Steam is one of the biggest digital distribution platform for computer games.

The last official announcement from Valve (the developer and owner of Steam) back in February 2015 stated that Steam has over 125 million active users worldwide.

According to steamspy.com (a Steam statistics service based on Web API provided by Valve) the current amount of active users has grown to about 142 million (December 2015).

Steam's main focus are desktop computers (PC, Mac, Linux).

7.2.2 Why Steam:

The sheer numbers the platform has to offer are unbeatable. As a developer you want your game to be accessible to as many potential players as possible.

Another factor is the low entry barrier. As a developer, all you need is to get enough votes from players to get through the Greenlight process (explained in more detail below) and pay a 90\$ entry fee.

When looking at post-mortems of other indie games they seem to share the common opinion that hosting your desktop game on other platforms is usually not worth the extra effort in terms of sales. Updating all the platforms whenever you have an update/announcement is a lot of work.

7.2.3 Why Steam - Tower Offense:

The game was planned to be released via Steam from the very beginning. The Steam API (application programming interface) called Steamworks provides developers with many functionalities. The Networking and Matchmaking service are especially important for us since Tower Offense has an online multiplayer mode. Seeing which of your friends are currently online and inviting them directly for a match is a feature we wouldn't want to miss. Also, our target audience (men from 20 - 30 and people with an e-sports affinity) are very likely to have a Steam account.

7.2.4 Why Steam - Niche:

During the prototyping phase of Niche we planned to release it as a browser-based game, expanding to desktop (Steam) and mobile (iOS & Android) in a second instance. This switch of priorities happened due to a skill shift in our team (more about this topic in the conclusion chapter).

After the reorientation, Steam became the most interesting platform to aim for. We decided to make use of the „Early Access“ program Steam introduced in 2013. Early Access means that developers can sell their games at an early state of development (often for a reduced price). Early Access fits the spirit of Niche's community approach perfectly, since it allows you to improve and update your game together with your fanbase. Steam even includes a forum for your game to collect bug reports and player feedback.

7.2.5 Steam's downsides:

Steam takes a big share of the developers income. The exact numbers are kept secret by Valve. Cases seem to be handled individually, ranging from 20 - 40%. While this share is not uncommon in big game stores, there are alternatives. Unfortunately, smaller game stores are a lot less frequented by players and therefore less lucrative to use. Steam is not what it used to be either. Five years ago, releasing a good game on Steam was a pretty safe bet to break even with your development costs or even make a profit. Nowadays, Steam is almost as crowded as the mobile app stores and visibility is becoming a big problem.



Figure [5] Amount of games released on Steam (monthly)

7.2.6 What is Greenlight:

In 2012, Valve introduced Steam Greenlight as their new procedure of adding games to their platform. While publishers and famous game studios can get their games on Steam directly, smaller developers have to successfully finish their Greenlight application.

For a one-time submission fee 90\$, the developers can upload their games. The fee was added due to a high rate of spam uploads and is donated to a charity organization.

7.2.7 How does Greenlight work:

In advance to running a Greenlight campaign for our games Niche and Tower Offense, I looked at the procedure in detail.

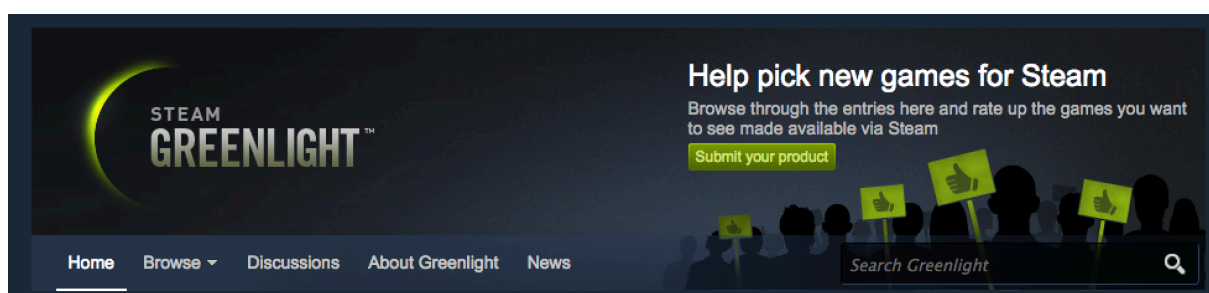


Image [22] Header Steam Greenlight

After a developer uploads their game to the Greenlight page, it is added to the „Recent submissions“ collection which shows all games that have been added recently.



Image [23] Recent submissions

Now, here comes the fun part. Judging from a video, screenshots and a description text, players decide whether or not they would buy the game if it was available on Steam. They then cast a „Yes“ or „No thanks / Not interested“ vote.

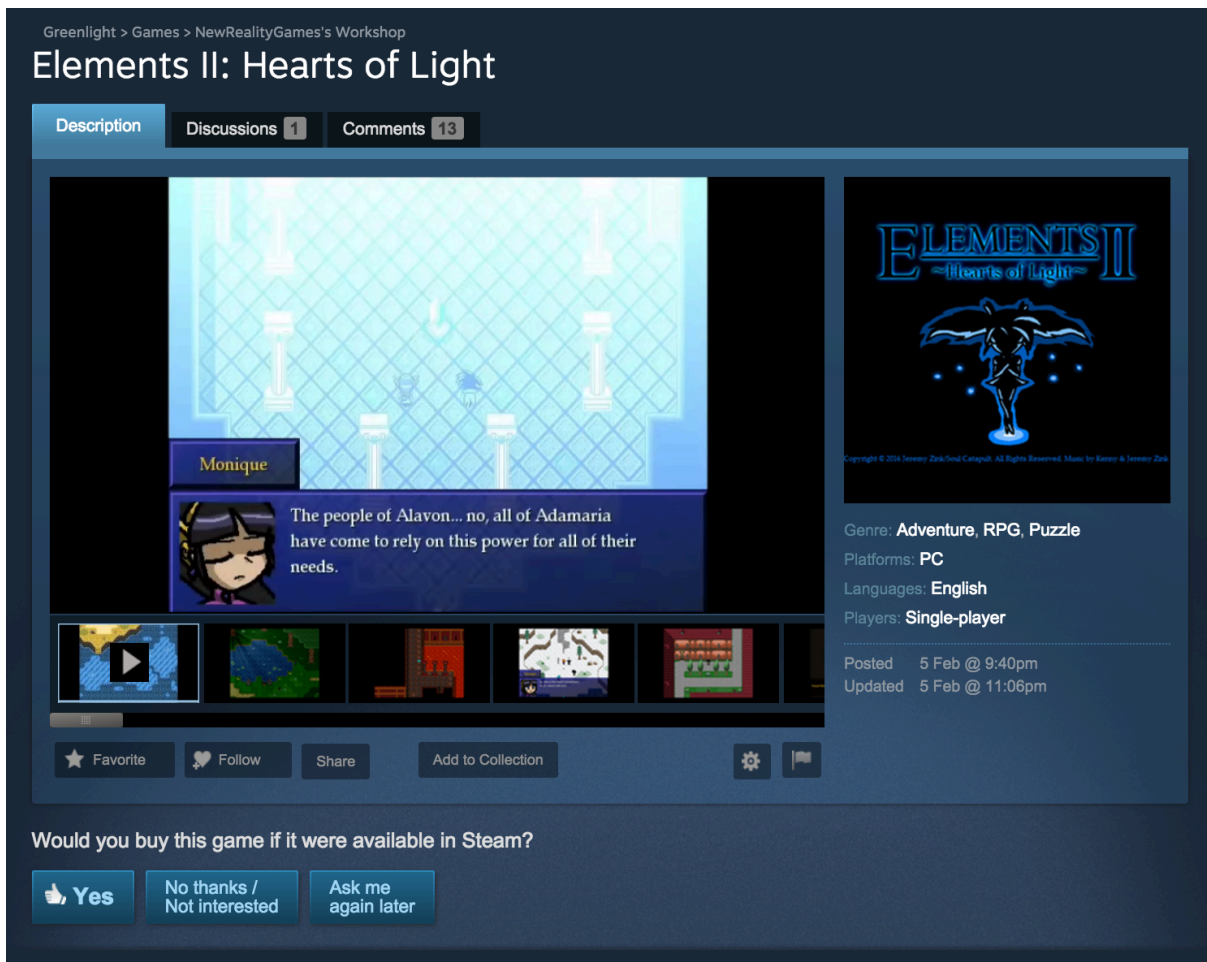


Image [24] Random Greenlight page “Elements II_ Hearts of Light”

A game has to climb all the way to the „top 100 games“. This is achieved by collecting a certain amount of Yes votes from steam users. The progression starts at 0% on the way to the top 100. Valve frequently selects games amongst the top 100 which completes their Greenlight process and gives them the official legitimization to release their game on Steam. The exact reasons why some games are selected and others aren't is not made transparent by Valve. The combined, shared experiences from developers have shown that being picked is not just a matter of votes. Whether a game wins a significant competition, big news sites write about it, a famous youtuber plays it or other visibility increasing events occur, if Valve takes notice that might help to get greenlit faster. Picaresquestudio.com introduced the term „50 shades of green“ in July 2015. Meaning the fact that having a majority of positive (50%+) votes on a game will increase its visibility on the Greenlight platform.

The first 2 - 3 days on Greenlight guarantee a steady flow of visitors, because the game is visible on the first site of the „Recent submissions“ list. At this point votes come in on a frequent basis. This attention storm dies off immediately after a game drops to the second page. From this point on the traffic depends on the developer. They have to bring in enough people from their blog, social media sites etc. This is where the games community comes into play! It's also high time to reach out to the press.



Figure [6] Stats on the way to the top 100

In my opinion, Greenlight is a great thing. If Valve would offer me to skip the process and sell my game on Steam directly, I'd decline. Why? Because Greenlight is a great way to gather a first, small following of people that will be notified when your game launches on Steam. The process itself is not very time consuming and the material (video, screenshots and description) is something a developer has to prepare for their press kit anyways.

7.2.8 Greenlight for Niche & Tower Offense:

So after learning about the Greenlight process, it was time to try it ourselves.

We decided to go live with the Niche and Tower Offense Greenlight at the same time. Our intentions behind this:

- Collecting votes at the Ludicrous - Zürich Game Festivals where both games were exhibited and show our donors, Pro Helvetia, that we are active.
- Being through the Greenlight before we go to GDC (to spread Steam Keys)
- Being able to cross-promote each other and sell "Swiss Games on Greenlight" as a more newsworthy announcement
- For me personally: Being able to compare how the games are doing for this thesis, because the factor of timing would then become redundant

On Wednesday evening (21.1.2016) at 22:30 (UTC+1) Niche went live. Our team was celebrating the moment together on skype. Eagerly counting down the seconds until the button would be pushed. 3, 2, 1, live.

We had announced the time we would go live on Greenlight in our playtester group (about 250 members at that time). When we published the link, voting hell broke loose. Approximately 100 people headed over to Greenlight and voted yes. This gave us a great boost of yes votes in the beginning, 80% yes, 20% no.

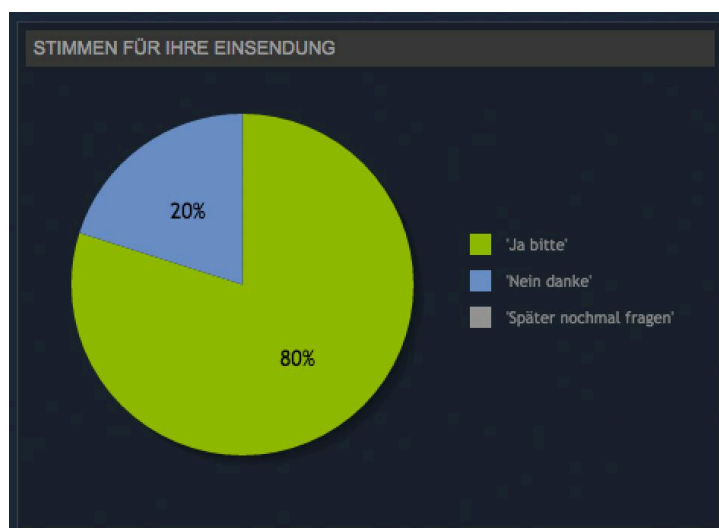


Figure [7] Percentage of yes votes for Niche Greenlight

We kept on sharing the news in Facebook groups ([Indie Game Developers](#), [TBS](#), etc.) as well as our private accounts and the Niche Like Page. To promote the Greenlight campaign as effectively as possible, I had asked my friend Stephanie Stutz to produce a promo image for us that we hadn't shown anywhere so far. This new image caught people's attention and generated an amount of over 700 likes and 30 shares during the course of the Greenlight. The image was later also shared on Twitter, generating about 40 cumulated retweets.



Image [25] Greenlight promo image made by [Stephanie Stutz Art](#)

We also shouted around on Twitter with a GIF, which we also used as the preview image of our Greenlight page on Steam. The Tweet generated about 75 cumulated retweets.

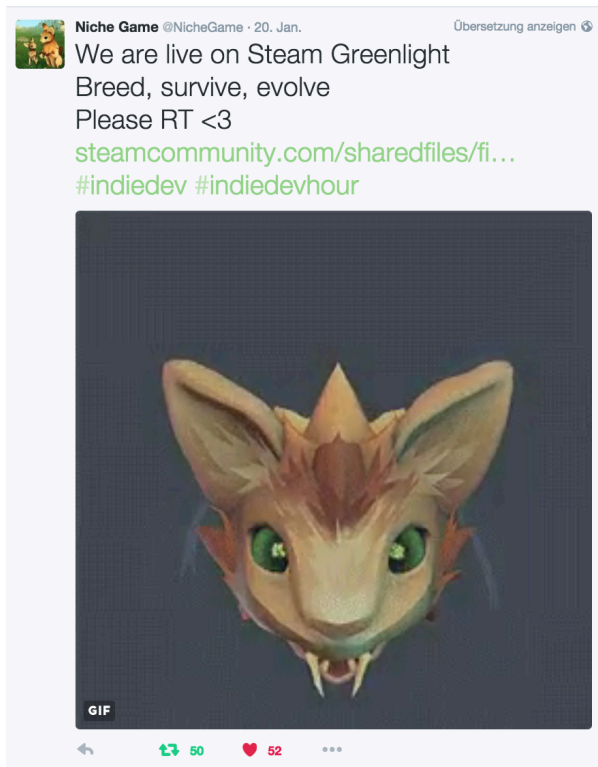


Image [26] Greenlight Preview Image & Twitter image made by [Stephanie Stutz Art](#)

We invested a lot of time to create a new teaser video we showed for the first time on our Greenlight page. Instead of trying to make an AAA trailer, we tried a humorous approach.



Image [27] Screenshot of the Niche Trailer, linked to video



Image [28] Severin & Markus at our trailer shoot

After a happy hour of watching Niche's votes climb higher and higher, something strange happened. We suddenly couldn't access our Greenlight page anymore. Mails and social media messages swarmed in, telling us that our link is broken. Well it wasn't our link, Steam seemed to have server issues. Those issues affected a handful of Greenlight pages, ours being one of them. We tried to reach out to the Steam Support, but... that was down as well.



Image [29] Steam is down

After about two hours of staring helplessly at our disconnected page and responding to lots of "Your site is down" messages we decided to go to bed. Let's refresh the site one last time, we said. And suddenly it was there again and we could sleep without having nightmares.

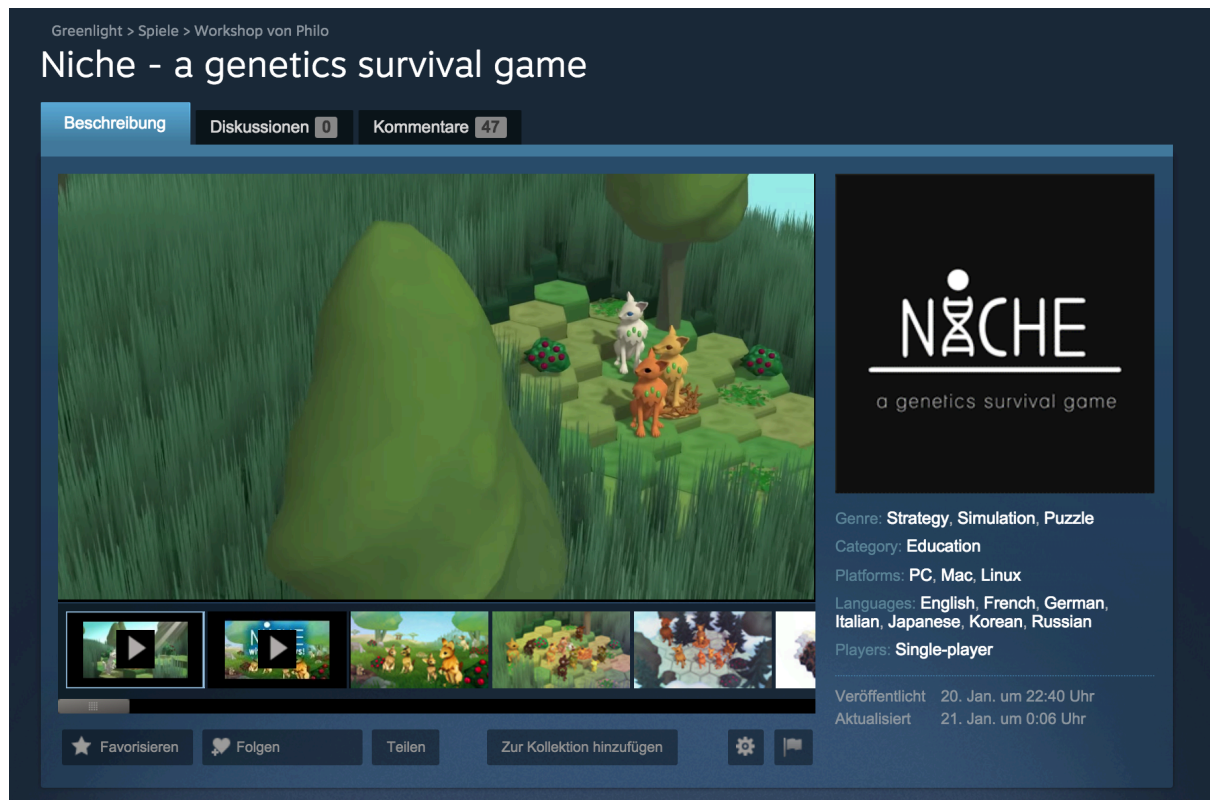


Image [30] Niche's Greenlight page

Tower Offense went live about 12 hours after Niche on Thursday (21.1.2016) at 13:15 (UTC+1). The timing was a bit unfortunate, since we had to head over to the Ludicrous festival right after the launch. The campaign was supposed to go live in the morning, but we ran into problems setting up the Greenlight page.

We posted the news in our playtester group on Facebook (about 100 members at that time), our public fan page and on Twitter. Very similar to Niche. Approximately 25 people headed over to Greenlight and voted yes. This was not enough for an initial yes boost. The no votes claimed the majority of the graph, slowly climbing to the positive site over the next few days.

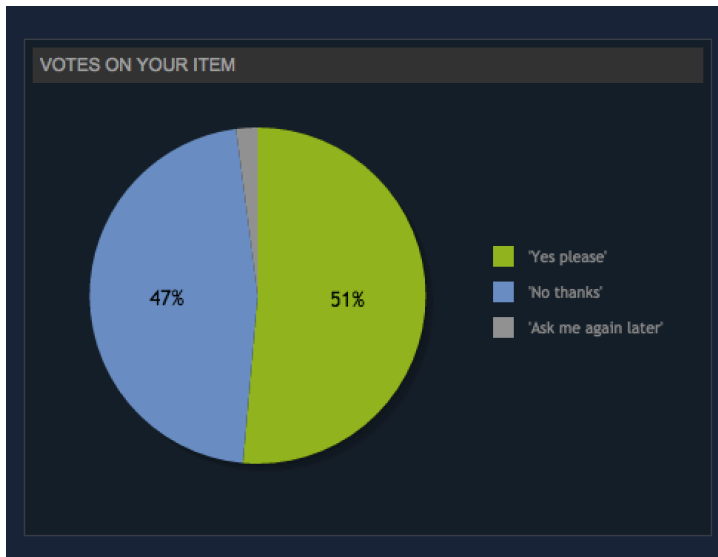


Figure [8] Percentage of yes votes for Tower Offense Greenlight

In the evening and spread over the next few days (time was scarce because of the festival we were attending) we posted our promo art in similar groups as Niche but there wasn't much reaction. Twitter worked better with about 20 cumulated retweets.



Image [31] Tower Offense Greenlight promo image

After less than 24 hours, Niche reached the top 100 and was climbing up steadily. Another 24 hours later, Niche had reached the top 10 of all games on Greenlight. At this point it was just a question of when the next batch would go through.



Figure [9] Niche after 24h on Greenlight

The batch came six days later. Niche got greenlit.

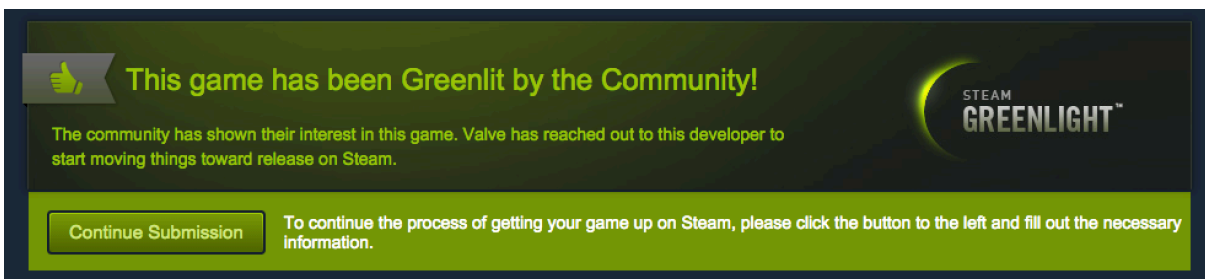


Image [32] Greenlit

The final stats:

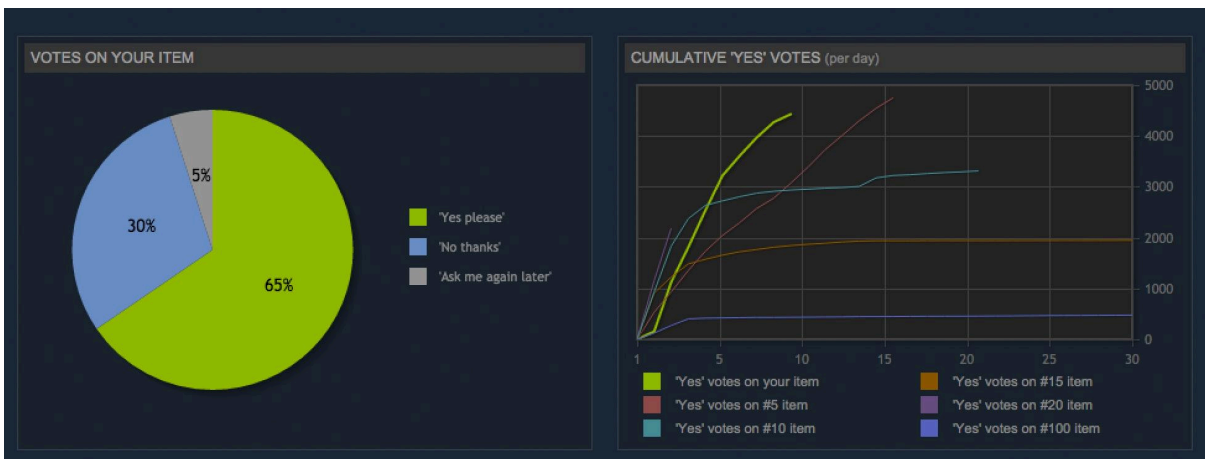


Figure [10] Niche final numbers



Figure [11] Niche final numbers



Figure [12] Niche final numbers

If we look at the graph on the last image we can see a significant drop of views on the 23th January. It was the first day we were not displayed on the first page of "Recent submissions" anymore. But the views kept coming in from inside of Steam anyways. My explanation would be that we were displayed in the "Your Voting Queue" frequently because of the high activity and good yes/no ratio.

Thanks to Google analytics we could see where our traffic came from. Almost 75% of the visitors of our Greenlight page came directly from Steam (a huge share of the visitors were from North America). Facebook was our second biggest source, Twitter third. Our own website is ranked sixth and generated almost no traffic.

☐	Quelle ?	Akquisition			Verhalten	
		Sitzungen ? ↓	Neue Sitzungen in % ?	Neue Nutzer ?	Absprungrate ?	Seiten/Sitzung ?
		7.125 % des Gesamtwerts: 46,82 % (15.218)	34,55 % Durchn. für Datenansicht: 37,67 % (-8,28 %)	2.462 % des Gesamtwerts: 42,94 % (5.733)	85,66 % Durchn. für Datenansicht: 86,95 % (-1,49 %)	1,24 Durchn. für Datenansicht: 1,24 (0,36 %)
☐	1. store.steampowered.com	5.269 (73,95 %)	34,88 %	1.838 (74,65 %)	87,95 %	1,20
☐	2. facebook.com	810 (11,37 %)	24,69 %	200 (8,12 %)	73,83 %	1,45
☐	3. m.facebook.com	259 (3,64 %)	64,48 %	167 (6,78 %)	74,13 %	1,42
☐	4. t.co	189 (2,65 %)	21,16 %	40 (1,62 %)	87,30 %	1,22
☐	5. blog.counter-strike.net	66 (0,93 %)	36,36 %	24 (0,97 %)	93,94 %	1,14
☐	6. niche-game.com	58 (0,81 %)	24,14 %	14 (0,57 %)	62,07 %	1,72
☐	7. dota2.com	35 (0,49 %)	37,14 %	13 (0,53 %)	94,29 %	1,11
☐	8. csgolounge.com	23 (0,32 %)	26,09 %	6 (0,24 %)	91,30 %	1,17
☐	9. l.facebook.com	23 (0,32 %)	60,87 %	14 (0,57 %)	69,57 %	1,52
☐	10. thisisgamethailand.com	22 (0,31 %)	27,27 %	6 (0,24 %)	77,27 %	1,41

Figure [13] Niche Greenlight traffic

Things weren't going so well for Tower Defense. I was quite startled at this fact. Tower Defense seemed to be the perfect fit for the Steam audience. I was actually expecting it to perform better than Niche. 15 days after its launch on Greenlight, these are the stats.



Figure [14] Tower Offense after 15 days of Greenlight

7.2.9 Draw up:

First off: Tower Offense is a great game. I've seen barely anyone not loving this game when playing it. But when you are on Greenlight, people don't play the game. Sure, you can upload a demo but most people will decide by looking at your video, maybe your screenshots and maybe your description. The ratio of yes and no votes that we got for Tower Offense are average. It's normal that about 50% of people say no to your game. What really bothers me here are the amount of "Unique Visitors" Tower Offense received compared to Niche. It seems that Steam shoved tons of users to the Niche Greenlight page but almost none to Tower Offense.

Unique Visitors Niche after 17 days: 14'356

Unique Visitors Tower Offense after 17 days: 1451

What are the deciding factors for these numbers? Neither of the games were featured on a big news page or won a significant award. So it had to be an algorithm behind the decision and not human input. My guess would be that the percentage of positive votes and/or the amount of comments determine whether Steam increases your reach. Since comments could also be negative, Steam would need a system to filter and count positive ones. I consider this unlikely. Which only leaves the yes vote percentage as an indicator. But without more data, it's impossible to say for sure. My suggestion here is to set your whole community into motion to vote for your project on day one in order to have a high percentage of yes votes which seemingly increase your visibility in the Greenlight process.

7.2.10 Surprise:

After keeping up our fight to get Tower Offense greenlit, we were surprised by a sudden notification about two weeks later. Even though we had not reached the top 100, we got greenlit with the next batch. It seems that Valve decided to let Tower Offense pass the test without fulfilling the conditions.

7.2.11 Being greenlit:

Both games have been greenlit and attracted a lot new community members in the process. Having passed Valve's test, both games are now eligible to be released on Steam any time we want.

7.3 Kickstarter Niche

During the Greenlight campaign there was a lot of energy and joy in the Niche community. It felt like we are all achieving something together as one big group. It didn't matter who the who were the developers and who the fans. We fought alongside to achieve our goal. The true form of the "us-state" mentioned earlier. In order to recreate this strong feeling and as a community experiment, our team decided to run a Kickstarter for Niche. The main reason neither being money, nor marketing, but the recreation of the "us-state" which binds members of a community stronger together.

Since the Kickstarter is still running while I'm writing this thesis I can only give insights on what happened so far, but not for the final outcome. We set a relatively low funding goal, asking for 15'000\$ to finish Niche's Early Access version which would launch about two months after the Kickstarter came to an end. So far, we raised 33'000\$, receiving money from over 1200 people. If you are unsure how Kickstarter works, please refer to this [official information](#) before you continue reading.

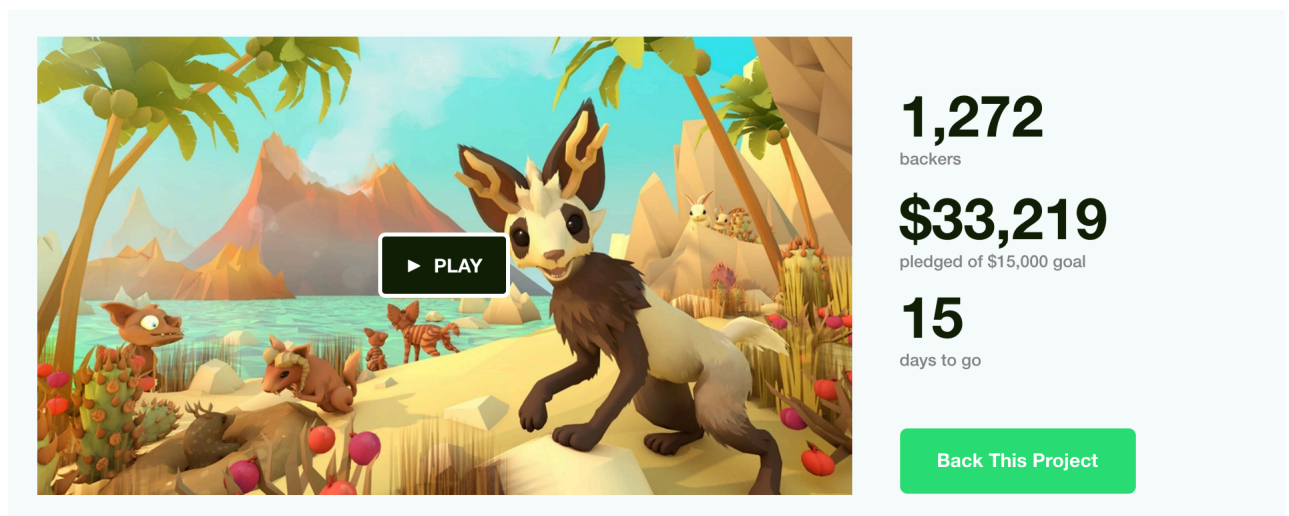


Image [33] State of Niche funding on May 15th 2016

7.3.1 Most important parts:

After helping to successfully run the [indiecouch Kickstarter](#) I have a clear idea of how the Niche Kickstarter should look like. Our team prepared the campaign launch within the timeframe of a month. A Kickstarter page consist of multiple elements. The most important ones being the campaign video and the rewards that supporting people (backers) can obtain. The video sits on top of the campaign and is according to Kickstarter data the biggest decision point on whether or not to support a project. Since we already produced a video for

the Greenlight campaign of Niche, and received great feedback for it, we decided to reuse it after making a few small improvement mainly concerning the audio track.



Image [34] Example Kickstarter page "Nadia Was Here"

7.3.2 Rewards:

With the video being done, the biggest challenge was finding a good reward structure for Niche. To learn more about how rewards work in the Kickstarter context, please refer to this [official information](#) from their side. We received great feedback from people who are experienced than us.

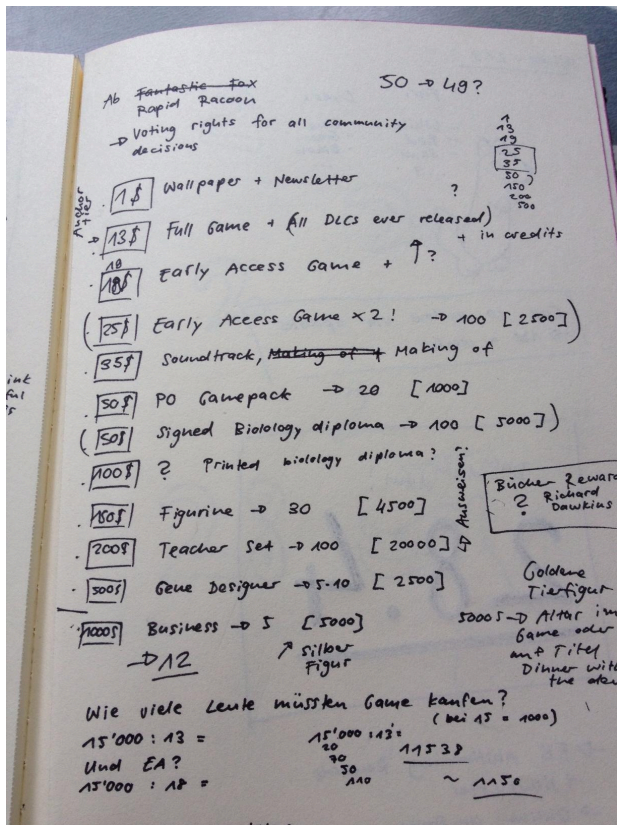


Image [35] One of many reward structure sketches for Niche



Image [36] The developers of Deliver us the moon gave us great feedback at Quo Vadis

At first I was quite recusant to offer any physical rewards in the Niche Kickstarter. But Jessica Kuhn, a friend of mine who designs animal-like figurines under the brand “[Little Bitty Creatures](#)” offered to create and ship two special rewards for us: Cute animal ears as wearables and Niche animal figurines. We included both rewards in the campaign:

Fluffy Fennec

100\$



Super cute ears to put on your head!
Available in different color combinations.
Handmade by Little Bitty Creatures.

- + Cute, handcrafted ears for your head
- + Digital copy of Niche + Beta Access
- + Digital Wallpaper + Digital Soundtrack + Digital Making Of
- + Your name in the credits

Available fur types:



Image [37] Fluffy Ears created by [Little Bitty Creatures](#)

Lucky Lion

150\$

20



You receive one of 30 limited animal figurines which are handmade by Little Bitty Creatures. Choose your fur and eye color. Each animal is unique and has a special fur marking. The figurines are numbered (and signed if you like).

- + One of 30 limited animal figurines
- + Digital copy of Niche + Beta Access
- + Digital Wallpaper + Digital Soundtrack + Digital Making Of
- + Your name in the credits

Available fur colors:



Image [38] Niche animal figurines created by [Little Bitty Creatures](#)

7.3.3 Launching:

When launching a Kickstarter, the first week of the campaign is extremely important. Backing a product that isn't even finished takes a big amount of trust. If a creator is unable to raise around 30% of their project's funding goal within the first week, people start to doubt if the project will make it. Many creators therefore use a method called "Early Bird rewards". Early Birds rewards are usually a discounted version of your product, available in a limited amount. So that for example only the first 100 backers receive your game for \$15 instead of \$16. This urges people to back right now which is what the project creators want.

I was planning to do the same for Niche's campaign, until I came across this statement in Jamey Stegmaier's book "A Crowdfunders Strategy Guide":

Forward momentum is incredibly important when you're running a crowdfunding campaign, particularly in the first few days. However, I think many project creators (myself included for Viticulture) assume that early-bird pledge levels are the best way to get the project off the ground at the beginning.

Let's be clear about that: the sole purpose of early-bird pledge levels is to give potential backers a reason to pledge now—on the first few days of a creator's first crowdfunding project—instead of later.

However, the true impact of early-bird rewards is that the lucky few backers who happen to discover the project early on get a discount, and everyone else—the potentially thousands of backers who follow—are charged more, even though all backers are pledging for the project to exist. My philosophy is that the entire campaign should be treated like one big early bird, given that all backers are pledging their hard-earned money for something that they won't even receive for six to twelve months.

(Stegmaier, 2015, 58)

This short text convinced me to avoid Early Bird rewards. I especially liked the idea of all backers being one big community instead of dividing them into winners and losers from the very start. But I still wanted to create a sense of urgency for people to back the project on day one. That is why I used a timed community stretch goal, a strategy less frequently used for crowdfunding projects.

100 Backers in 24 hours

Speed is an important trait for a hunter.
Let's sneak up on our prey and strike fast!

If this goal is reached:

The animal species mutates a special cheetah fur pattern which will be added to the game.

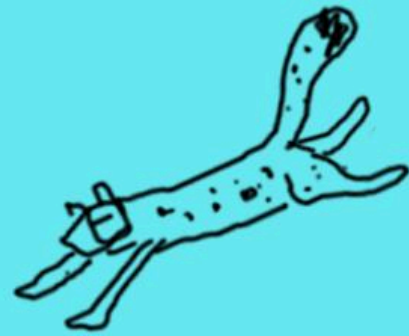


Image [39] The first sketch of the timed community stretch goal

Another approach our team tried to generate momentum with is was our launch event. We invited friends and local community members to attend the party locally, and set up a live stream for everyone else to join the fun. We played a few games that would let the winners win free Early Access keys. The highlight of the show was the moment when the whole team pushed the Kickstarter launch button together.



Image [40] Niche Stream

7.3.4 Community Stretch Goals:

Since this is a community focused Kickstarter, it makes sense that community stretch goals are its main focus. Essentially these goals are ways to actively involve people and to let them achieve different goals in order to benefit the campaign. In our case we decided to combine community stretch goals with the topic of evolution. With their actions players could

influence how the animal species in Niche evolves. Up until this point the community reached all the goals that we set up for them.



Thank you so much for checking out our Kickstarter! The animal species in Niche is very adaptive and will react to things that happen in this campaign. Influence their evolution with your actions!

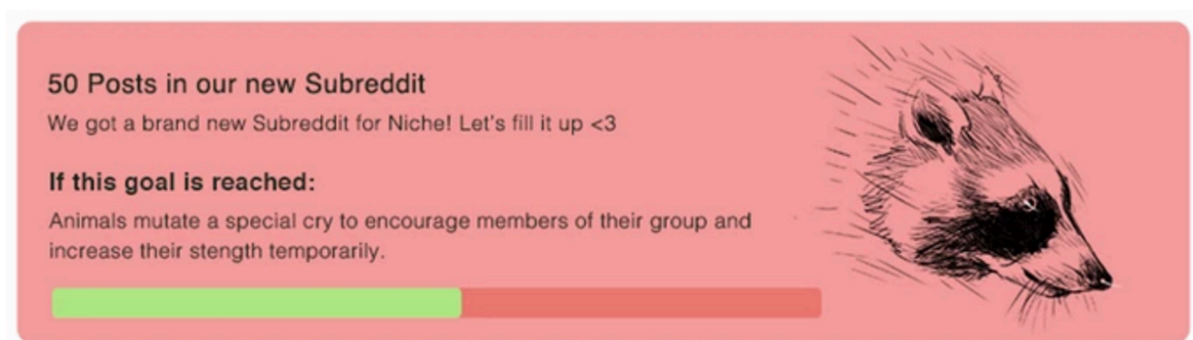


Image [41] An example community stretch goal

Thanks to these goals, people have involved themselves in different ways. Some goals were as simple as sharing a post on social media. Others required more creativity such as the challenge to come up with 100 ideas for possible genes to be implemented in the game. I expected our community to take at least one week to come up with so many ideas. It also felt like a good way to keep them busy, since the whole campaign moved faster than expected and our team needed some extra time to come up with new challenges. But I was wrong. Completing this goal took our community a mere three hours. Never underestimate the power and energy of engaged people.

Gene Nr: 18

Gene Name: Night vision

Author: Nelde

How it works: You develop the ability to see very well at night (you can see predators and food far away) but you are almost blind at day. Also the eyes glow at night and look very cool.

Discussion:

JS: Seems like this would make sense as some kind of 'nocturnal' set of traits.

Gene Nr: 19

Gene Name: Pouch born

Author: Sakuryu

How it works: Your animals gain the pouch born trait of marsupials allowing them to carry their Cubs with them to maturity to protect them from predators. (Sugar gliders, Kangaroos etc.)

Image [42] Screenshot of people suggesting new gene ideas for Niche

One of my favorites is our fan art stretch goal, where people sent in Niche related artwork they created. Not only were these artworks a great delight for our team, they also keeps fans engaged and provided us with material to further promote the Kickstarter.

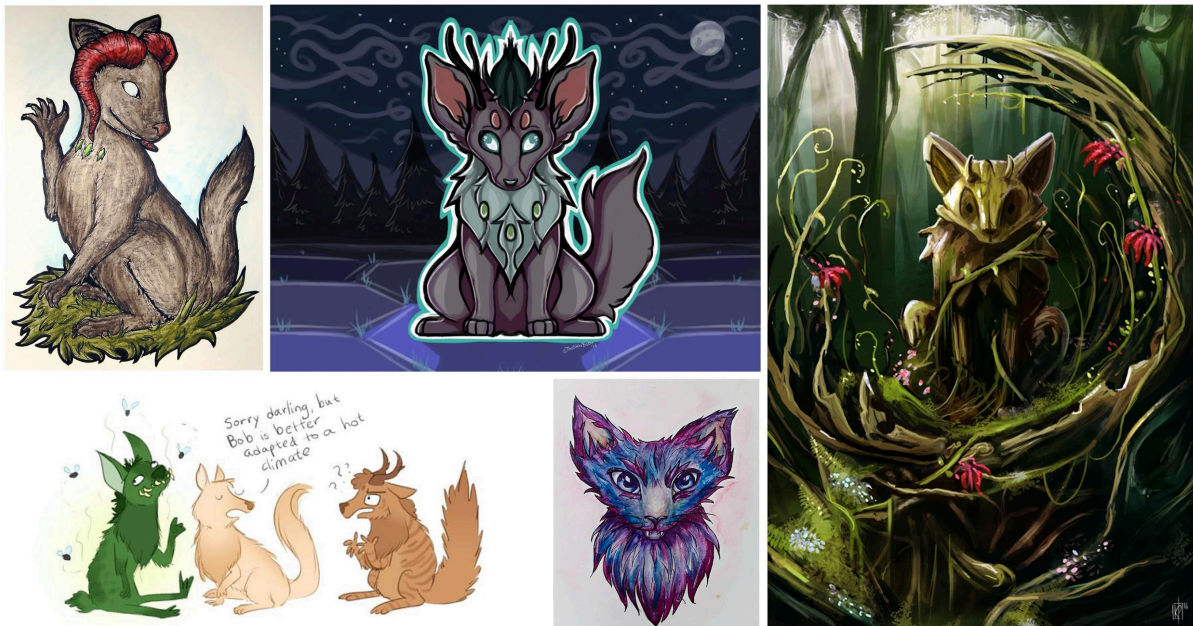


Image [43] A collection of fan art for Niche

An approach I haven't seen in any of the crowdfunding campaigns I researched are limited rewards that also have an influence on the game. I named this seemingly newly invented method "Shared Reward Goals". We offered our backers a limited reward, called "Twin Tapir". Everyone who picked this reward received an additional Early Access Key. If all these rewards were to be taken, we would add an extra feature to the game. This reward tier was sold out within the first few days, which I didn't expect since "additional game key" rewards are usually not very popular among backers.

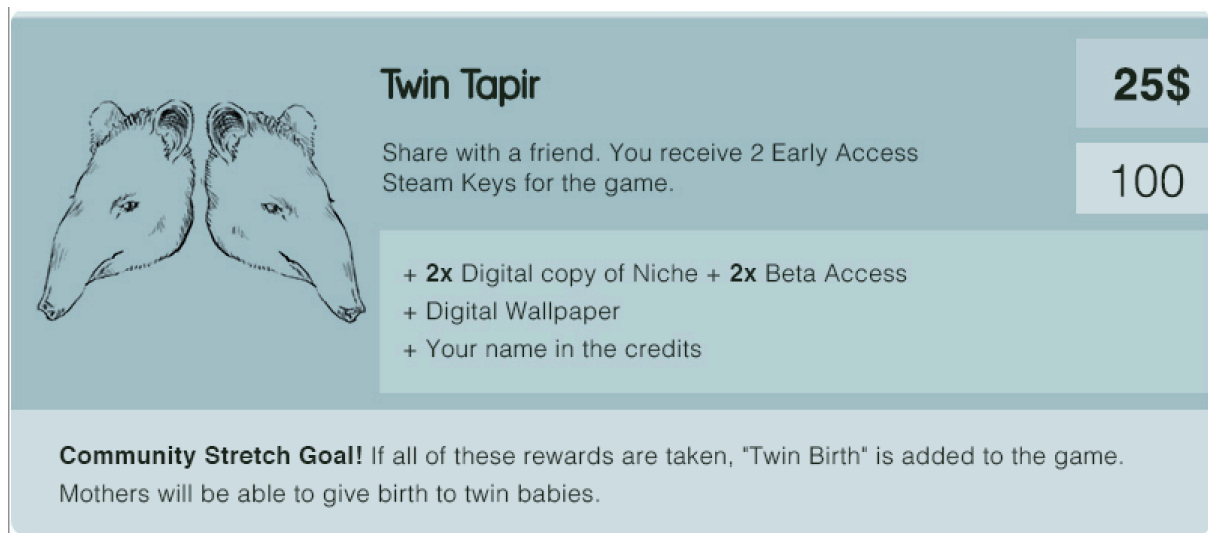


Image [44] Twin Tapir "Limited Reward Goal"

The biggest challenge we have in stock for our games community had not yet been announced by the time my master studies came to an end. They will be sent on a quest. The quest to find the one and only biggest supporter for our Kickstarter campaign.

----- But wait what are we actually going to do now? -----

The search for the benevolent whale is real! We have a kickstarter reward called “Benevolent Blue Whale” which is only available for one person. We believe that this person exists, what leaves the problem of reaching her/him.

If we manage to find this one and only biggest supporter for Niche, we will use the gained money to actually build a swimming whale island into the game.

<https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/80250451/niche-a-genetics-survival-game>

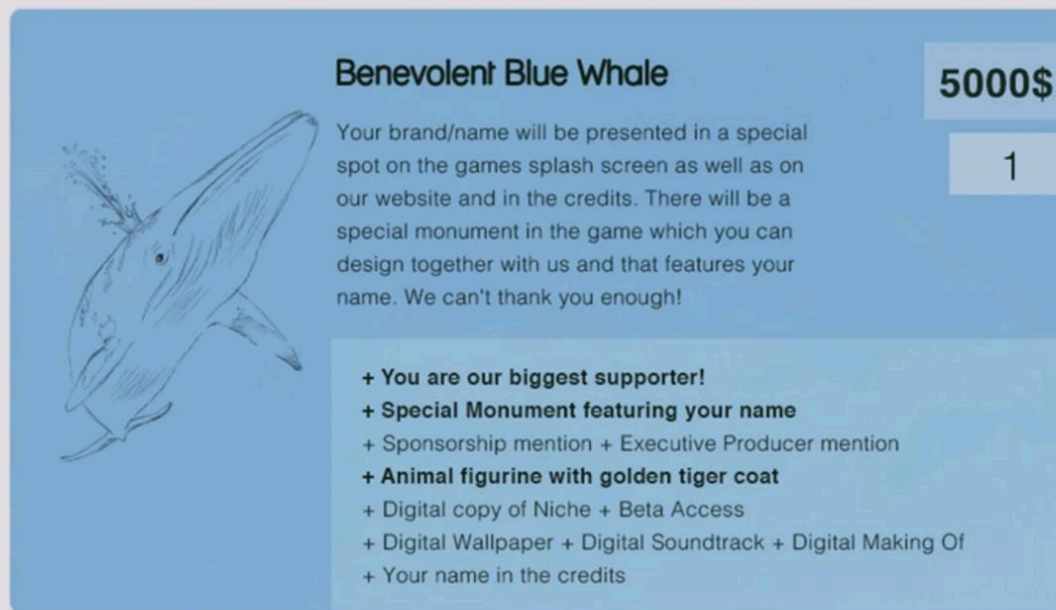


Image [45] Excerpt of the community goal “Legend of the Benevolent Whale”

7.3.5 Youtubers:

In order to reach new backers for the campaign we contacted various Youtubers. Keeping in mind that they are entertainers who try to run a community just like we are, we came up with a special challenge. If they managed to increase their group size to ten animals while playing Niche, we would provide them with free copies of the game to gift them to their viewers. This worked out great. Their viewers became more involved and celebrated their Youtubers once they were able to beat the challenge. This is exactly the feeling we wanted to create with this challenge and it benefited everyone involved.

7.3.6 Support from Playful Oasis:

Luckily, Niche was not the only nature game on Kickstarter. While this seems to be a disadvantage at first glance, it was actually highly beneficial. It is true that backers don't have an endless amount of resources to spend on game projects. There might even have been a few that decide between all available nature-related games and chose only one. But the main problem for a Kickstarter is not immediate competition, it is our good, old friend

visibility. One of the other nature games (Empires Of The Undergrowth, an anthill simulator made by Slug Disco) was also a member of Playful Oasis, our nature game collective. They had launched their campaign a few days prior to ours. We had been strategizing before their launch already, checking each other's campaign drafts and reward structures. Soon after our launch I discovered another nature related game and invited them to join our collective. They did and therefore we gained another comrade we would could ask for advice.

Previous to launching our campaign, we asked Playful Oasis members to gift us Steam Keys for their games. They were generous enough to support us and so we could add a reward tier that features additional nature games, alongside Niche.

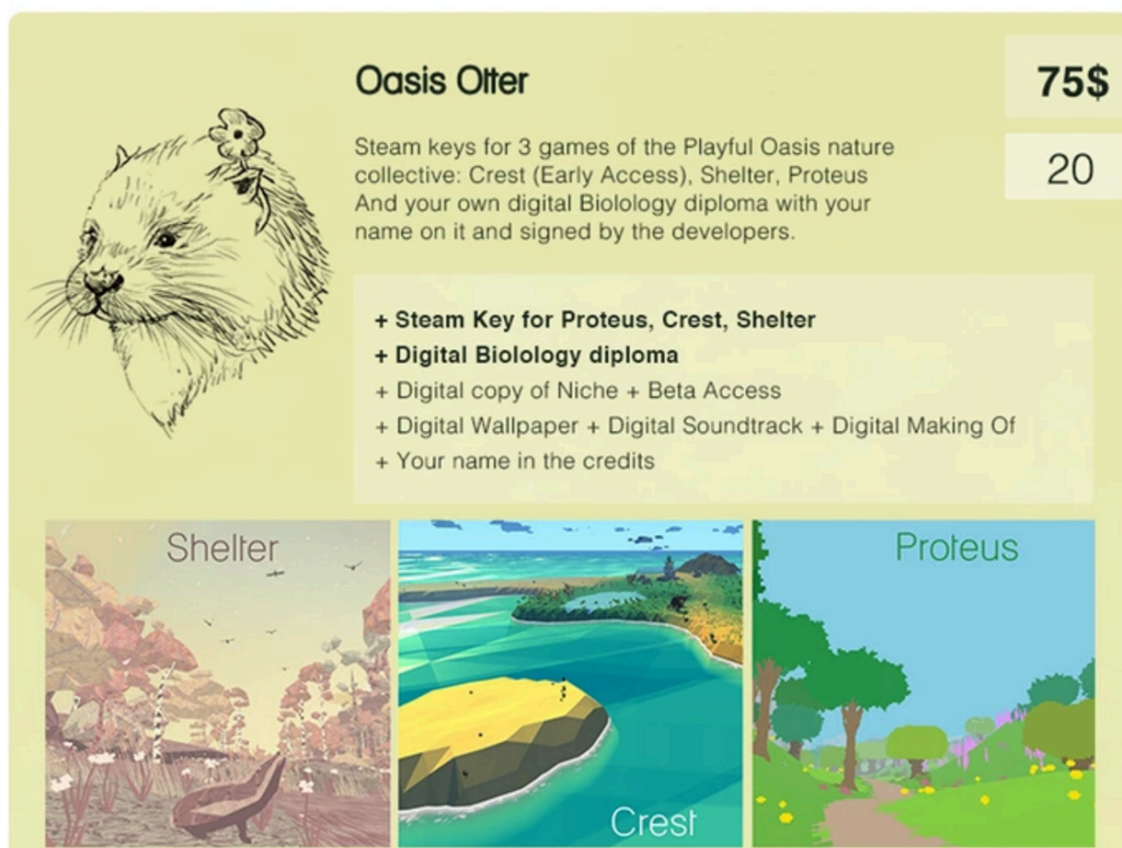


Image [46] The Oasis Otter reward tier of Niche's Kickstarter campaign

7.3.7 Reflection:

Since the campaign is not yet finished, I can't draw a final conclusion. But so far, I have been surprised at how well our approach worked. No major news sites or very big Youtubers have talked about us and still we managed to reach a lot of people. This resulted in reaching our funding goal after three days and doubling the income until the middle of the campaign. I did not run a final evaluation or survey yet, but it most of our backers seem to have heard of the campaign thanks to word of mouth. Our community has put a big effort into making the campaign known and I am very thankful for that.

PS: The finished story can be [found here](#).

Funding progress

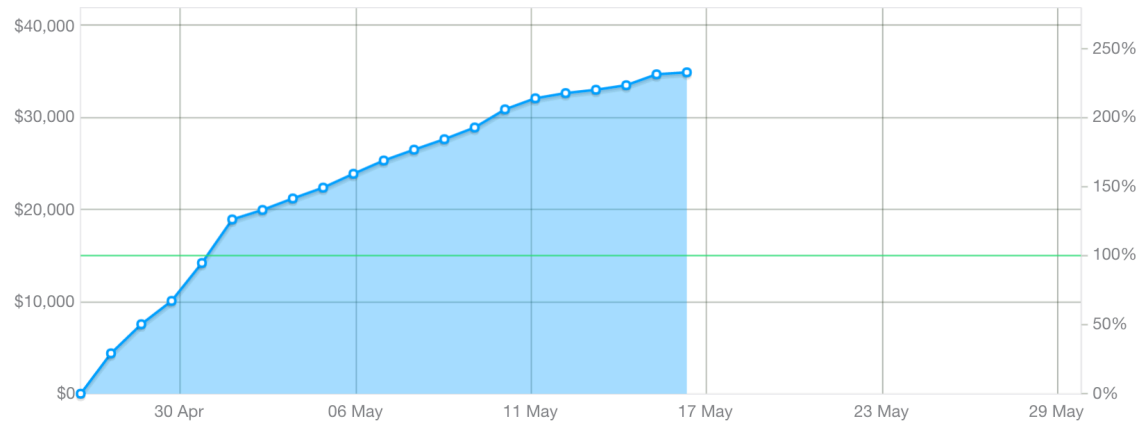


Figure [15] Funding progress of the Niche Kickstarter

8 - Conclusion & Reflexion

8.1 Thesis summary

This thesis explains the concept of community building for indie game developers. It describes the benefits and drawbacks that come with building up a fanbase for games. Based on the experience gathered through working with two game studios over the course of a year, the EEE (Evaluate, Establish, Engage) approach was formed. Multiple experiments have been conducted and documented using the two game project of the studios (Niche and Tower Offense) for the purpose of this thesis. The newly defined EEE approach can now be used by game developers to better understand the modules needed to build and maintain their own community for their projects.

8.2 Assertions evaluation

Research question:

How can indie game developers build up and maintain a community for their game?

Evaluation:

Reflecting and analyzing the building of Niche's and Tower Offense's fan base resulted in discovering a pattern. This pattern has been further analyzed and turned into the EEE (Evaluate, Establish, Engage) approach for community building. To better understand the structure and needs of a fan base, it is important to analyze existing communities and understand their elements and purpose. Chapter 5 - *"Evaluating: Analyze your development community (Example Switzerland)"* offers a sample on how this can be accomplished.

After a solid understanding has been formed, the real work begins. Chapter 6 - *"Establishing: Building a community around your game"* provides inputs on where to find people to build a fanbase and how to make them care about your idea.

Finally chapter 7 - *"Engaging: Setting the community into action to achieve a goal"* documents examples and experiments of what a group of loyal fans can achieve.

Assertions 1:

Community building and a good connection to your audience are an essential factor for success in the market.

Evaluation:

When starting to write this thesis I expected both researched games (Niche and Tower Offense) to be available for purchase before my master ends. Unfortunately, neither of the projects reached this goal which leaves this assumption open. Indicators that this assumption might come true can be drawn from the Greenlight and Kickstarter experiments which are evaluated in chapter 7 - *"Engaging: Setting the community into action to achieve a goal"*.

Assertions 2:

Forming an indie game collective increases the visibility of its members.

Evaluation:

A year has passed since I founded “Playful Oasis” - a collective of game developers who are working on nature/biology related games. During that year, the collective has grown from one to 26 members. Developers from all over the world are now part of the collective and exchange advice and feedback on a daily basis. The initial intent of founding Playful Oasis was to cross-promote each other's games and build a website that can be used as a shared portfolio. The collective has become much more than that. People became friends and truly support each other. The members have been asked whether or not Playful Oasis increased their visibility. Their feedback states that the collective has indeed helped them to connect with more people and increased their visibility.

Assertions 3:

Building a community around your game/studio is highly profitable for activities like Greenlight and Kickstarter.

Evaluation:

This assumption has proven to be true. Both experiments (Steam Greenlight and Kickstarter) have shown to be exceptionally successful thanks to the help of the previously formed communities of the games. Both Greenlight and Kickstarter have turned out to be great ways to increase both size and connection of the game communities. Details about this subject can be found in chapter 7 - “*Engaging: Setting the community into action to achieve a goal*”.

8.3 Conclusion

Let us have a look at this project's goal, stated at the beginning again and evaluate whether it has been achieved or not.

After finishing this thesis I want to be able to call myself an indie game community building expert. I want to understand and learn as many strategies and approaches as possible. It is very important for me to support the two studios Capsule Games and Team Niche I'm helping out with marketing and community management in a professional and efficient way. I hope to boost their reach with the gained knowledge during the course of writing this thesis. This thesis will be turned into a guide for aspiring indie game developers with a focus on game developers from Switzerland.

While I would not call myself an expert yet, I certainly improved my abilities. During the first half year of writing this thesis it felt like I did not learn anything. Mastering a soft skill is a strange feeling, because it is very hard to measure how well you are doing. When learning to program, I had a lot of moments during which it became obvious that I had made progress. This was not the case for improving my skills in community building. At some point I even started to doubt myself. Only when I started to run the experiments with Niche and Tower Offense in the second half of my master, I began to realize that I had increased my knowledge. Suddenly, results became clearly visible in the form of Greenlight yes votes and

backing from Kickstarter. Seeing the experiments go well filled me with great joy and renewed my self confidence as a community manager. Taking on this new role to support the two game studios was a great joy and I will certainly continue to execute this role alongside my passion as a game designer.

There were countless mistakes I made when helping the teams to increase their reach. I missed chances, miscalculated and used the wrong timing among other mistakes. Still, both teams benefited from the presence of a community manager. Both games did not have a community when I started writing this thesis. The conducted experiments helped to find interested people and bring them together.

8.4 Outlook

I am finishing my master with this thesis, but thanks to the Niche Kickstarter experiment I can keep working on my game. This year full of trying out new things has shown me what I want to be: An indie game developer, making and marketing my own games alongside my teammates. In the next few months this thesis will be turned into a guide to support other indie developers. So many people have supported me while writing this thesis. I cannot thank you all enough. Thank you for helping me find what I truly want to be.

9 - Thank you

René Bauer, Robbert van Rooden, Dr. Mela Kocher, Dr. Beat Suter,
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10 - Appendix

10.1 List of references

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10.2 Ludography

Stardew Valley	Developer: Concerned Ape Year of Publication: 2016 Platform: Desktop
Nuclear Throne	Developer: Vlambeer Year of Publication: 2015 Platform: Desktop
Darkest Dungeon	Developer: Red Hook Games Year of Publication: 2015 Platform: Desktop
TowerFall	Developer: Matt Thorson Year of Publication: 2014 Platform: Desktop
Awesomenauts	Developer: Ronimo Games Year of Publication: 2012 Platform: Desktop
Don't Starve	Developer: Klei Entertainment Year of Publication: 2013 Platform: Desktop
Spore	Developer: Maxis Year of Publication: 2008 Platform: Desktop
Creatures	Developer: Steve Grand Year of Publication: 1996 Platform: Desktop

10.3 List of illustrations

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Image 1	Self-owned image	
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