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Building an engaged online community with zero budget

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Indie Games: The Movie is a documentary film about the video games industry, made in 2012, by Canadian filmmakers James Swirsky and Lisanne Pajot. It was one of the first films to be funded through Kickstarter and after its release it went on to win the World Cinema Documentary Editing Award at the 2012 Sundance Film Festival. It was also named 'Best Documentary' by the Utah Film Critics Association and nominated for a Canadian Screen Award in the category of 'Best Feature Documentary'.

From a marketing perspective, what is particularly interesting about the project was how the filmmakers created a buzz around the project, both to help with the initial Kickstarter funding request and subsequently to drive cinema distribution and paid downloads. There was no budget for marketing or advertising and awareness of the film was entirely via word of mouth. The process of making and distributing the film has been catalogued by the pair on the film's website. It is partly from this blog post series that, with permission, the content for this case study has been taken.

The two filmmakers are clear that this is very much a film of its time: "This film could not have been made and released the way it was five years ago, heck, not even 2-3 years ago. The film and us are hugely indebted to the technology, tools and evolving audience attitudes that made all this possible." They put the success of the film down to two factors, leveraging tools and technology and building early, active audience engagement. It has become a trend in the technology and gaming sectors to document the journey of creating something, being open and transparent about each stage of the process can help to draw your potential audience into your story. If you can take people with you on your journey, it is more likely they will engage with the final product, whether that is an app, a live performance, an art project, or a film.   James and Lisanne describe it this way:
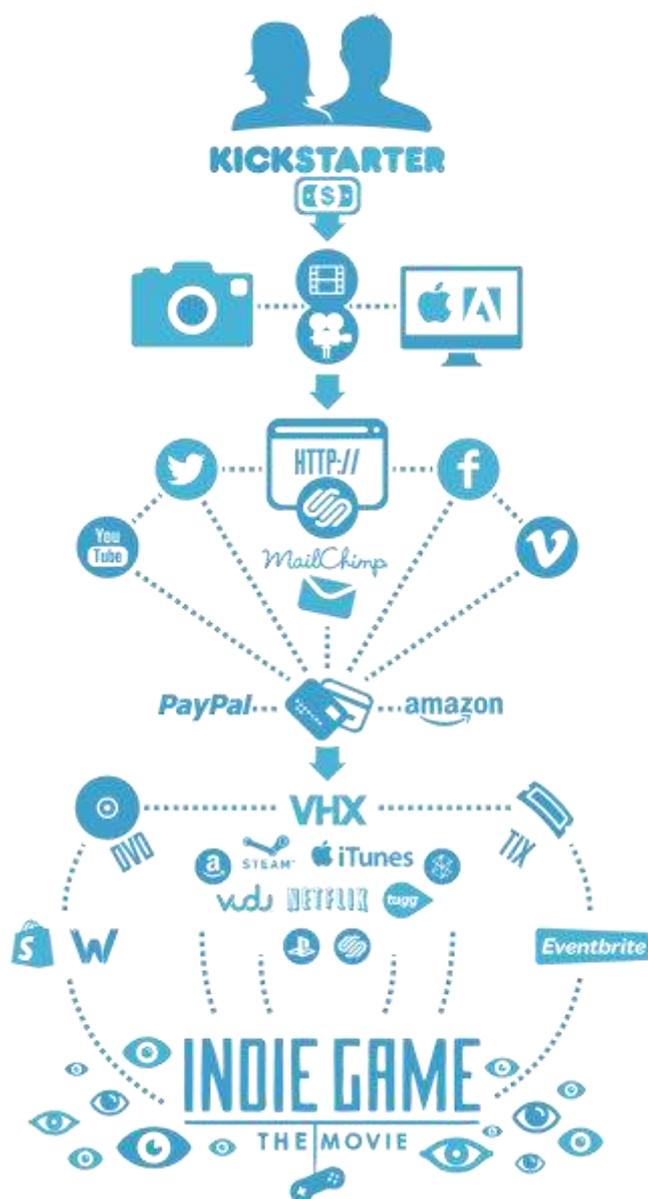
> *"In researching the film, we kept on seeing fantastic examples, within independent gaming, of an intriguing kind of creative entrepreneurialism taking place. Basically, developers were making cool things and being very open throughout the entire process. They would keep detailed development blogs, publish open Betas and fund themselves through pre-orders. Over time, these creators would build themselves a dedicated audience that was deeply invested in the project in more ways then just financial. (Some great examples, at that time Overgrowth, World of Goo & now of course, Minecraft.) It was a development process that to us meant, 'Thinking Like A Fan'. Giving your audience the type of content and engagement that you'd like to see from the games/film/music/stuff you're into. It's a simple and effective way of building an audience for your work."*

While that sounds fine in principle it does of course require a lot of work to get traction for an unknown film, being produced by two relatively unknown filmmakers. And while social media can be brilliant for building profile and nurturing an online community, it takes a considerable amount of effort to make it work. This is something acknowledged by James and Lisanne who admit that they poured almost more time into raising awareness of the project and film than they did making the film itself. Using the 'Think Like A Fan' idea they made sure that they catalogued and shared every step in the process of producing the film. Having a Twitter account and a Facebook page for the project is fine but you need content to pour into them. To this end, over the course of the production, they produced and published (usually from hotel rooms on the road) 88 minutes of extra video content. While none of this was used in the final film, they guessed correctly that it would be of interest to the core audience. In addition they maintained an active production blog, posting over 150 entries in 70 weeks of production.

Once people started to respond, James and Lisanne made the decision to try and reply to every email, Facebook post and tweet about the film they received, guessing, rightly that when people feel acknowledged and appreciated, their loyalty grows. On their blog they phrase it this way, "It feels like we literally built the audience for IGTM one email, one tweet at a time. Looking back at it, it was probably an insane amount of work for two people." The statistics demonstrating just how much they did, over the 33 months of production and distribution, are as follows:

- 10,286 IGTM-related emails were written or replied to
- 13,783 Tweets were sent off from @indiegamemovie
- 182 blog posts were made on IndieGameTheMovie.com
- 88 minutes of extra video web content was published prior to release, resulting in over 1.3 million views.
- 51 Updates were given to Kickstarter Backers
- 2,784 emails were support/fan emails personally responded to after the first release.
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Ultimately all the hard work paid off as when the film was launched they already had a community who were actively engaged. By the time, *Indie Game: The Movie* premiered at the Sundance Film Festival the film had raised over $150,000 in pre-orders, received over 3,000+ detailed screening requests and accumulated a fan base/mailing list of 30,000

people. The social media activity continues as they promote a special edition of the film together with associated merchandise. In terms of advice for anyone else who wants to build an online community from scratch, James and Lisanne had this to say:

"Audience communication was huge part our process. We were able to grow the community and reach more people because we kept the conversation going. Aside from sharing through the blog and Twitter, one of the best things we did, was put out a lot of video. Video is powerful. It's our currency as filmmakers. For us, those videos were mostly short films. Stories and extras that weren't part of the film itself but that were produced in the same tone and theme. Along with those extras, we also put out behind the scenes pieces and sneak peeks of the actual film. We promoted each video through social media, but we also shared them with the other websites and blogs that also interested in the same subject matter. Each video then became new, embeddable content for those sites and helped expose the film to a wider audience. So, try building the development of shorts and videos into your production. It can help you the filmmaker as a creative exercise and shows your future audience your voice and what you can do."