GAMEMAKER BLOG

5 Steps to Sell Your Games

For many of us, the games we create with GameMaker are for fun, or a learning experience. But there are some people who wish to take that extra step and turn their games into profitable creations. Although much information exists on the GMC forums and distribution platforms, it is spread out and often hard to find. This article can be considered a compilation of much useful advice offered by other GM users as well as game developers in general.

Let's be honest here. On one hand, adding a set of requirements to how you create your game can stifle fun and creativity. On the other hand, if you really wish to make money from your creation, you can't afford to just throw together a game and 'hope people like it'. Although you could probably skip these steps and still create a successful game, you increase your chances of success by following the tried and tested strategies of others.

And so, without further ado, here are five key pieces of advice worth considering, presented in a rough order of when you would use them in the development process:

1) Select a Target Audience

Focusing on and catering to one group only will speed up your development time and free you from the worries of what elements are appropriate for your game. So, of what exactly does this step consist? To keep it short and simple:

a)   Decide what game you want to make. This includes the genre of game, purpose/theme, and the resulting levels of adult content. For each of these elements, decide to whom they are likely to appeal.

b)   Using this information, decide what subgroup of people will most likely enjoy your game. This could be as specific as "eight to ten year old boys with an interest in racing cars" to as general as "everyone over the age of twelve". Most importantly, you will want to know the age restraints.

c)   Add constraints to your workflow to keep yourself on track. Define what the game will and will not be.

One way to do this is to create a small table for your game:

Factor Type		Age Limitations	Gender Limitations
Genre	Side-scrolling adventure	>4 (complex motor control required)	None
Purpose / Theme	'Rescue the princess'	None	None
Levels of Adult Content	None	None	None
Final anticipated audience:		>4 year olds	Either gender

So the above game is best suited to >4 year olds. Unfortunately, we haven't been able to narrow down our audience.

Another example:

Factor Type		Age Limitations	Gender Limitations
Genre	3D RPG	>4 (complex motor control required)	None
Purpose / Theme	Betrayal, revenge	None	More targeted towards boys
Levels of Adult Content	Moderate violence	>8	None
Final anticipated audience:		>8 year olds	Either gender, more aimed towards boys

So the above game is best suited to >8 year old boys. It's important to remember these are generalizations, and the numbers are estimated.

One more example:

Factor Type		Age Limitations	Gender Limitations
Genre	FPS	>8 (dexterity)	None
Purpose / Theme	Domination	None	Targeted towards boys
Levels of Adult Content	Graphic violence, bad language	>16, but >12 realistically	None
Final anticipated audience:		>16 year olds	Boys

Note that above the game is aimed towards >16 year olds even though 12 year olds are likely to play it. Once you find your target market, aim the game completely at them. Don't worry about others; should they play the game, that's an added bonus, but you don't want to end up tailoring your game to meet their needs. That's exactly what we are trying to avoid: having to make a game that absolutely everyone will enjoy.

This step, so simple to follow through and implement, is left out by many a developer. You might ask "why bother?" Not only does this free you from worrying about having to appeal to absolutely everyone, it allows you to make some valuable predictions. Once you've established the market, you can find out what is likely to appeal to them. The whole point of this is to enable you to decide whether a certain feature of your game will be appreciated or not. If not, exclude the feature entirely.

2) Increase Your Efficiency

Specifically, learn to use your tools. If you plan on creating anything worth parting money for, you would strongly be advised to:

a)   **Ensure you are fully utilizing GMS**. If you ever find yourself doing something rather tedious, take a moment to find out whether there is a quicker way to approach your goal. For example, you might be using the GMS sprite editor to add fade animations, and find that changing the alpha variable with draw_sprite_ext()achieves the same end in a much more controlled manner. Other examples including using the inbuilt parenting system for objects, and the surface system for allowing users to draw on the screen.

b)   **Master GML**. A continuation of the above point, this includes not only learning how to utilize the language in your game, but how to do it so you will save time. GMS's Drag & Drop interface has been wonderfully designed; however it will eventually become a limiting factor in your output if you do not move over to using code. For example, using an array instead of many individual variables is much easier to handle. Similarly, creating nested if statements with the D&D interface is both time consuming and hard to debug, whilst several lines of code will achieve the purpose in a much more readable fashion.

c)   **Use free resources**. Sprites, extensions, and (for me, quite importantly) sounds can all be found on the internet for free. If you find something that does the job well, use it. Not only will you save time, but you will potentially have a higher quality product at the end. Note: be very careful about the licensing. If someone wants you to contact them before you incorporate their resources in your commercial game, do so. If they want credit in your game, give it. And most importantly (from a legal perspective), if they wish for royalties, give them. Not only are these polite manners, they can save you from legal trouble later on.

d)   **Consider royalty-free resources**. Royalty-free resources are easier to manage; you pay a one off fee, and use what you have bought to your heart's content. Sites exist for music, sound effects, stock photography, but also for vector graphics.

e)   **Hone in your graphical skills**. It would be fair to say that a large portion of game design is graphically related. Although free resources are useful, and there is a wealth of resources for sale, you do not wish to limit yourself just to what you can find or what you are willing to buy. Expertise in GIMP and Inkscape is invaluable, or (if you are fortunate enough to own them) in Photoshop and Illustrator. Or, if you're a fan of pixel art and are going down that route then a fantastic bit of software is Aesprite and is only $14.99 (at the time of writing).

3) Get Exposure

This is an area that can consist of a person's entire career. Once you've made a good start on your game, there's no harm in building interest about your game. In fact, it's very beneficial. Some ways to do this (without parting with large amounts of money in advertising) include:

- Creating your own website to update on the progress of your game
- Create a Twitter account as an easy way to engage with potential players and other developers that may be willing to help you gain interest in your creations
- Asking blogs (like this one!) to feature your upcoming game
- Creating and releasing a demo for your game
- Adding social networking features that allow others to spread news of your game without difficulty

Having your game featured in several blogs will be enough to get people heading to your website. Combined with a fun demo, and an easy way for people to promote your game (e.g. adding a Facebook 'Like' button on the site or a "Tweet about this" button), you should be able to whet people's appetites.

A few points to remember:

- Don't approach a blog with mere speculation about what you are creating or are about to create, and expect them to write an article. Show them hard evidence; photos and videos that (ideally) they can add to their post.
- Unless your demo is absolutely remarkable, you may want to consider waiting until just before the release of your game before releasing it. You do not want to leave others waiting for the full version of your game and eventually giving up on checking.
- As a drastic measure, you may consider adding your game to a Humble Bundle. For the uninitiated, the Humble Bundle is a sale of games at drastically reduced prices (because the buyer decides how much they will pay!). The upside is that many people flock to these bundles, supporting charity (and you), and most importantly, building a name for yourself. A good game sold through a Humble Bundle will reach many, vastly increasing the number of people who know about you, and thus increasing the number of potential buyers for your next game.

4) Choose a Distribution Model

At this point you've finished your game and want to get it out in the open. Or, you've finished the demo but don't know where to offer it. Below is a short summary of some distribution methods you should consider.

Computer Based

- Steam Greenlight. In terms of distribution methods, the metaphorical elephant in the room would have to be Steam Greenlight. For many indie developers, they view Greenlight as their ticket to a large customer base (over 125 million as of the writing of this article). And, for the most part, they are correct. However, the key limitation of Greenlight is that your game must be popular enough to be voted in – this makes your website and social media interactions all the more important.
- Green Man Gaming. Although much smaller than Steam in terms of users (launched in 2010 - although user number still in the millions), Green Man Gaming has its own publishing arm dedicated to smaller devs to help get their games published. The also have an early access area should you choose to release in beta.
- **Others** (GOG.com, Windows Store, the Apple iTunes store, and Google Play)

It would be wise to come up with a combination. For example:

1) Distribute your game on Green Man Gaming or Steam Greenlight to build a fan base

2) Accept feedback and criticism, iron out bugs, and perfect your game

3) When you feel confident enough, add other distributions into the mix

One area not yet discussed is the idea of using your own platform. Unless your gameplay is so revolutionary that it is guaranteed to be popular, this is not a feasible idea. On one hand, it's harder to promote a game without the support of a platform, but on the other hand, you don't lose a slice of your profits to a platform if you don't use one. One example of a developer who successfully followed this path is Notch with Minecraft.

Phone and tablet Based

If you are a GM Studio user who has purchased a license to develop phone applications, you will definitely want to make use of it. The key three platforms would have to be:

- Google Play & the Android Marketplace
- Apple's iTunes Store
- The Windows Marketplace

Here is a very brief comparison (percentages courtesy of IDC):

Platform	Development Fee	% of Smartphones	% of Tablets
Android	One off fee of $25	87.6	66.2
iOS	$99/year	11.7	22.4
Windows	$99/year	0.7	11.3
Other	Depends on platform		0.1

Logically, you would be best off publishing your game on both Android and iOS.

5) Reconsider Your Financial Strategy

So, you are effectively done. Now you just need to add a price tag. But before you assume that a low price is the best, it would be worth your while to consider the following approaches:

- **Free**. If this is your first game, giving it away for free gives yourself a chance at scoring a large customer base, many of which would not have paid for your game. Leaving out ads and item purchases also ensures the game will not lose any of its 'fun factor' - hopefully, users will see your game as a gem they scored for free. If so, they'll be more likely to buy a sequel.
- **Free but Ad-supported**. A good choice for those who want to re-coup money without limiting themselves to paying customers.
- **Free with item purchases**. Specifically with phone and tablet games, this can be a very effective strategy. However, there is no substitution for making your game entertaining - if it is free but not fun, you will not reap the benefits of your in-game purchases.

If the above approaches do not appeal to you, then yes, a lower price tag is a good incentive for potential buyers. Although it may be hard to set a $2 price tag on a game that is so far your greatest development achievement, the truth is that you will make more from many small purchases than a few big ones. This is the principal behind almost every phone app as well as the Humble Bundle.

Conclusion

Now that you've got the information you need, go out there and make a game! Feel free to drop an email to admin@gamemakerblog.com - whether it's more advice, constructive criticism, or a critical point this article missed entirely. And, as always, success stories are appreciated, and a good motivator for all developers!