CODE FUNDING
Application Writing Guide

The CODE Funding Application Writing Guide has been created to help teams and/or studios interested in applying for a Kickstart or Start Up Grant from the New Zealand Centre of Digital Excellence (CODE).

The objective of CODE's grant funding is to support teams in their early stages of their journey towards becoming a sustainable studio that is able to support itself through the sale of their games.

While we acknowledge and respect the creative work that goes into making games, this application must additionally demonstrate the business development work that has been done (and will be done) to decrease risk and increase the chances of the studio being able to sustainably support New Zealand game developers.

Within this guide is a description of the information that should be included within the Main Application Document. While there may be more information that you may want to include that will help to show your business acumen, the items listed in each section are what the Assessors are expecting to be included.

Please note:

- The Main Application Document will contain a combination of information that would be found in a typical Game Design Document and/or Pitch Deck as well as information that would be found in a cohesive Business Plan.

- The intention of asking our applicants to complete this process is twofold; it helps our assessors check off the requirements needed to see that your project is viable for the level of funding you are applying for, and it provides a standard format to frame your planning.

- Completing this application is also beneficial for you as an applicant because it will equip you with a "toolbox" from which to draw material when you go to pitch to publishers, platform holders such as Xbox, PlayStation etc. and other financial partners, as well as helping you to think about potential plans and paths for your game's release and beyond.

- While we do not require exhaustive detail (i.e. your full Game Design Document, or all of the data gathered for your market research), we do require the key points that validate your project and demonstrates that the project is viable and stands out in its genre - both in terms of game design and market analysis.

- To be clear, you will not submit your whole Game Design Document nor your entire business plan but you will need to submit a document that conveys:

  - The fun and distinct aspects of your title; tone, mechanics or otherwise, and the relevant research-based evidence that proves that your game is worth supporting;

  - The high level production and financial plans that are reasonable and achievable;

  - The summary of your market research, the breakdown of your audiences, and the marketing plan to how you'll be connecting with your players;

  - The evidence that you / your team has the experience needed to produce the product.

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This Main Application Document will be submitted alongside:

- Your Application Form
- Your core team CVs
- Your build (if applicable)
- Your Production spreadsheet - please use our provided spreadsheet
- Any supplemental documentation supporting your application

Handy tips when writing your application

- Use the sections below as headings and subheadings for each section of your document, and keep them generally in this order so it's easy and clear for the assessors to navigate your document.
- Keep your writing clear and concise -use headings and subheadings to organise your document.
- Write in a third-person business style.
- Use diagrams where appropriate or useful.
- Include any other information or learning that can help to provide additional context on your business skills and decisions.
- Art assets are welcome within the document to help showcase the game's style, but they should not impede the written information.
- Please make sure our assessment panel can see your reasoning if you are making any assertions. E.G. "It is believed that that Developer can get 10,000 users on our Discord server by January 202X"- describe how, including the strategy and methodology. Don't leave the assessors guessing.
- Be specific about your target markets/audiences/players. E.G. "We're targeting mid-core gamers interested in fantasy rogue-likes who will likely have played..." rather than "Male and female gamers, 18-50".
- Avoid the word "unique" or other stock words/phrases - specificity with language will communicate your proposal more effectively than using similarly common expressions - "Unique Selling Points/ Proposition" (USP) is the exception to this rule.
- As this document should focus on the big picture of what your game has to offer and how the business will become sustainable, the assessment panel does not need to see long asset lists you have yet to complete, however grouping things as features can be helpful to show scope.
- If there are core parts of your games design that are being iterated on, state this and discuss briefly how you are going to tackle this problem.
- If you are including supplemental documentation, make sure it's organised and readable, and consider including summaries to explain findings.
- Use non-discriminatory language.
- If your game includes content outside of your personal experience, follow guidelines for First Nations content or utilise other appropriate resources. Cultural consultation is not an afterthought.
- The applications cut off will be at 5:00pm sharp on the closing date - plan to have your application submitted well before hand in case of technical difficulties.
- Remember that you are not just showing why your game is good, but showing your understanding of business development in the games industry and how you're making good business decisions to lower your risk and give your studio its best chance for sustainability.

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Main Application Document - Writing Guide

Introduction

- Give the assessors a very high overview of your game to get them ready to dive into the specifics of your game. This should include:
    - Your one-line elevator pitch;
    - A brief paragraph summarising your game;
    - A sentence or two identifying your main target audiences.

Game Play

- Give an overview of your game that explains the exceptional systems, features, and experiences of your current understanding of your full game.
- Include things like:
    - Main gameplay style, genre, and theming;
    - Core gameplay loop(s) with descriptions of the main phases/features in these loops (**tip:** include diagrams);
    - How these systems/loops combine to make engaging gameplay;
    - A couple of examples of things like items, power ups, gear, or other features.
- Highlight what mechanics and features will make your game stand out as your USPs (Unique Selling Points) and key differentiators.
- If appropriate, provide a Narrative Design section to explain the extent of your narrative:
    - Describe your theming and how will present throughout your game;
    - Breakdown any applicable main plot points, how they are intertwined with gameplay, and what the ending to the narrative will be;
    - Include an excerpt of a script or dialogue as a supplementary document for narrative-heavy games.
- Describe the accessibility features and accommodations you will be including in your game.

Note: The point here is to show how your game will work as a whole and excite players within the genre without getting too far into the detail of describing every single mechanic, item, option, etc.

Art & Animation

- Describe your intended art style for your game and include examples of concept art, key art, environment art, screenshots, gifs of animations, or assets of characters, items, etc, that you've made for your game if you have them.
  - It is more important for you to show the vision of what the final product will look like rather than current screenshots with lots of placeholder artwork.
- Mention and include any influences you are drawing from, and explain what parts of these inspirations you are tying into your style.
- Include the different feelings you are trying to invoke in your players.
- UI or UI-mockups should also be included in this section.
- If you are in the early stages of development, images of other games or other types of inspiration can be helpful in describing your intended style, but keep in mind:
  - This should serve as a demonstration in conjunction with some concept or character art.
  - Explain what part of these inspirational examples you plan to draw on.
  - Any art/screenshots that are from outside of your game must be labelled and credited.
  - Aim to have at least one or more parts of key art and/or examples of a game screen to show what the game will eventually look like to show what your vision is.

A note on AI-art:

- We appreciate that for many developers, providing professional-level concept art at an early design stage may not be feasible so many will resort to AI art generators.
- Please label these "concept art only" in your application and know that Generated AI content can not be included in the final game as per our Terms and Conditions.
- Be mindful that CODE is currently working on the premise that if there is a risk of infringement of intellectual property with the use of AI art in a game, we reserve the right to refuse funding.
- Be mindful of use of AI art around Māori or Indigenous subject matter where it may not be appropriate.
- If in doubt, talk to your Regional Content Manager or the Industry Development Manager before submitting.

Sound Design

- Sound design is an integral part of your game and needs to be considered even at early stages.
- Describe the choices you're making around:
  - Music
  - Sound Effects (SFX)
  - Voice Acting (if applicable)
- Include a playlist of original music or SFX (if you have any) and/or inspirational tracks and what specifically about these examples you want to highlight or apply to your game.
- Describe the styles of music, if/how it will change throughout gameplay, the emotions you're trying to evoke in your players, and any special systems or technology you plan to use (if any).
- It is fine to include links or samples in your supplementary material.

Production

- Provide a few sentences describing what the grant will allow you do to develop your game.
- Create a high level schedule for the development of your game including major features and milestones.
- Discuss major production milestones and any challenges you may face as it is important that we see the full scope of production, not just the timeline that will be covered by the grant.
- Consider including visual diagrams of the schedule.
- Include all of your plans if you have more than one pathway to release (eg. with and without receiving a CODE grant, etc.).
- Feel free to include a section on risk management. I.E. Identifying potential risks and what your team is going to do to actively mitigate them.
- Please note that all production schedules should align with the hours within the Production Spreadsheet.

Finances

- At a KickStart level, we are not expecting definitive answers on where you expect to get additional funding from but we would like to see potentially realistic plans that you plan to pursue. Be mindful of actual sources and your strategy, rather than "we're going to talk to publishers."
- At a StartUp level, we need to see the plans to fund the game through to launch in addition to any monies you may receive from CODE. These can include publisher advances (or intention to receive them), platform funding, venture capital funding, personal funds, or other methods.

Finances - contd.

- Mention the current funding and/or time that has been put towards the project so far.

- Include any relevant publishing deals, market attachments, commercial opportunities, completed crowdfunding efforts and raising attempts as a supplemental document and include a description of where you are within this process in the main document.

- Note that this financial information will be paired with the Production Spreadsheet.

Go-to-Market

- Describe the audiences for your game, what is important to them (including demographics / psychographics, playstyles, etc) and how you will reach and connect with these audiences.

- Include your understanding about the genre(s) that you're game is a part of.

- Support your understanding of audience and genre with competitive analysis.

- Describe how you will assess market validation:

  - Detail the types of data that you have analysed or will analyse to validate your game's player engagement. Consider: Wishlist building (Steam and other platforms), online communities, playtesting, newsletters, in-person events and expos, publisher/investor/ platform interest, Steam/curated events and festival/showcase engagement, external team collaborations, expert evaluations, crowd funding, content creator engagement, etc.

  - For KickStart grants, it's not expected to see live evidence at this stage, however there needs to be an understanding of when and how you'll be starting this process (which should be reflected in your marketing plan) and provide what your goals and expectations are within these metrics, how you will analyse them. If you have done some market validation already, please feel free to include this and provide an analysis of the process so far).

  - For StartUp grants, it's expected that your team has started the market validation process for your game and have already begun analysing and adapting to this data. Detail what you've done and learned so far, and describe your current plan for the road ahead. Be sure to discuss your goals for key validation points and how you are working towards those goals.

- Your market validation should reference the steps you'll be taking as part of implementing your marketing plan and relate to your targeted audience groups.

- Those who receive KickStart and StartUp grants will have the opportunity to work with an industry marketing expert to help you hone your marketing strategy. Include a section that details the specific areas that you would capitalise on this opportunity including any sticking points, and areas of uncertainty.

  - Note that you need to do the work of understanding the key marketing strategies that apply to your audience and product (game), and this additional marketing assistance will be to help with blind spots, course correction, etc.

- Describe your game's marketing plan, including:

  - Major marketing beats and schedule;

Go-to-Market - contd.

- Where you'll be connecting with your audiences;
- How you'll connect with your audiences in each of these places.

- KickStart applications are expected to have a strong understanding of their audiences, how to connect with them, and have an understanding of the many ways to connect with them as part of their marketing plan and some exploration into the longer term marketing and Public Relations (PR) strategy.

- StartUp applications are expected to include a solid marketing strategy - this could be a combination of; your social media presence(s), website, paid User Acquisition, PR-planning, advertising, platform and publisher planned-engagement or direct marketing activities - and likely have started executing this strategy or have made significant preparations to do so.

- Consider including a high-level visual diagram of the Marketing Plan.

Teams

- A brief introduction of your team members should be included in the Main Application Document. **Note**: It is important to demonstrate that not only is the project viable but the team behind it also has the capability to see the project to launch.

- Include both core members and the expanded team including contractors, consultants, mentors, etc.

- CVs must be included as supplemental documents for all core team members, and, apart from serious games where academic credibility may be relevant, keep them to the relevant highlights and one page only for the assessors.

- While CODE appreciates you may not be able to contract team members unless you receive the grant, you should know who they will be, especially in key roles or if you are a tiny team.

- For larger teams, it is fine to indicate funding may go to, say, a junior designer who is not yet recruited - but not an Art Director.

- Be sure that you've communicated with everyone you list that is working on your game, and please note, email addresses must be supplied for named team members and all team members will be emailed to ensure they are not misrepresented as being attached to the project.

- Feel free to include any additional info about your studio's goals and values.

Builds

- When applying specifically for StartUp funding a prototype will be necessary for your application. This does not have to be a polished, investment-ready demo that you would show a publisher or financial partner but it should be at a stage where the assessor can understand the feel of the game. Include install and playing instructions if necessary.

Builds - contd.

- For KickStart funding, submitting a build is not necessary as this level is designed for earlier stage projects, however if you are applying for funds to help you get to the Vertical Slice stage of development, and your build can be played by the assessors without significant instruction, it may be relevant.

- All builds will be downloaded at time of submission and will not be able to be updated during the assessment process.

- Feel free to include build notes to describe any notable information.

Final Note

Information regarding the above points will give your application the best chance possible. It is your responsibility to sell the concept of your game and business strategy to the assessor panel, convince them that you understand the business of games, and to identify and mitigate risks, well enough in order for your studio to be sustainable. Remember that the assessors will not assume any knowledge or understandings are held by default, and will only be able to assess what you include in your application.