IGDA Game Submission Guide

Advice, Perspectives and Suggestions for Submitting your Game Concept to Publishers

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www.igda.org/biz

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The IGDA Business Committee

The International Game Developers Association is the independent, non-profit association established by game developers to foster the creation of a worldwide game development community. The IGDA's mission is to build a community of game developers that leverages the expertise of our members for the betterment of the industry and the development of the art form.

The IGDA Business Committee's mandate is to empower the development community with business knowledge and in the process allow developers to make better games.

The goals of the Business Committee are as follows:

- Enable developers to build stronger, more successful companies
- Provide knowledge and business support resources
- Increase the perception of game development as a credible business and raise the profile of game developers as viable companies
- Improve the publisher/developer relationship
- Improve the retailer/developer relationship

Additional information on the IGDA and the IGDA Business Committee can be found at

http://www.igda.org/biz/

http://www.igda.org/committees/business.php

http://www.igda.org/committees/business_members.php

Introduction

Every game publisher receives as many as 500 game concepts per year to consider for publishing. Unfortunately, the majority of these submissions are rejected for a variety of reasons, including inadequate submission materials.

Many new – and veteran – game developers are unaware of publishers' requirements for submitting games. This Game Submission Guide aims to demystify the process by offering advice in various areas including general information about submitting games, legal survival tips, and how best to improve your chances of acceptance.

There is considerable waste in the game submission process; developers may sink their time, money, passion and various other resources into developing their game concept beyond the point of relevance, as well as creating and submitting materials that are not helpful in the review process. Conversely, publishers spend considerable time reviewing, evaluating and managing incomplete or poorly developed proposals.

We offer this Guide in an effort to save *everybody* some time and money. We hope it provides valuable advice, credible perspective and worthy suggestions for submitting your title to publishers.

If you have feedback or ideas for future versions of the Guide, or other comments on the project, send them by email to biz@igda.org, subject "Game Submission Guide".

Warren Currell
Sherpa Games

Process and Psychology of the Pitch

Overall, the game development business is very competitive. There are hundreds of game developers around the globe. Each team has its own ambitions and dreams of making the next *Sims* or *Grand Theft Auto*.

The purpose of this section is not to discourage you, but to give a realistic impression of your chances for success in obtaining a publishing deal, and to provide some general advice to increase your odds. The Publisher Survey in this document shows us that only 4% of game concepts that independent developers submit to publishers are actually published. That is a 96% rejection rate!

Additionally, this section will offer best practices on getting your submission noticed: from what to submit to how you should dress for a presentation.

Why do I have to pitch anyway?

The definition of a "pitch" can be very broad. Historically, a pitch has entailed anything from a one-page write-up of the game concept to the more detailed submission that we commonly see today. The pitch that publishers actually want to see is defined later in this Guide.

The purpose of the pitch is to accurately express your game concept, demonstrate the professionalism of your development team, and inject the publisher with your excitement and enthusiasm for your game title. The publisher should leave with a sense of confidence that your team can deliver the title on time and within budget.

When preparing your pitch, try and get inside the mind of the publisher. If you were going to invest millions in a game title, why would you invest it with your group, for your project? What can you demonstrate that will instill confidence that you can deliver a *good, fun* game on time, within budget? How much risk is involved with your group? What can you present that will mitigate the perceived risk of investing in your project?

Thinking about these questions from the perspective of a publisher will help you prepare your submission.

Submission process

Once you have created your pitch, the general process for submitting a concept to a publisher is as follows:

- Identify the correct individual or department at the publisher to whom you will submit your title. Most publishers list the contact information on their websites; you can also call their main corporate number (not their consumer service number) and ask to be directed to the correct person. Typically you are looking to contact a person in "game submissions" or "third party product acquisitions."
- Once you have contacted the correct person, be sure to identify the platform and the genre of your title, as some publishers will be able to immediately indicate whether there is any interest from their organization in that type of game. For example: if your game is for the PC, a growing number of publishers will refuse it without evaluation (regardless of the quality) due to their non-involvement in PC publishing. As a general rule of thumb, however, most publishers want to see every game on the market – so prepare as many as 40 concept submission packages for distribution.
- When attempting to contact publishers, remember that persistence does eventually pay off – if only to secure a firm "no." Frontline developer contacts at publishers are very busy, and it's not uncommon for them to not return phone calls for days. (Unfortunately, some publisher representatives will not return calls, no matter how many messages you leave.)
- Some publishers will require you to execute a submission agreement or confidentiality agreement. Such a document secures confidentiality between the parties, and acknowledges that the publisher both creates and receives dozens of game concepts every week - and any similarity between your idea and another game concept that they might be considering (or developing internally) is strictly coincidental. Confidentiality agreements are discussed in greater detail later in the Guide.

- Some publishers will allow you to visit and pitch your game concept in person; other publishers prefer that you send in the material via courier. If you can afford it, and have the opportunity, we recommend the in-person presentation - as these presentations are usually more effective in expressing your enthusiasm and excitement about the game.

In-person presentation advice

This should go without saying, but when you meet with publishers to pitch your title, try and present yourself and your team in a professional manner. Wear clean clothes, take a shower that day, shave, and remember to brush your teeth. You don't want to be remembered as "that guy with bad breath"! Wearing a suit and tie is not necessary, but ripped jeans and an old t-shirt are not appropriate.

How long will this take?

Depending on how aggressive you are, and how much focus you can bring to bear on the process, effectively pitching the majority of publishers can take anywhere from 4 to 16 weeks. We recommend that you keep a checklist, or spreadsheet, of every contact with every publisher and monitor it on a regular basis. Dealing with publishers that have numerous individuals evaluating your project at various locations can get very confusing, and you don't want to lose track of your progress.

Is E3 or GDC the best place to meet publishers and make a presentation?

Obviously industry events such as GDC (www.gdconf.com) and E3 (www.e3expo.com) provide an opportunity to meet numerous publishers within a short time period. If you are attending, and can arrange it, do your best to set up presentations with publishers. Practice and rehearse your pitch, limiting it to a 20-minute presentation, as most publishers will have back-to-back meetings all day for the duration of the event.

The psychology behind the process

Remember that really popular "hot" person of the opposite sex in school? The one that was so good-looking that he/she had the choice of anyone to date? The one that could

afford to be rude or to ignore you, or to not even acknowledge your presence when you walked by? Publishers are a lot like that “hot” person. They only engage their time and resources with what they consider attractive opportunities. So if you represent yourself and your studio as anything other than a competent, creative and attractive opportunity from which both parties will benefit, then you have about the same chance as you had with that ” hot” person if you had approached with bad body odor and food between your teeth. And in truth, it doesn’t matter to the publisher if they just turned down the “absolutely best game ever designed” because, like “hot” people, another great concept is always coming down the pipe.

Remember that publishers literally have hundreds of properties to choose from – and they might only pick two or three for the whole year. Your submission needs to be complete and professional. Keep this all in the perspective of business, and remember not to take your forthcoming rejections personally. Based on our survey results, the odds are against you, but they are not zero. Also keep in mind that rejection is not failure if you learn from it, and any constructive criticism that you receive can go a long way in improving your pitch for the next publisher.

Contents of the Pitch

Preparing your company's game submission documents is the first step in introducing your company and its game(s) to potential publishers. The importance of this first step cannot be overstated. These documents are just as important as the concept you're building in code. The package should contain a balanced assortment of documents that are tailored to the various evaluating entities within the publisher's organization.

It is important to remember that the publisher does not always have the time you would want them to spend to properly review and understand your title. Take special care with the clarity and presentation style of your documents in order to ensure that your message is clearly understood in a *short period of time* by *widely varying individuals*. Later, if the publisher shows interest, you will have the opportunity to expound upon all elements of the game in more detail.

The following descriptions are meant as a baseline for creating your own submission documents. Every company has its own style, and that style should shine through. We do, however, offer suggestions based on what we have found to be most successful, both from personal experience and the Publisher Survey later in this Guide.

Submission package contents

- Sell Sheet
- Game Demo
- Game AVI
- Game Design Overview
- Company Prospectus
- Gameplay Storyboards
- PowerPoint Presentation
- Technical Design Overview
- Competitive Analysis

Sell sheet

What is it?

A sell sheet is a one-page document that is written for the benefit of the sales and marketing teams that will be looking at your product. It is a “short-attention-span” document that clearly states what your game is, as well as the target demographic. With this document, a product marketing manager should be able to understand the relative merits of your title and how it fits in with their company’s goals and lineup. As game development progresses, a good developer sell sheet can become the foundation of the sell sheet the publisher creates to sell a game into the retail channel.

Why should I bother with it?

You may ask: if the publisher’s sales and marketing teams ultimately create this document, why should I bother? First, your goal is to make as many people within the publisher’s organization as aware as possible of your game, and a sell-sheet format is easy to circulate and does not involve a significant time investment to review. Secondly, doing this work for the publisher demonstrates that you understand their needs and market needs for your title, and that you have made the effort to use a format and the publisher can relate to.

Sell sheet contents

Sell sheets typically contain the following information.

- Game title/logo centered at the top of the page
- Line item, Genre
- Line item, Number of players
- Line item, Platform
- Line item, Ship date
- Line item, Developer
- Line item, Publisher (put TBD)
- Brief game description (no more than two paragraphs)

- Bulleted game features. Make sure they are one-liners. Refer to ads of competitive products to fully understand the lingo of marketing.
- Game art or screenshots
- Copyright and other legal lines at the bottom of the page

Game demo (prototype, playable, tech demo)

What is it?

Playable demos can come in many different flavors depending on where you are in your development cycle. Some demos focus on a working game engine; others demonstrate the concept's look and feel; others demonstrate tuned examples of final gameplay. Publishers may request differing proof points, but when in doubt, it is most important to hone the play mechanic and allow the gameplay to really shine through. Above all, the demo must represent the best of your company's abilities. Also keep in mind that it should be easy for the intended user to pick up and play without a lengthy "readme" file or manual.

Why should I bother with it?

A playable is the best way to convince a publisher that you are onto something big. No matter how glowingly your document describes the concept, it is the playable that will help them believe you can pull it off. Moreover, 77% of respondents to the Publisher Survey indicated a playable demo is essential to a submission package. However, if circumstances prevent you from creating a playable, the next best thing is good documentation and a good AVI.

Game demo contents

- Solid game level/area
- Quality artwork and audio
- Easy to pick up and play
- Encompass as much of the play style as you can

Game AVI

What is it?

Game AVIs are “promotional videos” that display the characters and play style of your game. They are mostly computer-animated sequences similar to cutscenes, and are most effective if created in-engine, though some companies use storyboards, music and narration to create reasonably effective AVIs. They are reviewed throughout the different departments within the publisher. Game AVIs end up in product review meetings, and can be sent to international sales and marketing groups to obtain worldwide sales projections.

Why should I bother with it?

In the absence of a game demo, an AVI is the next best thing. It is helpful to include an AVI with the game demo; if the publisher is short on time in an internal presentation, or equipment is not working correctly, the AVI can be a quick and easy substitute. The publisher can also send the AVI to anyone with a computer for additional opinions.

Game AVI contents

- Mockups of gameplay and introductory sequences
- Show off all key gameplay features
- Simulate game features that you have yet to implement
- Music, voiceovers, sound effects
- Model presentation on movie promotional clips
- They should show your best side!

Game design overview

What is it?

The game design overview is the game design document minus detail-overload. This is a “medium-attention-span” document. It should contain all the game’s key features in a trimmed-down fashion that does not wear out the reader. This document is not meant as a production reference; rather, it is meant to provide details of all of the game features to the publisher.

Why should I bother with it?

The publisher will want to know that you have a game design document— a plan in place to complete your game. You could just deliver your game design document and milestone schedule, but more often than not the publisher will just skim this information and miss the point. Provide the game design overview to the publisher with the explanation that a full design document is available upon request. In practice, completed game design documents are expected as part of the first milestone; implementing publisher feedback on a game design overview is less costly and time-consuming than rewriting a completed game design document.

Game design overview contents

- Title page, with company logo, game logo, date, "confidential" designation
- Table of contents
- "Purpose of document" description, with target audience, game genre, platform and release date
- Game story
- Gameplay mechanics
- Game flow
- Level design objectives
- Game controls
- Game interface
- Game cutscene description
- Art style
- Music style
- Multiplayer options description
- Online features description
- Game images section
- Preliminary milestone schedule
- List of team members for this specific project with a brief description of their roles

Company prospectus

What is it?

This is a short document that describes who you are, the management behind the organization, and what your company and team members have done in the past.

Why should I bother with it?

You wouldn't apply for a job without a resume. Publishers need to know your company's track record in order to judge whether your team has the necessary skills and experience to pull off the title.

Company prospectus contents

A. Title Page

- With company logo
- Document name
- Date
- Contact name, address, and phone number

B. About Your Company

This section should be brief. Describe your location (pictures help), management structure, company culture, company history and founding date.

Explain the abilities of your company

Following are some suggestions for topics; be sure to modify to accent your team's strengths.

- Ability to design and create unique characters and games
- Extraordinary technical ability
- Experienced management
- Financially Stable

- Current development hardware onsite
- Past target platforms
- “In the last X years we have shipped X titles on time and on budget”

C. The next section of the document should be the “in-depth description” of your company. This is where you cover key considerations in full detail. Don’t go overboard!

Ideas for headings of this section are:

- Design talent on staff
- Technological advantages relative to other developers
- Proficiency with middleware
- Detailed description of core technology (in engineer-speak)
- Description of proprietary level-editors or world-builders (in engineer-speak)

D. The next section should explain your product strategy (for current as well as future titles) and your conversion/port strategy (if you have one).

E. The next section should be a list of titles that your company has completed as a group. If you’re a new group, make sure to list each team member’s title credits as part of the staff list in section G. The list should contain the product name, platform, publisher, and year it shipped. You might want to also include sales data if it’s available and beneficial. Be sure to quote worldwide sales figures.

F. The next section should be a list of titles currently in development with publishers. This list should contain the game names and platforms. Rather than disclose a confidential project that has not been announced, list “confidential project for confidential publisher.” That helps the publisher evaluate the competing demands on your resources.

G. The final section of the document should contain biographies of the company's key employees. This section can contain a list of everyone on the team if necessary, with titles as well as past experience.

REMEMBER:

- Always list your company's name, document title and document date in the footer of each page. Prospectuses can lose pages.
- A "confidential" designation should also be added.
- Use images from your current game as well as previous games to break up a monotony of text.

Gameplay storyboards

What is it?

Storyboards offer a strong visual selling point for your game. While AVIs are the visual medium most preferred by publishers after the game demo, storyboards may work best for people who rely on images over a design overview to convey a concept. They can also supplement your game demo.

Why should I bother with it?

Once again, it is a matter of making it easier for a publisher to understand your concept. Absent an AVI or game demo, storyboards can also make it easier for the publisher representative to explain your title internally.

Gameplay storyboard contents

- Title page or slate with company name, contact information, legal lines, and game title or logo
- A visual walkthrough of a game level or section that shows overall game play
- Brief text explaining the action in the images
- Play control instructions or diagrams
- Character introductions or personality profiles

PowerPoint presentation

What is it?

The PowerPoint presentation can be a tool for the publisher representative to present your game to other internal reviewers in your absence. It should primarily be used during your in-person presentations to the publisher.

Why should I bother with it?

It may be helpful to provide the publisher with messaging that represents your game in the best light without you presenting in person. More than likely, the publisher representative will create his own materials for internal product review meetings, but if you have covered the necessary elements and have time for a PowerPoint, you will have left the meeting with most of the publisher representative's work done for him.

PowerPoint presentation contents

- Title page with logo and characters (include studio logo)
- "Game overview" page with short game description, title, genre, age range, release date, number of players
- "Key strengths" page with "what is new", "why the market needs it," and three key selling points
- "Universe" page with core spirit of game universe, scenario, art style, characters
- "Gameplay" page with player's actions and control, rules, player objectives, challenge
- "Game structure" page with game flow, game modes (i.e. multiplayer), length and duration, replay value
- "Game risks" page. Prepare to mitigate any risk you list!
- "Competitors" page, with an explanation as to why your team and your concept are better
- Conceptual images

Technical design overview

What is it?

This is much like the game design overview, in that it's a "medium-attention-span" version of your Technical Design Document. This document describes how your technology works, as well as its origin and development path. It should be directed at an audience that's familiar with game technology but may not be engineers; describe features clearly, using as little jargon as possible, and wait for your publisher's technical evaluator to ask for programmer-level explanations.

Why should I bother with it?

This document helps the publisher understand the relative merits of the tools you're using, your strategy for building a quality game, and the technical risks inherent in your decisions.

Technical design overview contents

- Title page with company logo, contact information, legal, and engine name (if any)
- General overview
- Engine description with highlights of key proprietary technology elements
- Development tools description, focusing on pipeline efficiencies
- Online solution overview (if any)
- Hardware used (both development hardware and target platform hardware)
- History of code base
- Middleware used, if any

Competitive analysis

What is it?

This document covers titles you're competing against that can be considered similar in nature to your title. It shows that you understand the competition and your concept's relative position in the market, and that you're willing to help educate the publisher on similarities and differences. Generally, a competitive analysis will give a brief description

of each competitive game within your genre, with sales figures, review rankings (see www.gamerankings.com), and short commentary on pros and cons for each title.

Why should I bother with it?

It demonstrates that you have considered the risks facing the publisher if they choose to enter the genre with your game. Publishers like to know that you understand what others have done to succeed in the marketplace, not to mention reasons for failures.

Competitive analysis contents

- Title page with company logo, contact information and legal lines
- Summary of your concept's market position and main reason for success
- Pro/con descriptions of competitive titles, with review ratings and sales data if you can get them

Pre-Submission Legal Considerations

The publishers to whom you submit your concept are business people and, as with your game documentation and demo, they expect you to be professional and competent in basic legal and business areas. So, take the time to get your legal matters in order before you submit. It will improve your credibility with publishers, and will help convince them that if they invest in your project, you have not only the technical ability and artistic talent but also the business acumen and maturity to deliver.

There are several additional reasons why it is important to have the legal aspects of your project in order *before* you submit to a publisher. First, you are in the process of marketing the joint work of your development team to a publisher. You need to have the complete ownership (or in some cases, the appropriate license) secured before you pitch your game. Quite simply, you cannot sell what you don't own. If you have not taken care of these matters before you meet with a publisher, issues may arise during the negotiations (or, even worse, later in the project after you have signed) that can kill the project and have a very detrimental impact on your long-term prospects in the industry.

Game asset ownership

Ask yourself these questions:

- *Who owns the assets in the game?*
- *Are there any problems with the assets that would prevent the game from being taken to market?*

The majority of the assets of the game are subject to copyright law. Under current copyright law, the person who creates the "work" (for example, the code, artwork, music or model) owns that work, unless the person created the "work" while being paid as an employee of another. In that case the "work" is considered "work for hire," which the employer owns. The complication with many self-funded team efforts and copyright law is that no one is employed by anyone. People contribute their individual "work" for the

collective good in the hope that the game will get funded. So, legally each team member owns what he or she contributes to the project, and the developer "company" owns nothing.

The danger, of course, is that an alienated initial team member can create a huge problem for the rest of the team if these ownership issues are not resolved by defining ownership of the assets. Similar problems can arise from unlicensed third party assets. So, make sure that everyone contributing to the project has signed a "work for hire" agreement, or otherwise assigned or licensed their work to the developer company *before* you meet with the publisher. This can usually be taken care of with a well-written "Employee/Consultant Agreement."

Game developer ownership

The other legal questions that should be asked before you submit are:

- *What legal entity will the publisher deal with?*
- *Who on the team gets what if the team succeeds?*

Forming a company is essential to your ability to deal with a publisher, because it is the company that will own the assets we discussed above, and that will have the right to sell or license them to the publisher. And it is the company that will be party to the contract with the publisher, if you are fortunate enough to get one. So, you need to form the company before you submit.

Take the time to form an appropriate corporation, limited liability company or partnership before you start trying to sell your game. These legal entities (Corporations, Limited Liability Corporations and Partnerships) provide many useful advantages; some regarding taxes and expensing of capital investment, others such as health insurance and even retirement benefits. But the most important benefit to a corporate structure is the ability to assign specific ownership interests in customized proportionate amounts.

Make sure that everyone on your team is clear about what ownership interest, if any, they have in the company. The best time to resolve ownership issues regarding the company is when it is being formed. Then everyone on the team knows where they stand and there can be no misunderstandings.

Games are by their very nature collaborative works involving the combined efforts of several people. Often inexperienced developers are so involved in making their game that they do not take the time to ensure that everyone on the development team has a clear understanding of his or her own ownership position in the project. This can result in huge problems for the team later.

So, remember, game development is the best business on earth. You get to do what you love and get paid for it -- a real blessing. But it *is* a business and needs to be treated as such. If you have to, learn this stuff and do it yourself. If you can, hire a professional.

The Non-Disclosure Agreement

A Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA), sometimes referred to as a Confidentiality Agreement, is a document that gives one party the right to sue the other party if information disclosed under the agreement is subsequently disclosed by that other party to an unauthorized third party. Publishers typically have their own standard-form mutual NDAs that bind both the publisher and the developer. These are not generally negotiable. Publishers are not generally inclined to sign NDAs drafted by developers.

While protecting a developer's intellectual property interest in a game is important, focusing heavily on having an NDA in place too early in the publishing process is likely counterproductive for the following reasons: (i) legal protection may be available to the developer even without an NDA; (ii) NDAs are notoriously difficult to enforce; and (iii) an NDA is only the first small step on the road to having a title published.

Other legal protection may be available. Even without a signed NDA, a developer may have protection for game-related information based on underlying legal principles that vary from country to country. For example, generally speaking, if information is inherently confidential and it was received in circumstances that impose an obligation of confidence, then disclosure of the information that causes damage may allow an action for breach of confidential information (notice that this cause of action arises without a signed document). A developer, then, can increase the level of protection for material submitted to a publisher by clearly marking such information as "Confidential". Moreover, the author of a game design document holds the copyright to the design document with or without a signed NDA. Therefore, in any event, unauthorized reproduction of the design document or the creation of a derivative work from the design document would be an infringement of the developer's copyright. An important point for a developer to recognize, however, is that to a large extent, NDAs and even intellectual property laws do not protect "ideas" as such. Moreover, an established publisher has

typically received so many submissions that relatively few "ideas" are actually original. Therefore, the fear that a publisher will "rip off" a developer's idea is largely unfounded. Certainly, an NDA adds another layer of protection against unauthorized disclosure. However, it is rarely the case that a developer is without a potential legal remedy – the issue is often how realistic it is to enforce a remedy (see below).

NDAs are difficult to enforce. Assuming that an NDA has been signed, it is often difficult to prove that the agreement was breached (or even who breached the agreement). Moreover, the costs of taking formal legal action against a publisher are often too high for developers. An NDA will invariably stipulate that legal disputes be brought in a certain geographic location. If the developer is not located in that geographic location, the costs associated with enforcing any rights under the NDA rise significantly.

An NDA is not a publishing deal. Since an NDA is potentially the first of many documents executed over the course of a publishing deal, care should be taken not to jeopardize the ultimate publishing deal by over-negotiating at this early stage. A developer should keep in mind that any requested changes will likely have to be approved by the publisher's legal department, and that this can add significant time to the execution of a final deal. In addition, the games industry is remarkably small, and developers that gain a reputation for being difficult to deal with may be handicapped in future publishing negotiations.

It is suggested that the appropriate time for a developer to push for the signing of an NDA is at the stage when the publisher requests the game design document or demo. Until this point, the primary objective of the developer should be to show the publisher enough about the game to give the publisher comfort that the game fits into their overall product plan.

A publishing deal is as much a matter of negotiation as any commercial arrangement. The execution of an NDA as part of a publishing deal is appropriate. However, it may

not be as soon as a developer would typically like. A developer may wish to assess the overall importance of an NDA in the context of broader deal objectives before pressing a publisher for an NDA at an early stage, or requesting revisions to the publisher's standard-form agreement.

Evaluation: What Happens After Submission

If you have succeeded in pitching one or several publishers, you have probably followed some well-considered advice from legions of developers who came before you. Presumably, you have the best-looking game demo you are capable of making, you demonstrated your core gameplay features, and kept your publisher pitch from 30 minutes to an hour in length. You answered questions well when asked, and left feeling optimistic that you had a chance. Now the waiting begins.

Following up

Before leaving your publisher pitch meeting, you should ask when you should expect a preliminary response to your pitch. This will set both your own expectations for a response as well as the publisher's expectations that you intend to follow up.

Prompt follow-up on the developer's part is of paramount importance, but over-eagerness can quickly wear on the publisher. A good guideline is to follow up with a short "thank you" email immediately after your pitch to the relevant parties, and provide any supplemental materials or electronic copies of documents that were requested during the meeting. You should avoid the temptation to ask the publisher how they liked your presentation or whether they thought the game was "good".

After the initial follow-up, if the publisher does have strong interest, he or she will likely contact you immediately to schedule follow-up meetings and possibly an onsite visit. If you did not receive an immediate response, don't despair, as longer follow-up time is often necessary after busy trade shows such as the Game Developers Conference and E3, and during the holiday season. If you do not receive a response after 7-10 days, you should contact the publisher representative who attended your pitch with no more than one email and one phone call per week to check on the status of your pitch. Additional contact beyond one call plus one email per week will be seen as bothersome

and is unlikely to help your cause. Asking specific questions such as “What is the next step in your internal evaluation process?” and “Has your evaluation team expressed any objections that I can address in the meantime?” is much more productive (and, frankly, easier for the publisher to answer truthfully) than “What are our chances?”

Who decides?

Rarely does a single person have the decision-making authority to give the final “yes” to a third party submission. Games are accepted for publishing once a number of key decision makers have researched and debated the merits of the product, and once there is consensus to move forward. However, if any individual has strong objections about a title, he or she can usually vote to kill it.

Key decision-makers

A “typical” video game publisher is organized around three operational groups. These groups are:

a. Sales and Marketing
b. Product Development (often called “Production” or “PD”)
c. Business/Legal

Publishers’ specific structures may differ, but generally the Business and Legal function is responsible for finding titles, negotiating acquisition and licensing deals, and managing product acquisition budgets. PD is responsible for producing games, either internally or externally. Marketing and sales are responsible for developing a budget (commonly called a P&L) and marketing plan that dictates the expenditures dedicated to selling and distributing the game, and for selling the game to large retail chains such as Best Buy, Wal-Mart, and Target. Within each of these groups are key decision-makers who review external developer concept submissions.

In Business and Legal, the key decision makers are usually the Vice President of Business Development or the equivalent, and the acquisitions analyst who first saw your submission. They are the first filter for product submissions; of the 300 - 500 pitches they might actually review in a year, only about 15-20 are taken seriously enough to be reviewed with other departments. The business development executives who select titles may be given a bonus based on their titles' performance in the market; these executives must choose wisely which titles have the best chance of success and lowest probability of failure.

If Business and Legal executives like your title concept, they may solicit input from a producer in product development who is familiar with the genre as well as a marketing manager with expertise in marketing this type of title. Once these people have been assigned to review the submission, they will attempt to build consensus on the title's likelihood for success.

Building consensus

Tension among the three operating groups is not uncommon. Often, the tension revolves around the tight deadlines, budget negotiations and creative pressures to produce a great game on time and on budget. As a result, these groups may have cordial but competitive relationships within a game publisher, with the resulting lack of unity causing your otherwise worthy game submission to get lost in a political battle. While the overall company political structure is beyond your control, you do have the ability to build a relationship with an internal "champion" who believes in your team and your product. Your title is most likely to get picked up if your "champion" in one (and preferably all) of these groups is able to convince the naysayers that this will be a successful and profitable product for the company.

Technical and management due diligence

After the Business and Legal staff have given their preliminary thumbs-up to a title, early technical due diligence begins. The publisher will usually ask a technology executive, such as a lead programmer from a similar title, a technical director or a CTO, to review

the game demo, technical design overview and game design overview to determine whether or not the game demo can feasibly become a game, and what “hard” issues remain to be solved. Results of this technical due diligence will be incorporated into a risk matrix, which is explained more fully below.

Frequently, technical evaluators and possibly the business development or production staff will visit your studio to see your team in action and evaluate development tools. While it’s not necessary to run around cleaning up empty boxes and soda cans, you should know that such visits disclose as much about staff morale, workplace culture, and professionalism as about the efficiency and quality of your technology. Treat any publisher visit as an in-person job interview for your entire team.

License to Kill

Assuming you are not proposing a derivative of a title already in the publisher’s library, the subject of licenses will inevitably come up. Licenses are the publisher’ safest and (at times) most cost-effective approach in launching a new title into the marketplace. Generally, publishers prefer to fit your original title into an existing franchise or license, rather than attempt to launch a new franchise and spend additional marketing dollars building a new brand. License discussions often center around three ideas:

1. Does this game demo lend itself to a marriage with a title in the publisher’s catalog, or an unused intellectual property? For example, if you pitched this title to Lucas Arts, does it have potential to make a great title set in the Star Wars universe?
2. Does this pitch lend itself to be developed as a new title within a larger licensing deal that the publisher has, for example, as part of a comic book license?
3. Does this concept lend itself to acquiring an available license to mate with the property? For example, if you show the developer the coolest rolling marble game anyone has ever seen, would it be possible to get the license to Marble Madness from the current rights holder(s)?

If the answer to #2 or #3 is yes, the Business and Legal representative and marketing manager will attempt to gather the costs and timing involved with procuring the license and factor that figure into the cost and risk matrix.

The risk matrix

While every developer dreams of creating the next genre-breaking title, innovation (and the trust necessary to achieve it), often comes from within. Independently developed titles often have the best chance for acceptance if they seek to innovate or improve upon well-established genres, rather than creating totally new classes of gameplay. The publisher will immediately need to understand what genre or genres your product will fall into. Moreover, your concept has a better chance at acceptance if it fits squarely into a genre or blends two or more in an established fashion. While a game like *Pikmin* may have been met with critical acclaim and commercial success (by Nintendo's standards), most publishers want to eliminate as much risk as possible from their third-party acquisitions. Bold experiments tend to succeed best when developed by in-house genius auteurs with a successful track record and generous budget, rather than by developers looking to successfully break in with an original title on limited resources.

Against this mindset, publishers may build a risk matrix to evaluate how your product will fare in the marketplace. It's well worth a developer's effort to prepare your own risk matrix for your title relative to your top publisher candidates. Not only will this clarify your key pitch points, but it will even help you evaluate which publisher will be the best partner for your title.

The risk matrix might include:

a. *Timing Risk*: How long will it take to get your title to market? Will it be finished for Christmas (traditionally the best selling season) or other key timeframes (e.g. a publisher's fiscal year end or quarter end)?

b. *Design and Development Risk*: What risks are there in designing a title in this genre? Is it level intensive? Art intensive? Writing intensive?

Programming (e.g. graphic engine) intensive? Have other titles in the genre succeeded? Is the genre crowded on the target platform?

c. *Technology Risk*: How much new technology is being created for the title? How familiar is the team with this technology? Does the team have experience making reusable tools or engines? How viable will the technology be after the product is completed to make sequels and derivative products? Who owns the technology at the end of the product? Does the publisher have a right to license tools or the game engine to make derivative works (thus reducing their risk on future spin-off products)?

d. *Developer/Team Risk*: Has the team worked – in particular worked together - on previous hit products, preferably at the same company, and preferably in the same genre as the current titles the team is producing? Do they have clearly defined roles and responsibilities? Is the developer stable financially and from a team staffing perspective? Does the developer have managers with proven capability to create successful products? Does the developer have a brand name that consumers and press associate with high quality?

e. *Platform Risk*: Is the game correctly matched to the target platform(s)? If multiple platforms are contemplated, will gameplay and code port easily to another platform?

f. *Localization Risk*: What will its appeal be outside of the US vs. in the US? For example, Soccer (Football) Manager games are quite popular in Europe but tend to sell poorly in the US. Similarly, extremely violent games may be banned in some countries due to censorship issues.

g. *Marketing and Marketplace Risk*: Even if the title is finished on time and is outstanding, does the publisher have the marketing expertise, bandwidth, and financial resources required to promote this type of title? If the publisher properly promotes the title, what is the competitive landscape for

similar titles expected at our near the time of release? What have similar titles sold?

g. *Cost to Complete*: What is the total budget for the title? What is the probability for budget overruns? Does the developer show good business judgment? Will the developer be able to finish the project on budget? Will they be sufficiently capitalized to finish the project if they deliver (or don't deliver!) milestones in a timely fashion?

h. *Contractual Issues*: Is the developer asking for concessions in the contract that make it prohibitively expensive (or unprofitable) for the publisher to publish this product? Does the developer seem to be reasonable in its contractual demands?

i. *Internal Risk Factors*: Does the title compete with a similar title in the publisher's lineup? Is the genre not one of the publisher's strengths? If not, does the publisher have a strategic goal of developing capabilities in this genre? Do unrelated internal corporate factors threaten the title's success?

After it has been determined that the title meets the minimum risk matrix threshold (which is different for each publisher), the Business and Legal representative will work with marketing to prepare a detailed Return on Investment (ROI) analysis which will determine the profit potential for the title. The ROI calculation is derived by presentation of the game demo and collateral materials to the publishers' domestic and international sales groups to determine reasonable sales volumes both inside and outside the US. These sales estimates, expected selling price, and proposed royalty to the developer are then plugged into an ROI spreadsheet which might look something like this:

Console Game with Retail Price of $49.99, and Retail Margin of 30%.

Units Sales and Cost of Goods Sold (COGS)	
Gross Sales (Units)	200,000
Wholesale Selling Price	$ 35.00
Gross Sales	$ 7,000,000
COGS Per Unit	$3.50
Hardware Royalty Fee Per Unit	$7.50
Less: Total COGS	$2,200,000
Gross Margin	$ 4,800,000
Less: Publisher Advance	($2,500,000)
Less: Marketing Spend	($1,000,000)
Net Profit to Publisher before Overhead	$ 1,300,000
Return on Investment	37%
Developer Advances and Royalties	
Royalty Rate to Developer	25%
Net Royalty to Developer	$ 325,000
Total Advances and Royalties paid to Developer	$2,825,000

Note that in this ROI, the publisher would usually recoup all of their costs before any monies, beyond the advance, are paid out to the developer.

Endgame

If the risk matrix looks acceptable, the ROI looks profitable, and the product looks good, your next communication from the publisher may be a short-form letter of intent, a prototype contract, or a full-fledged publishing contract. Be sure to ask about next steps, particularly how long the subsequent contracting process takes, as well as when you can get your first check if all goes well. Lack of certainty on this issue may indicate that your proposal is not as far along the acceptance chain as you believe it is.

The publisher may also contact you with the bad news that your title will not be accepted. It is reasonable to ask for the specific factors that worked against you in the publisher's evaluation process, as the publisher may be willing to revisit the project if the concerns are adequately resolved. If not—your title has joined the 96% of unpublished concepts, and it's back to the drawing board for you and your team.

Publisher Survey Results

Methodology

In February 2003, the IGDA Business Committee created a publisher survey targeting key business development people within the various publisher organizations. The web-based, by-invitation survey consisted of 10 questions and ranged on various subjects, with the primary focus being the initial game submission process. Some of the publishers also offered additional comments, which are included later in this article. Approximately 33% of the questioned publishers participated in the survey.

How competitive is it?

We have always known that the game development business is extremely competitive, and that the chances of getting a publishing deal are stacked against the developer. The results of the survey strongly reinforced this point.

Game developers submit a lot of games to the publishing community. Our survey results indicate a publisher can receive between 3 and 30 submissions per week, with an average of *approximately 10 submissions per week*, per publisher. While most respondents indicated that this was a seasonal statistic, with more games being presented to them during GDC and E3 time periods, this is approximately 500 games per year, per publisher, for evaluation! *Only 12% of games submitted actually make it past the first round* of evaluation, earning the project greater investigation and review by the publisher's evaluation group.

Consider that publishers on average only put out approximately 12 third party games each per year. This number varies greatly by publisher - anywhere as low as 3 for publishers with heavy internal resources or, in some extremes, as high as 40 externally developed games per year for those publishers who do not have internal development facilities.

Less than 4% of games submitted actually get published. This is a 96% rejection rate. When you consider that less than 10% of *published* games are considered successful, it might be an understatement that the game development business is extremely competitive.

What do publishers consider important in the submission?

Publishers were asked to select the degree of importance for possible elements of an *initial* game submission. They were asked to rate each element between *"Extremely important!"* and *"Don't bother"*.

Extremely Important

The following elements of the pitch were rated as “extremely important”; most respondents would not accept a submission without them.

- Game Demo (ranked the highest priority for respondents, with over 77% ranking this #1)
- Sell Sheet
- Company Prospectus

These three key elements allow the quickest assessment of the project’s viability and risk. Not many projects would be given a green light based only on these three elements; however, the majority of projects are rejected based on these elements alone.

Also Important

Respondents indicated that the following pitch items were considered helpful and also needed in the submission.

- Technical Design Overview
- Executed publisher NDA
- Detailed development budget
- Game AVI
- Game Design Overview

Helpful

Publishers indicated that the following elements were also helpful in the evaluation and should be included if possible.

- Publisher's custom submission document
- Competitive Analysis

Not Important/Don't Bother

Publishers indicated that these elements were not necessary to include with your initial submission.

- Gameplay Storyboards
- PowerPoint Presentation

Most publishers want to see the gameplay and your team's proven ability to deliver. The best way to demonstrate your abilities is through a game demo.

Who reviews these submissions and how much time do they spend on it?

With an average of 500 game submissions per year, game publishers typically rely on a team of evaluators to review and assess your game submission. Respondents indicated that on average three people within their organization reviewed the initial submissions. Again, this varied by publisher, with 69% of respondents indicating that two or three people review each submission. This is important to remember, as some developers can articulate their game concepts, ideas and ambition for their game much better in person, to one individual. However, *your submission materials need to be strong enough to speak for your project after you leave the meeting*.

Numerous individuals evaluate games at various publishers. Respondents indicated that *Producers and Business Development were the primary departments for reviewing your submission.* Other departments within the publishing organization that review game submissions include:

- Marketing

- Executive management
- Acquisitions team
- Finance
- Sales

The majority of respondents (62%) indicated that on average, *they spend between 30 and 60 minutes reviewing each submission*. As variance, 31% of the respondents indicated that they spend between 10 and 30 minutes reviewing each submission, and 7% indicated that they spend between 5 and 10 minutes reviewing each submission. While it probably took you months to create your game demo and submission documents, the reality of the situation is that *you have a very short period of time to make a good enough impression to get through the first round.*

What should my game demo focus on the most?

With the game demo being the most important element, respondents rated the following specific elements within the demo from most to least important.

1. Playable Demo on the Target Platform: 77% of respondents indicated that *playability on the target platform is the most important element* of the game demo. If you are pitching your game as a PS2 title, your playable demo should be playable on a PS2 debug system. Your submission will be quickly handicapped if your game is being pitched as a console title, and you do not demonstrate your game on the target technology.
2. Stable Engine/Technology: *Your playable demo should be bug-free with no crashes.* The quickest way to lose credibility is if the demo cannot work properly on the publisher's evaluation systems. Also, highlight any bought-in middleware components with proven success.
3. Fun and Representative Gameplay: The demo should contain the *gameplay elements that most accurately portray your intention* for the final game.
4. Polished In-game Art: While not ranked as highly as representative gameplay, the industry has set a very high bar for in-game art in video games. Your demo

needs to *meet or exceed the current graphics standard* of today's top-selling titles.

5. Demo Walkthrough and Cheats: Remember to create these documents or "helpers." While some game players require a good challenging game, *the evaluators only spend 30 minutes to play your demo*. If they can't get past the first 10% of your demo, you have wasted a lot of effort.
6. Completed Level: While it is nice to have a finished level in your demo, it is more important to focus on the above elements. If you can afford the time and effort to complete the level, and are satisfied with the quality of your other elements, then *a complete level is a great way to demonstrate your team's ability to finish what you start*.

Respondents ranked the following demo requirements lowest. In other words, your chances of making it through the first round of evaluation are better if you focus on the above six elements. You should only focus on the following items if time and budget permit.

7. User interface
8. Tools demonstration
9. Complete character art and animations
10. Near-completed game
11. Percentage-complete indicator
12. Cinematics and cutscenes

Publisher Comments

James Regan, Director of Business Development, Ubi Soft
As Ubi Soft continues on its path to become a top-five publisher in 2005, we are always looking for developers to help us grow our portfolio of products. We welcome opportunities to meet developers and discuss the potential of new concepts.

In the end, a concept needs approval from each of several key departments within Ubi Soft, with each department wanting different information. First, it is important to capture everyone's interest and verify your team's ability to execute your vision. This is most easily done with a demo, but may also be done with a detailed design document. Once Ubi Soft is interested in the concept, then we will spend more time looking at the detailed design document and technical abilities of the developer.

Jason Willig, Sr. Brand Manager, Vivendi Universal Games (Partner Publishing Group)
In reviewing product submissions we really like to see that the developer has a strong understanding of how their title fits into the competitive landscape, how and why it is discernibly different from previous / similar titles, and why it will appeal to consumers. Credible external feedback (pre-reviews, focus groups, etc.) is also very helpful, as it demonstrates that the developer is in tune with the audience and open to integrating external feedback.

Additionally, team experience & technology infrastructure is very important, as well as the developer's ability to communicate the production process from concept-to-master in design & technical documentation and detailed -- and realistic -- MS Project schedules.

As an organization we accept submissions in every genre. While we view submissions in the context of a specific market segment to assess sales potential, we focus more heavily on the product's quality and its appeal to consumers, rather than its place in a specific genre.

David Halpern, Licensing Manager, Xicat Interactive

Understandably it's hard for a developer to know what a publisher wants and expects. One of the most important things we look at is making sure there is good management and leadership within the development studio to make sure milestones and game direction are consistent and constant. Talent is no longer a question in many studios —being able to harness and direct that talent is another.

Jon Walsh, President, Groove Games

Consider the market:

Sometimes we receive game submissions from development teams that seem to give little consideration to the economic viability of their concept. While it may be fun, a baby seal hunting game for the PS2 that comes with a plug-in fake wooden club is probably not a good idea.

Publishers are forced to view the industry from a slightly different perspective than developers. We are often more jaded and cynical, because we've taken a good long bath on a game somewhere down the line. While publishers fundamentally want to make great games (at least we do at Groove), we must deliver games that make a profit. Otherwise we won't be in business for long. My advice is to consider the business reality behind an idea, in terms of its marketability, costs, potential performance, etc.; and be objective. If possible, do some research on how similar products have performed, and what the consumer appetite is for a particular concept before you go too far with it.

Help manage the risk:

Publishers are stupid and lack vision, so show us as much as possible. A demo showing proof of technology is incredibly useful on a number of levels. Not only does it demonstrate a developer's ability, but it allows us to visualize the concept in a much more concrete way, and to compare it to what is performing in the market.

Start small and show you can finish:

We've come across many small new developers who are making the next big MMORPG. Unfortunately many of them burn out because they have taken on an enormous task and lack the background or street credibility to get publisher attention. Pick a manageable marketable idea to start with and get going. Make a scaled down simplified version of your big game idea. You're not a sell-out if you have to use your great new technology to make a hunting game before you begin your multi-million dollar sci-fi shooter extravaganza. In fact it's the best way to get your big game made. Show you can finish something; even if it's a one-level demo, that's important. The final stages of a game are the most difficult in terms of sticking with it and staying focused. By the end of any project you will likely be extremely sick of it, but that's the most important time in a game's development and can be the difference between making a hit and another bargain-bin game. Proving you can see something through will go a long way with any publisher.

Credits

Thanks to the following industry professionals who worked hard to create this Guide. And, special thanks to publisher executives who completed the Publisher Survey.

Thomas H. Buscaglia, Esq.
- “Pre-Submission Legal Considerations”

Warren Currell – Sherpa Games
- Game Submission Guide project leader
- “Process and Psychology of the Pitch”
- “Publisher Survey Results”

Trevor Fencott, Esq. – Goodmans LLP
- “The Non-Disclosure Agreement”

Jeff Hilbert – Digital Development Management
- “Contents of the Pitch”

Jason Kay - Society Capital Group
- “Evaluation: What Happens After Submission”

Kathy Schoback – Eidos Interactive
- Editing and harmonization

About the IGDA

The International Game Developers Association is the independent, non-profit association established by game developers to foster the creation of a worldwide game development community. The IGDA's mission is to build a community of game developers that leverages the expertise of our members for the betterment of the industry and the development of the art form. Do the right thing and join the thousands of members, studios and partners that help make this mission a reality.

Personal Membership

The IGDA membership is made up of programmers, designers, artists, producers and many other development professionals who see the importance of working together to advance games and game development as a craft. Your involvement is critical to the success of your career, the IGDA and our industry.

By joining the IGDA, you join a worldwide community of game developers that shares knowledge, insight, and connections. From local chapter meetings, to online discussions, to committee output, the IGDA provides invaluable information and resources.

Studio Affiliation

Your team is your most valuable asset. As a Studio manager, you can reward and inspire your development team by affiliating with the IGDA. By joining the Studio Affiliation Program, a studio provides all of its employees with personal IGDA memberships, allowing them to connect with their peers and grow professionally and personally. In addition, Studios receive their own unique benefits and discounts, all while showing support for the community. Refer to the back cover of this report to see all the great Studios that are part of the IGDA.

Industry Partner

Your organization is essential to game development. Make a difference in the community you've helped to create by becoming an IGDA Partner. Send the message to game developers that your organization supports the growth and development of games as an art form, and backs the community at its roots. Gain exposure with IGDA members for whom game development is a way of life. The IGDA upholds the common agenda of game developers and the game industry. Be a part of that agenda by becoming an IGDA Partner.

Make a difference:

www.igda.org/join