Grant Application Introductory Workshop Series

Workshop 5: Go To Market 2025 - Release Prep & Pipeline

Vee Pendergrast - Industry Development Manager - NZ CODE

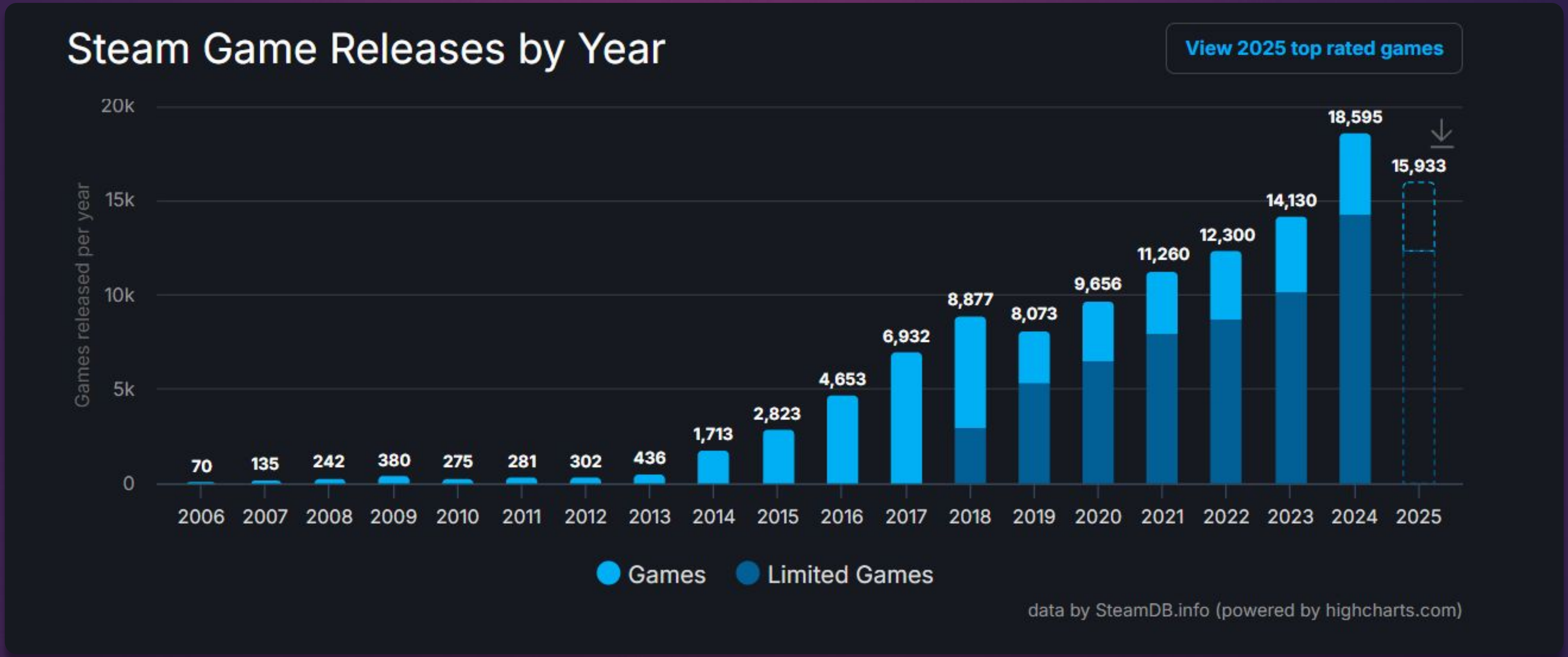
Market Realities in 2025

- The video game market is crowded.
- You have to seek pre-audience, both for playtesting and user validation.
- Regardless of whether you're aiming to self-publish or you're seeking a third-party publisher, you are in the "business of fan creation."- Jason Della Rocca, 2025.
- CODE offers up to $190K, before launch, so where is the rest coming from? You need to know what order of magnitude you are targeting.
- For a chance at commercial success, you need to be thinking about things like localisation, PR, community management, platform porting etc.
- To this end, you have to plan your marketing beats as you are advancing in production.
- You cannot afford to be precious and guard your secrets if this is your first title.
- Be wary of latching onto "outliers" as proof points.
- Sometimes it's less a "market gap," more a gaping chasm.
- If you're looking at traditional publishing, you're looking at Unity, UE or Gamemaker Studio or you're making your life harder.

Serious Games Market Realities

- The end user players of serious games are often not the people playing it-you need a viable commercial strategy.
- Any serious game submitted through CODE needs to be able to(or have a plan to) demonstrate benefit- it has to do what it claims otherwise we cannot fund it. So what's your evaluation plan?
- Don't fall into the trap of making it gameplay-lite. That then decreases the attractiveness of it as a game proposition.
- E.G. Your education market is not "teachers." It's well and good to get good testing feedback from teachers, but they are rarely the decision marker in an education system. Get to the decision makers, manage the pipeline.

Games on Steam Over Time



Where do we even start?

You've worked through the logline, elevator pitch etc.

Do you have a key differential? Is this a genre you can potentially find some market traction in?

How's your competitor analysis looking? Have you looked at price points, languages, platforms and performance of your key competitors?

Have you playtested, or what are your plans around that?

Have you got evidence from anywhere that your product is market viable?

What methods of outreach and retention are you familiar with? What have you considered?

Initial Steps

- Once you have settled on a product, you want to be thinking about your initial marketing beats, even at an early stage.
- The days of holding onto it all and waiting for perfection are gone. Start communicating as soon as you have something to communicate with.
- Test as soon as you have something to test. Build and test, over and over.
- While you are putting your first visuals together, start recording material for social media. Everything from concept art, early animation, funny bugs, level builds, whatever you can. You'll need it later to start building your audience.
- When you first go live on social media, you're going to be shouting into the void for a while as you build audience. You can reuse material at times.

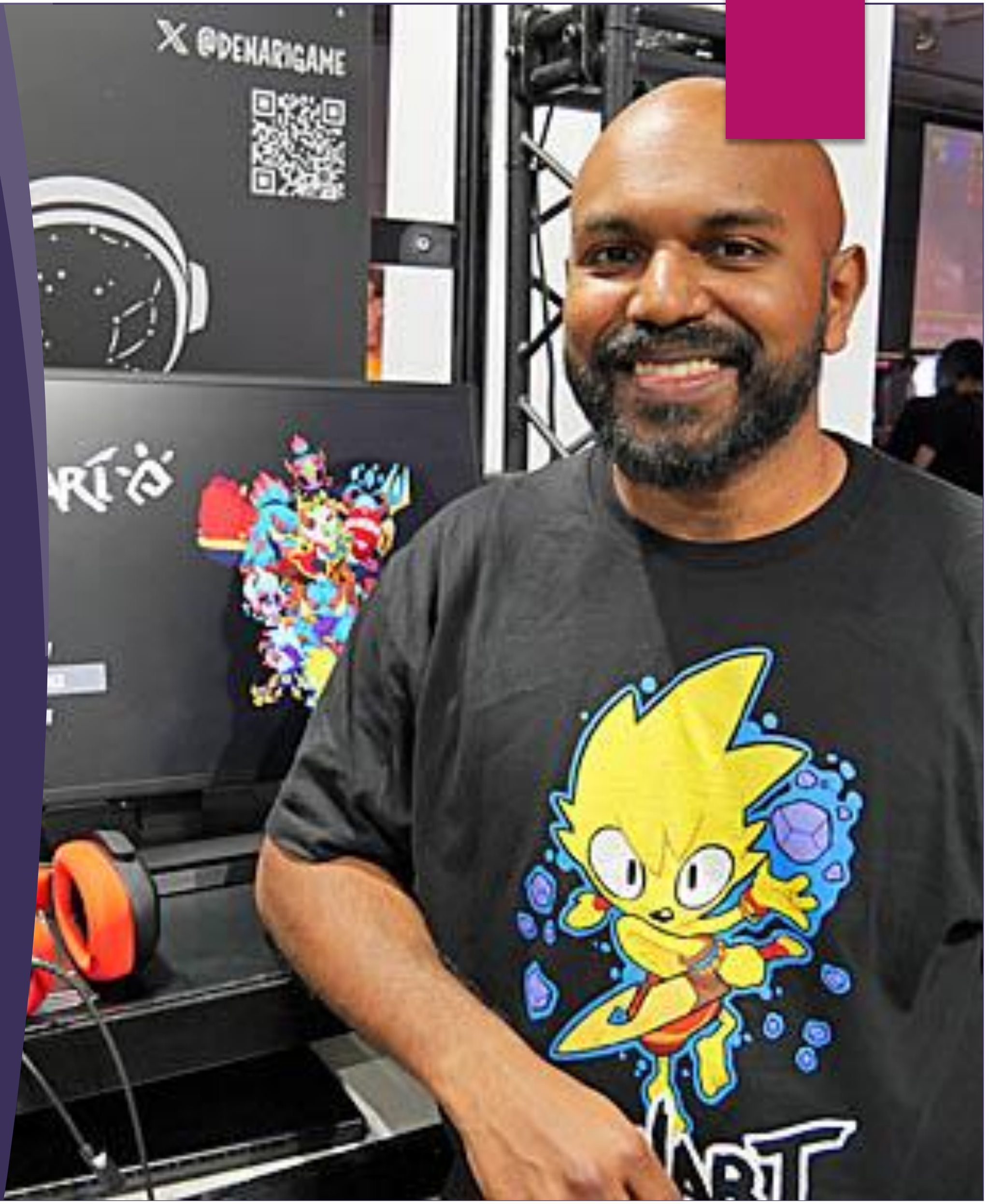


Image: Shrikkanth Sreedharan - Astronaut Diaries @ BitSummit, Kyotō 2024

Social Media

Use software wherever possible for scheduling to land posts at the best times. It also allows you to cue posts.

If you're early, it's okay to give yourself some space while you're building up to the next thing.

If you're doing playtests or expo events (even small local ones), get photos of real players, playing your games.

Remember, this will take time. But when you are pushing, keeping the posts going with some frequency is the intent. If you're building momentum, one social media post a week is not enough!

Find the platform(s) that are where your player base lives: E.G. Reddit for horror or simulation, Instagram for casual, Bluesky for cosy etc.

Third-Party Vs. Self Publishing

- In the mid-2020's, you're self-publishing by default. The attachment ratios are limited.
- Whether you are aiming at a self-publishing model or third-party publisher, you *still* have to build pre-audience for your game or your chances of commercial success are limited.
- Publishers or any form of investor (project-based, platforms etc.) ideally want to see some form of substantiated interest. E.G. pitching at 0, 10K and 30K wishlists are all very different propositions.
- You may likely find pitching to publishers for the marketing side, tied to an advance, which is a finance option. Alternatively, there's the rise of the project-based finance/shadow-publishing option.
- Do not automatically assume self-publishing is a panacea because you're not doing a rev share. Can you handle all those additional tasks? (community management, LOC, porting etc.)

Self Publishing - What do I have to do?

In the mid-2020s, these are the tasks you are realistically looking at having to handle:

- Porting
- QA
- Localisation/LOCQA
- Community Management
- Marketing & PR
- Price management

However, there are options- shadow publishing, service providers etc. But they require budget.

Image: Joe Simmonds - FourFox Interactive pitching @ Representing Games 2025

What’s Your Price Point?

- How much do similar games cost?
- Can your game actually make money?
  - RRP- 30%- 5-7% for US taxes (Steam)
  - Most copies do *not* get sold at full price
- How do you manage that long term?
- Make your own costing spreadsheet

Image Credit: Black Salt Games - DREDGE

Publisher Myths

Publishers are always unfair: It's always a case-by-case basis. Ask other developers, push back on contract terms that aren't equitable. You don't have to sign the contract.

"But I heard XYZ Publisher was terrible": Every publisher hasn't got it right 100% of the time, but it's about the trends.

Publishers always take the majority of the money: Have a look at what the recoup terms and revenue share actually looks like. Make an educated decision.

"If I don't find a publisher, my game is dead": *Always* have a route to market that doesn't involve a publisher from early on. Look at other options that involve project-based funding, shadow-publishing, platforms and other options.

"Going directly to the platforms is better": Sure, if they fully fund your game, but also you'll be handling much or all of your own LOC, PR, marketing etc.

"The most successful indie games don't use third party publishers."

Balatro, Culf of the Lamb, Dredge, Abiotic Factor etc.

Publisher Attachment Ratio (According to JDR)

- For every 1000 games pitched, 1.6 get signed
- OR 1 in 625
- OR 0.0016%

- So what do you do about that??

Image: Yep, it's Jason Della Rocca

To Announce or Not To Announce…

- Back in the 2010s, you'd keep it all secret until it was time to talk to a publisher, if you're a "first commercial release" game studio, those times have gone.
- If you have received at least moderate commercial success off a previous title, that may change. Remember if you're a developer coming from a large company, that success isn't usually going to rub off on you.
- Building up some momentum so you can hit your announcement day is a good idea.
- Or alternatively, if you don't have much pre-audience built up, going out early and building it so you can be free to grow interest is probably the better tactic.
- Use socmed, your playtests, Discord, relevant Steam Festivals and events wherever possible. Be aware of non-English speaking markets where you can find traction.

How do I get into Steam Festivals??

- Ask existing developers and community!
- Internet searching
- Reddit, Howtomarketagame.com
- Get involved in regular community events of your genre
- Make sure your Steam page is good to go!

Physical Events

- It is a simple fact that if you are seeking publisher engagement or additional investment, going to large industry events will increase your chances of success.
- However, this requires planning. Realistically, do not plan to go major pitching events until your Investment Ready demo is fit for purpose.
- Publishing deals can take 6-12 months to sign off. Build that into your planning.
- Consumer events like PAX AUS can be great for growing you grassroots supporters.
- Look them up, understand what they are.

Image Credit: Black Salt Games - DREDGE

Definitions around "Demos"- the CODE way

Prototype: Proof of concept, can be quick and dirty, testing out the basics of the game, the functionality, not usually something you would show an investor. The minimum required for a StartUp grant application. A production and design tool.

Vertical Slice: A "slice of gameplay" that shows all core features of the game and some level design. A production and design tool.

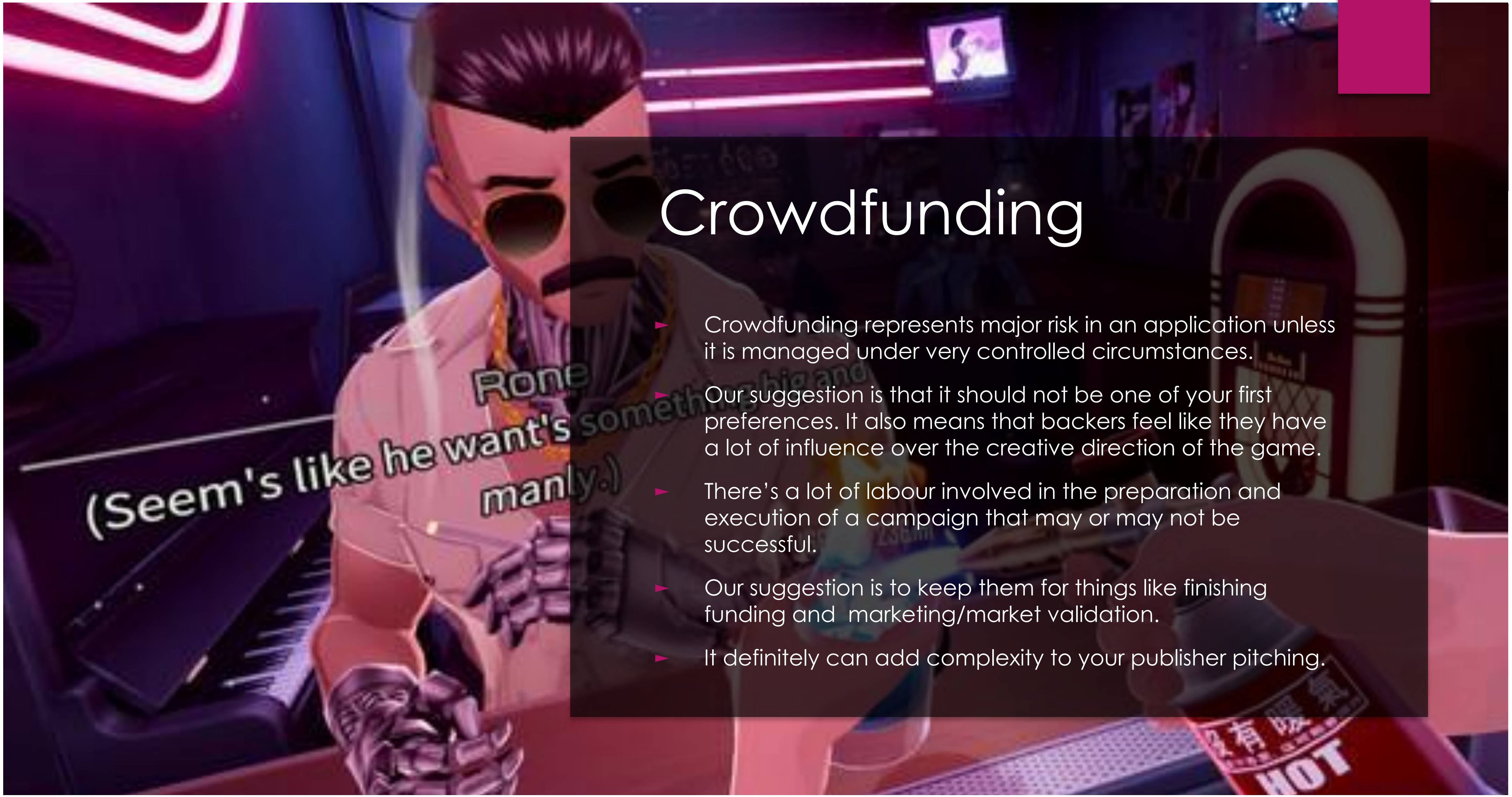
Investment Ready Demo: A 10-15 minute demo (no more!) that you can take to publishers, investors & platforms that shows off the core of the game. A business to business (B2B) sales tool.

Public Demo: A demo that you can take out to public (online, expos etc.) to help build interest in your game. A business to consumer (B2C) sales tool.

Disclaimer: Might not be a distributable package

Explainer

- Shadow publishing: Publishing as a service. Either with an agency that handles everything as a "one stop shop" or several service providers. Your company still maintains the publishing rights, but you have to commission each task and the cost is yours to shoulder.
- Project-based investment: Similar to a publisher in that they invest in the project, not equity in the studio. There's a recoup phase and a revenue share.
- Publisher: The traditional publishing model where there may be an advance involved, but the publisher will handle most of the marketing functions of your game.
- Platform: Steam, Xbox, PlayStation, Nintendo, Apple, Google etc. Platforms may have porting funds, or subscription offers (Gamepass, Apple Arcade etc.)



Crowdfunding

- Crowdfunding represents major risk in an application unless it is managed under very controlled circumstances.
- Our suggestion is that it should not be one of your first preferences. It also means that backers feel like they have a lot of influence over the creative direction of the game.
- There's a lot of labour involved in the preparation and execution of a campaign that may or may not be successful.
- Our suggestion is to keep them for things like finishing funding and marketing/market validation.
- It definitely can add complexity to your publisher pitching.

Image Credit: Plectrum Soft - PROJECT MIX

Any Questions?

Vee Pendergrast

Industry Development Manager

Discord: VVVee

Email: vee@nz-code.nz

https://www.linkedin.com/company/new-zealand-centre-of-digital-excellence-code

Thank you!