# Surviving the Jump from AAA to Indie

# Introduction

- Starting out for the first time is hard

- Devs coming from AAA:
  - Already know how to create great games
  - But there's a ton of non-dev stuff to learn
    - Business, marketing, community, publishing, …

- We'll share advice on getting started

# Speakers



@anuchallenger

Shawn Alexander Allen

*Being Independent*



@mikebithell
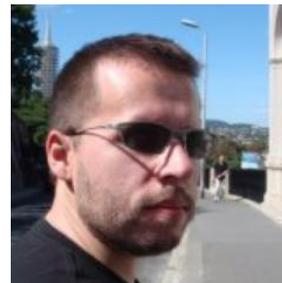
Mike Bithell

*Community*



@cliffski

Cliff Harris

*Business*



@plushapo

Borut Pfeifer

*Publishers*



@rzubek

Robert Zubek

*Multiplatform*

# Surviving the Jump from AAA to Indie
## Going from a team to being independent

**Shawn Alexander Allen (@anuchallenger)**

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE®
MOSCONE CENTER · SAN FRANCISCO, CA
MARCH 2-6, 2015 · EXPO: MARCH 4-6, 2015

# #BLACKLIVESMATTER

#BLACKLIVESMATTER

# Through the eyes of
# A G(ame developer)

# #BLACKLIVESMATTER

# Me against the world

# #BLACKLIVESMATTER

# How Shane Bettenhausen saved my life

# #BLACKLIVESMATTER

# 36" Chain

# #BLACKLIVESMATTER

# Going back to [trailers]

## #BLACKLIVESMATTER

# Can it Be All so Simple

# #BLACKLIVESMATTER

# Surviving the Jump from AAA to Indie
### Building a community

## Mike Bithell (@mikebithell)

# Cogs don't think about community



Zoe Persico

- 'If I make a good game, it'll get a community'.. like, 10% true.
- Nothing I learned as a Lead Designer prepared me for this part of my job.

# Admit you have fans

- Might be because I'm British: I hate assuming I have 'fans'.
- Conservative estimates of audience and fandom seem like a good idea, but hold back progress.
- Fans should be considered, but never taken for granted.



kytri.tumblr.com

# Give something away, right now

- Everyone who bought steam before it came to Steam got a free key for that version.
- Random acts of kindness seem to pay off with unintended consequences. I got to the front page of Reddit for a day because of a jokey message

**Richard Stanton**
@RichStanton

Mike Bithell is a lovely, lovely man.

↩ Reply   ⇄ Retweet   ★ Favorite   ••• More

📶 O2-UK  3G        22:36          🔒↻ 🔋

◁ Inbox (2)        1 of 50        ▲  ▼

I'd like to personally thank you for being an early adopter, for buying Thomas at a stage, well, let's be honest, you had no reason to believe it would be any good.

And you told people! You went out and spread the word. And because of you, and people like you, yesterday I was able to launch the game on Steam. You rock. And I'd like to say thank you by handing you a steam key...

KB485-D2BGR-WJG3C

Enjoy. There are achievements, and controller support. And if you do enjoy, instead of giving me any more of your hard earned money, go find another little game and give it a chance. People like you keep us going.

# You don't need to be in control



- 'Owning' the conversation is a lot of work for not much win.
- Heavy handed engagement is a great way to patronize and seem weird. Being indie means not being corporate. Let your human show.

# Look after individuals

- At the start, with a small audience, be friendly, supportive and fast to respond. These players stick around, I still chat to some of these early folk.

- If things go bigger, this gets harder. I still work to ensure everyone who has paid me gets the best possible experience in exchange, but can't reply to everything.
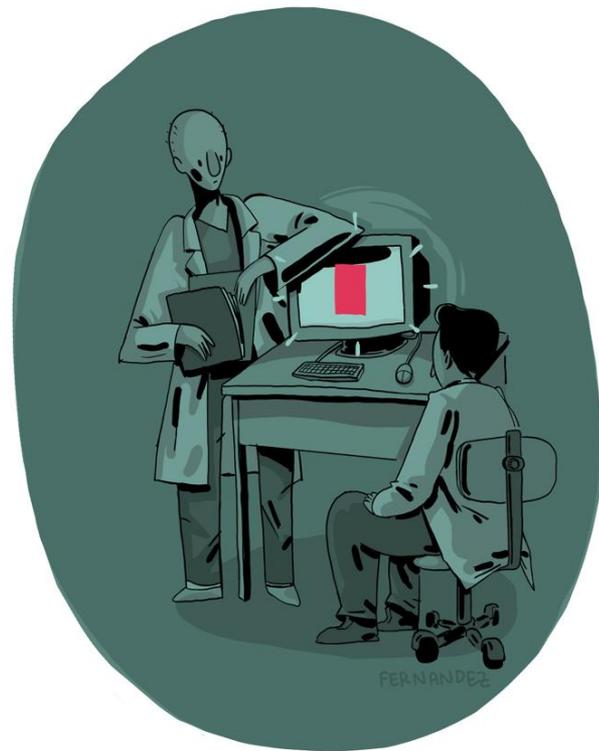


THOMAS WAS ALONE

# It's OK to be a 'name'



- My game came out nearly 3 years ago now. We're still talking about it because I'm visible.
- Visibility makes my games sell better than they would otherwise. I get to make more.
- There's a dark side, you're painting a target on your chest.
- Fake owners are an approach I've seen used brilliantly, won't out them here.

# Bad games don't have fans

(well, most don't)

**Surviving the Jump from AAA to Indie**
Business and Marketing

**Cliff Harris (@cliffski)**
Positech Games

# Who is this guy?

- Ex Lionhead, Ex-Elixir
- The 'Democracy' games
- Gratuitous Space Battles
- www.cliffski.com
- That guy who argues a lot
- The indie advertising dude
- The british guy who lives in a field.

# Emotional stuff

- If you are not slightly panicked you are in denial.
- Nobody to share the blame when it goes wrong (or even talk to)
- Friends & relatives think you are mad
- You have quit a perfectly good job to embrace the unknown.
- You NEED to meet others in your position
- You may find it hard to identify with others
- Failure a real possibility. Maybe even likely.

# Practical stuff...

- You need a dedicated work space.
- You need to work proper, serious hours.
- Get rescuetime, or an hourglass.
- Get a decent office chair. Yes really.
- You need an accountant. Sorry...deal with it.
- You need a biz bank account. They suck.
- Exercise / vision break. ARCHERY!!!!!!!

# Biz stuff you need to know

- Reading about biz/marketing is NOT *beneath you*, it's part of your job now.
- Tip: Pretend you are playing a tycoon game named after your company.
- You need licenses for software now
- You need decent hardware too.
- In the US, you need health insurance…
- And you need (eventually) a pension too…
- Know the corporation tax rates/income tax/exchange rates…
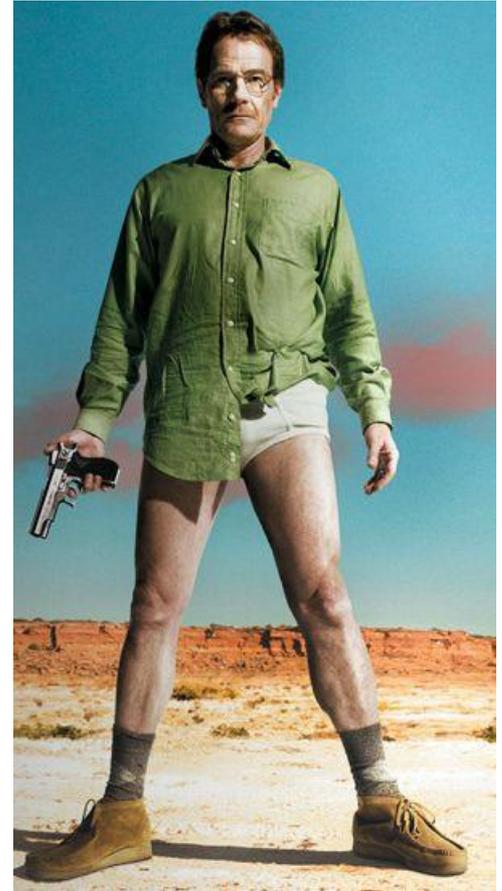
# A UK example

- Your game grosses $100,000
- You probably get around $70,000
- Maybe that's $60k profit?
- In local currency that is £37.5k
- After corp tax that is roughly £30k
- After income tax very roughly £27k.
- Just about average UK income
- …Assumes a game released every year making $100k
- Realistically you need $150k/year/employee. Or 'lots'.

# Your budget is wrong, and frankly laughable

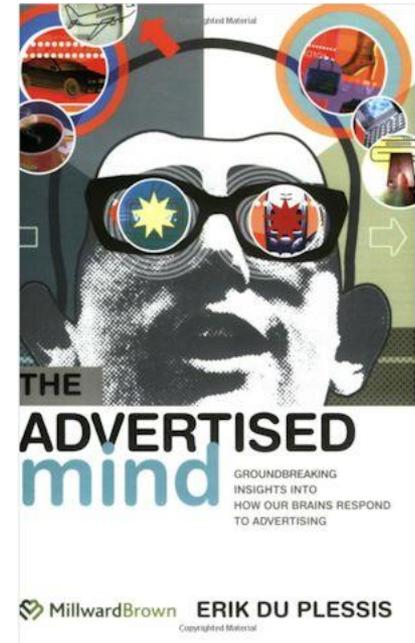Most budgets I read are like a comedy sketch.
- No allowance for health/pensions/software licensing
- Assumes everyone lives on noodles, despite being skilled software engineers.
- Everyone will work in coffee shops on laptops. (Coffee not included).
- Zero advertising or external PR costs
- Zero conference costs, no badges/flyers/t-shirts/flights/hotel…
- Compare with a tradesperson…plumber…etc
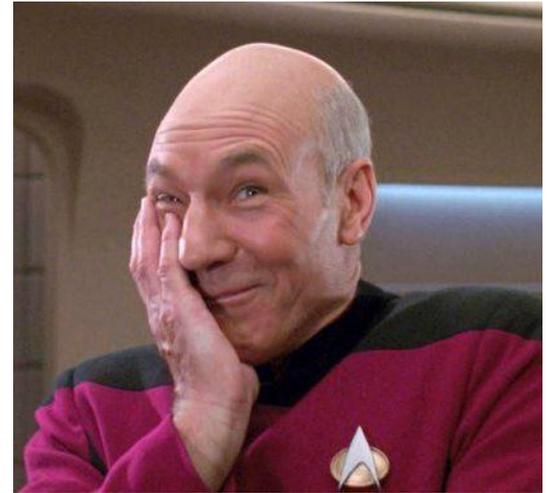
# Advertising is great

- Yes it works. Plz don't argue. Go read 'the advertised mind'
- Yes it works for indie games too.
- If you rush it, may as well burn the cash.
- If people come to you, HAGGLE!.
- If your game is <$20, you are screwed. Stop reading this bit.
- No, you can't track it 100%.
- You can't track GDC's use either, but here you all are…

THE ADVERTISED mind

GROUNDBREAKING INSIGHTS INTO HOW OUR BRAINS RESPOND TO ADVERTISING

MillwardBrown  ERIK DU PLESSIS

# …honestly it really is…

- It's not selling out or not indie to spend $000 on adverts.
- Stupid myth that 'indies just use word of mouth'.
- I've spent > $160,000 on google adwords alone.
- My adwords lifetime CPC is $0.14 CPM is $0.32
- The only GUARANTEED coverage you ever get is ads.
- I wouldn't launch a PC game with <$40k for launch ads.
- (One-man band, so scale this * your employee count)

# Surviving the Jump from AAA to Indie
Dealing with Publishers

## Borut Pfeifer (@plushapo)

# #1 Rule for Dealing with Publishers

1. Don't.

# Types of Publishers

Platform owners



Promotional

# Platform owners

What you get – on their platform

What they want – exclusivity, highlight platform features

Exclusivity:
- Never give exclusivity you can't afford - use sliding windows
- Minimum exclusivity time <= porting time
- Maximum exclusivity for sales that >= boat money

New platforms - don't under estimate tech **and** <u>non-tech</u> work

# Promotional-only publishers

Worthless contracts - % royalties for unclear promotion

What does it really reward?

What can they commit to in writing?

Advertising costs versus PR (shows, review campaign)

Consider spending caps, approval

Be extremely skeptical of promotional ability

# Negotiation

Overly simple advice - Be able to walk away

Find what they want – what is your leverage?

Be creative in finding terms that meet both your needs

Never chase money

Legal departments – lather, rinse, repeat

# The Future (Or, the Only Constant is Change)

More promotional-only publishers

Successful ones will build a *label*

Youtube LP'ers are now becoming publishers

# Parting Advice

Cost of dealing w/ publishers vs. learning on your own

Can you scope down to afford development?

You need to learn how to sell your game anyway

Look for **demonstrable value** from publishers

# Surviving the Jump from AAA to Indie
### Multiplatform PC + mobile

## Robert Zubek (@rzubek)
SomaSim

# Intro

- Big question: for your first indie game, what to do about mobile?

- Background:
  - About me: EA, Three Rings, Zynga. Then decided to go indie.
  - Released the game "1849" this time last year
  - PC + mobile, "premium" title
  - Simultaneous xplatform launch (good idea? let's see…)

# Indie Xplatform in 2015

- I wouldn't do a mobile-only indie title
  - "Premium" too risky (what if you don't get featured?)
  - F2P too expensive (buying ads etc.)

- Xplatform FTW
- New best practice: launch on PC first, then mobile
  - Getting the word out is easier
  - Let buzz from PC spill over to mobile
  - Caveat: give yourself time to adapt UI/UX

# PC + mobile

- Larger audiences, diversified rev sources
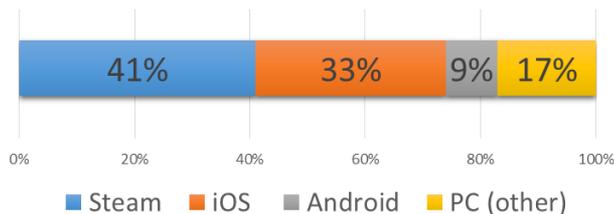


- Can you make it work with your design?

# PC + mobile

- On the other hand… very different types of players

PC:
- enthusiasts
- dedicated
- react poorly to
  "mobile ports"





Mobile:
- casual
- occasional
- hard to reach

- Different expectations of UI/UX
- They value different things - need <u>two</u> product stories

# Rev model?

- Premium is easy if you're just starting out
  - Compatible with PC xplatform
  - But it's hard to scale revs up to larger studios
  - Lifetime revs capped at $000K? ($MM is <u>really uncommon</u>)
  - Per Cliff's slides – can you run a studio on that budget?

- F2P requires (lots of) people and (lots of) money

- Ads not worth it ($0.01-0.10 per thousand impressions)

# Picking a price point

(or: prices on mobile are terrible and there's nothing you or I can do about it)



PC $29.99      PC $9.99      PC $9.99      PC $14.99

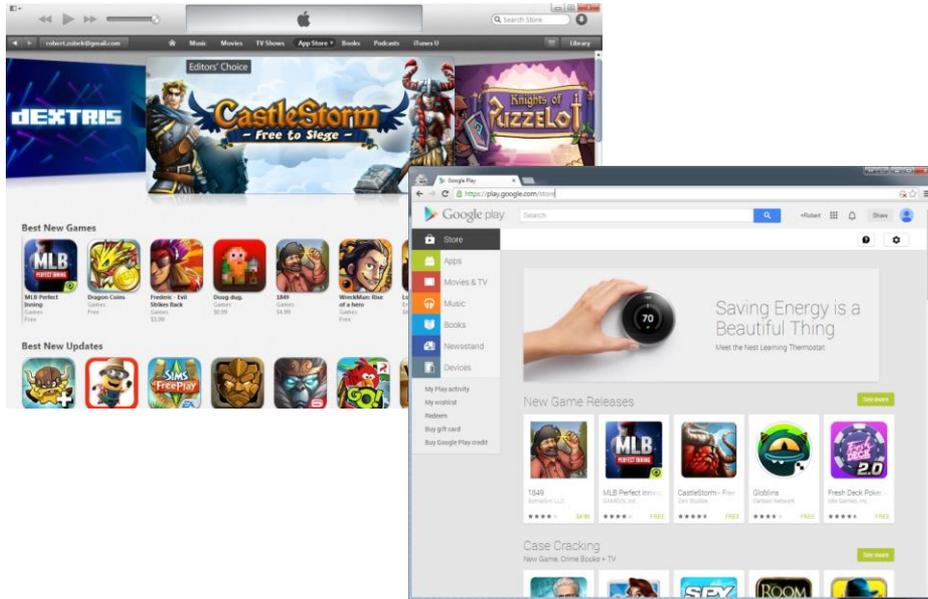iOS $9.99      iOS $9.99      iOS $4.99      iOS $4.99

# Getting the word out, xplatform

- Marketing a PC game is familiar to most game devs
  - Press, youtubers, etc.

- Marketing a premium mobile game, on the other hand…
  - <u>Store featuring and word-of-mouth are the biggest drivers</u>
  - Ads don't work (for premium)
  - Review sites not as influential as on the PC side

# Mobile: getting featured



1. Have a quality game! ☺

2. Don't wait to be discovered. Find ways to reach each platform's BD group.

3. Implement platform appropriate UI conventions and social APIs (high scores, achievements, etc)

# Thank You!

# Q&A


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