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Effective Marketing and Monetization Strategies Used in Small Independent Game Development

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Walden University

College of Management and Human Potential

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Jessica Nicole Mobley

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2025

Abstract

Effective Marketing and Monetization Strategies Used in Small Independent Game
Development

by

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MA, Academy of Art University, 2019

MA, Academy of Art University, 2020

BS, College of Coastal Georgia, 2014

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

January 2025

Abstract

A lack of effective marketing and monetization strategies negatively affects the ability of small independent game developers to complete projects within budget and on time, resulting in revenue losses. Grounded in platform theory, the purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry study was to identify and explore effective marketing and monetization strategies used by small independent game developers to complete projects within budget and on time. The participants were a global, online group of four small independent game developers, each of whom successfully used marketing and monetization strategies to manage budgets and timelines. Data were collected from semistructured interviews and publicly available company documents. Thematic analysis revealed four key themes: (a) building and engaging a strong community, (b) strategically using multiple platforms for marketing and distribution, (c) leveraging crowdfunding and financial management for sustainability, and (d) targeting specific niche markets. Key recommendations for small independent game developers are: (a) prioritize releasing free demos or early access beta versions, (b) emphasize crowdfunding and financial prudence, (c) leverage digital platforms, and (d) target niche markets. These strategies could help small indie game developers build trust, foster community interaction, and attract attention. The implications for positive social change include the potential to empower small indie game developers to achieve financial sustainability, which can contribute to job creation and economic growth within local communities by fostering a thriving independent game development sector.

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Dedication

In memory of my grandfather and grandmother. To my grandfather, who would cook dinner while I sat at the kitchen table studying. He dreamed I would become a doctor, a dream he held dearly because he missed out on schooling himself. I did it, Pa! To my grandmother, who somehow managed to be my grandmother, my mom, and my best friend all-in-one. It was a lot for one tiny, little lady!

And to my Dad, the best dad a daughter could ever hope for. I appreciate your love, patience, and unwavering tolerance. Little did you know the journey you'd set in motion when you gifted me Edith Hamilton's *Mythology* and Sir Richard Burton's translation of *The Arabian Nights* all those Christmases ago!

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Background of the Problem

In the evolving landscape of technology and entertainment, some small business entrepreneurs face difficulties in completing projects within budget and timeframes that result in ineffective marketing and monetization strategies. The game development industry is a billion-dollar industry, and computer games earn a large chunk of that revenue (Styhre & Remneland-Wikhamn, 2019). Still, over the past decade, independent (i.e., indie) game developers have only earned 2% of that revenue (Styhre & Remneland-Wikhamn, 2019). This is due, in part, to poor management and problems inherent to game development processes (Jørgensen, 2019). According to Jørgensen (2019), management issues are a known weakness among small game developers, resulting in challenges related to lack of experience and difficulties managing time and resources. Additionally, an imbalance in human resources on a development team contributes to the challenges inherent in game development processes and reflects the impact of poor management on the company's projects (Jørgensen, 2019). Indie game productions tend to be significantly smaller than traditional Triple-A productions, with funding covering a maximum of 75% of development costs or 50% of launch/marketing costs (Jørgensen, 2019). As a result, indie developers tend to embrace low-risk production modes with small budgets and teams, while focusing on crowdfunding for financing (Jørgensen, 2019).

Such challenges have implications for positive social change. By identifying strategies for better working conditions and sustainable results, small independent game

developers will be better equipped to compete against larger, more well-established game studios and contribute to the overall games community. There is a clear gap in understanding the unique challenges and solutions for these indie developers, necessitating fresh research in this domain. Addressing the difficulties faced by small independent game developers can lead to monetary competitiveness and sustainability, enabling them to give back to the games community through improved representation, activism, and inclusive dialogues, benefiting marginalized groups (Ruberg, 2018). Given the profound business implications and potential for industry transformation, there is an imperative to delve deeper into this issue. The background to the problem has been provided, and the focus will now shift to the problem statement.

Problem and Purpose

The specific business problem for this study was that some small independent game developers lack effective marketing and monetization strategies to complete projects within budget and on time. The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry study was to identify and explore effective marketing and monetization strategies used by small independent game developers to complete projects within budget and on time.

Population and Sampling

I employed a purposive sampling method, targeting small, successful independent game developers as participants. The goal for this study was to collect relevant documentation to answer research questions about effective marketing and monetization strategies. The target population consisted of a global, online group of four independent game developers not affiliated with any large triple-A studios or publishers to best fit this

study's operational definition of small independent game developers (see Lipkin, 2012; Pereira, 2021).

Participant access was facilitated through online gaming forums, developer communities, and direct outreach. Interview protocols were developed to answer the research question. The data included responses to questions and related documentation regarding effective marketing and monetization strategies to complete projects within budget and on time. By engaging successful small independent game developers as participants, I aimed to gather insight and documentation related to the challenges that small indies face in project completion and the strategies they employ for marketing and monetization. This approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the topic and provided valuable firsthand perspectives from those who had experienced success in the industry. The population and sampling have been provided. The focus will now shift to the nature of the study.

Nature of the Study

I used the qualitative methodology in this study. The decision to use a qualitative approach is supported by research conducted by Lysova and Khapova (2019), which emphasized that qualitative methods facilitate a better understanding of individual experiences. This method was selected because it offers a depth of exploration not afforded by quantitative or mixed methods research in the context of understanding personal experiences and intricate nuances associated with small independent game developers. The qualitative approach is particularly suitable for this study as it allows for the collection of rich data through one-on-one interviews and archival documentation,

enabling a more personal and intimate analysis compared to a quantitative methodology (see Wray & Barrett, 2022). Furthermore, advancements in online technology enable remote data collection in addition to telephone and video-based methods (Wray & Barrett, 2022). This approach provided valuable insight and a nuanced understanding of the challenges that small independent game developers face in the games industry and the strategies they employ for effective marketing and monetization of their products. The next paragraph will discuss the design that was used to extract meaningful data and draw conclusions.

To address the research questions in this qualitative study, I chose pragmatic inquiry study as the specific research design. A pragmatic inquiry design was particularly suitable for this study because it facilitated not only a thorough analysis of case variations, but also provide a practical application of identified best practices in the business context of small independent game development, as suggested by Taguchi (2018). The pragmatic inquiry study design also facilitates a comprehensive understanding of business cases using comparative analyses and diverse data collection methods to explore relationships between business phenomena, their contexts, and stakeholders (Salkind, 2010). A pragmatic inquiry study design was favored over other qualitative designs for its superior capability in allowing researchers to conduct exhaustive comparative analyses and identifying actionable best practices essential for addressing the specific business problem, as explained by Patton (2015). This approach facilitated a detailed analysis of both the differences and similarities among cases, yielding practical insight into effective marketing and monetization strategies relevant to

the business practices of small independent game developers. It also enabled the identification of potential best practices that are not only theoretically sound but also viable at a practical level across various business scenarios and industries. The nature of the study has been provided. The focus will now shift to the research question.

Research Question

What effective strategies have small independent game developers used to market and monetize projects for delivery?

Interview Questions

1. Please tell me about strategies you have used to successfully monetize your projects.
2. How do you manage – or plan to manage – costs (e.g., crowdfunding, securing a sponsor or publisher, grants, social media ads, donations, etc.)?
3. What transmedia streams (e.g., comics, merchandise, novelizations) have you used – or plan to use – as additional sources of income to support or supplement your game’s developmental costs (e.g., offering such items on Kickstarter, Patreon, etc. as a reward)?
4. What platforms (e.g., Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, etc.) did you select for marketing your game/studio, and what factors influenced your decision on which platforms to prioritize?
5. What platforms (e.g., Steam, itch.io, etc.) have you used for distribution and sales, and what factors influenced your decision on which platforms to prioritize?

6. How have you adapted your marketing and monetization strategies as platforms and user behaviors evolve over time?
7. How do you measure the success of your marketing and monetization strategies on different platforms?
8. In terms of cost management, describe your game and/or studio's overall success?
9. What other comments or strategies, if any, you would like to address concerning these issues we have not already covered?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework that grounded this study was platform theory. Platform theory was created by Carl Shapiro and Hal R. Varian as a framework for comprehending how platforms produce, capture, and distribute value (Shapiro & Varian, 1999). It is founded on the concept that platforms are digital intermediaries that connect different groups of users, such as buyers and sellers, and enable them to make transactions with each other (Shapiro & Varian, 1999). Platforms typically enable interlinked participants to create and capture value for one another through interconnected boundary-spanning transactions or interactions (Shapiro & Varian, 1999). Platform theory has grown in importance in the field of self-publishing because it provides a framework for comprehending the dynamics of digital platforms and the opportunities they present (Poniatowski et al., 2022). In the context of this study, platform theory provided insight into how small independent game developers can leverage digital platforms to connect and engage with their audiences. As the framework for this study, platform theory provided a useful lens for understanding the complex dynamics of the digital games

industry, and for identifying effective strategies that small independent game developers can use to achieve sustainable success. The conceptual framework has been provided. The next section will focus on operational definitions, clarifying key terms and concepts used in the study.

Operational Definitions

Independent games: Independent (i.e., indie) games are defined as video games developed by indie game developers. Indie games often offer players a different kind of gaming experience than typical blockbuster titles produced by larger game studios and are characterized by their innovative and experimental gameplay mechanics, unique artistic style and creative expression, and generally smaller scope (Pereira, 2021).

Larger indies: Larger, more well-equipped indie game studios are defined as game development companies that operate independently but have a larger scale of operation and more resources at their disposal than small independent game developers while still lacking the same level of financial and institutional support as Triple-A game studios (Lipkin, 2012). Terminology is lacking for these middle-of-road entities (Lipkin, 2012).

Marketing: Marketing for indie video games produced by small independent game developers is the process of promoting and publicizing a video game to potential customers, with the goal of increasing awareness, generating interest, and ultimately driving sales of the game (Su, 2023; Thorhauge, 2022). The specific marketing strategies and tactics used by indie game developers may vary depending on factors such as the

target audience for the game, available budget and resources, and the overall marketing goals of the developmental team (Su, 2023; Thorhauge, 2022).

Monetization: Monetization refers to the process of generating revenue from a game project (Bernevega & Gekker, 2022). It includes various methods such as direct sales, royalties, in-app purchases, advertising, subscriptions, and sponsorships (Bernevega & Gekker, 2022).

Platformization: Platformization in the context of indie video games refers to the process of adapting a game to be compatible with multiple platforms or devices (Chia et al., 2020). For small independent game developers, platformization is an essential step in bringing their game to a wider audience and maximizing potential revenue (Chia et al., 2020). A significant investment of time and resources is required to ensure that a game can be played on multiple platforms without compromising quality or performance (Chia et al., 2020).

Signaling theory: Signaling theory refers to a concept in economics and information theory where one party (i.e., the “sender”) conveys certain information to another party (i.e., the “receiver”) to influence their perception or behavior (Victoria-Mas et al., 2023). This theory is particularly relevant in situations where there is an asymmetry of information—meaning one party has more or better information than the other (Victoria-Mas et al., 2023).

Small independent game developers: Small independent game developers are defined as game developers who work independently or in small teams, with limited resources and budgets (Styhre & Remneland-Wikhamn, 2019). According to Styhre and

Remneland-Wikhamn (2019), indie developers regularly navigate the tension between creative integrity and financial success, and as a result, must utilize strategies to maintain their authenticity while also pursuing financial gain.

Third-party intermediaries: Third-party intermediaries (i.e., TPIs) are individuals or organizations that provide services to independent game developers to help them distribute, market, and monetize their games (Styhre, 2022). TPIs act as a middleman between the game developer and the end-user or consumer (Styhre, 2022). TPIs can include distribution channels such as Steam and itch.io or marketing influencers such as video game livestreamers (Styhre, 2022).

Triple-A game studio: Triple-A (i.e., AAA) game studios are defined as established video game development companies that have a track record of producing high-quality, high-budget games for major gaming platforms such as PC, consoles, and mobile devices (Bernevega & Gekker, 2022). These studios typically have large developmental teams and significant financial resources at their disposal, allowing them to invest heavily in game production, distribution, and marketing (Bernevega & Gekker, 2022).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

It is important to acknowledge the assumptions, limitations, and delimitations that may affect the findings and conclusions of a study (Burton-Jones et al., 2021; Saunders et al., 2015). In this section, I will discuss the potential factors that may influence the research on effective strategies that small independent game developers have used to market and monetize projects for delivery. Recognizing these factors is crucial for

maintaining transparency and effectively contextualizing the research findings within the boundaries of this study's scope and methodology.

Assumptions

Assumptions are facts or conditions that are presumed to be true without verification. One assumption for this study was that small independent game developers have limited human and financial resources to invest in marketing and monetization. Research conducted by Jørgensen (2019) and Su et al. (2020) supported the assumption that small independent game developers have limited resources. To mitigate this assumption, I conducted pragmatic inquiry research on successful small independent game developers who have managed to market and monetize their games effectively despite limited financial resources. By studying their strategies and practices, I hoped to identify the key factors that contributed to their success and draw generalizations that may help other small independent game developers. To further validate the assumption that small independent game developers have limited financial resources, I reviewed existing literature on small independent game developers and their marketing and monetization practices to identify patterns and trends in the industry and provide a broader context for my study. The assumption of limited resources for small independent game developers set the foundation for understanding their challenges and the need to identify strategies for effective marketing and monetization. I aimed to gather empirical evidence and insight through pragmatic inquiry research and existing literature on the topic to address this assumption and shed light on successful approaches utilized by successful small independent game developers. I hope that the findings of this study will

contribute to a broader context and provide practical implications to support other small independent game developers in maximizing their limited resources.

A second assumption is that small independent game developers have the same level of access to distribution channels as larger game studios. Research conducted by Chia et al. (2020) and Su et al. (2020) supported the assumption that small independent game developers may not have the same level of access to distribution channels as larger studios. To mitigate this assumption, I conducted semistructured interviews with small independent game developers to gain insight into their experiences with platform distribution channels. Additionally, an analysis of game sales and distribution channel data was conducted to identify patterns or differences between small and large studios. Furthermore, I explored and analyzed the role of marketing and advertising platforms in facilitating access to distribution channels and investigated any potential barriers faced by smaller studios in this area. Understanding the experiences of small independent game developers with distribution channels and exploring the role of marketing, advertising, and sales platforms provided valuable information regarding assumptions pertaining to distribution channel access for small independent game developers. Potential assumptions have been provided. The focus will now shift to limitations.

Limitations

Limitations are potential weaknesses or shortcomings in a study that are beyond the researcher's control. One potential limitation or weakness of this study was participant recruitment. Due to the closed nature of the game development industry, recruiting a diverse range of participants proved challenging (Politowski et al., 2018,

2021). This fact limits the transferability of the findings to a broader population. Other general limitations or weaknesses include the inability to control external factors that could impact the findings, such as changes in the market or the emergence of new technologies; difficulty in measuring the effectiveness of different monetization and marketing strategies, particularly if success is defined differently by different game developers; and a limited scope that may only focus on a specific subset of marketing and monetization strategies, and not provide a comprehensive understanding of the full range of options available to small independent game developers (Styhre & Remneland-Wikhamn, 2019; Yemenici, 2022). It was important to acknowledge and address these limitations in the methodology, design, and conclusions of this study to ensure research integrity and reliability. Potential limitations have been provided. The focus will now shift to the delimitations of the study to further clarify the boundaries and scope of the research.

Delimitations

Delimitations are boundaries set by the researcher which clarify the scope and confines of a study (Burkette, 2022). One possible delimitation in this study was platform delimitation. This delimitation was based on this study's small participant population, which restricted the exploration of monetization and marketing strategies across various platforms. Consequently, this study's findings did not encompass the full range of strategies employed by small independent game developers on different platforms. Such a narrowed focus could favor a particular platform (e.g., PC games) while excluding other platforms (e.g., mobile and/or console games). It is important to acknowledge that this

delimitation restricted the generalizability of the findings to other platforms and limited the comprehensive understanding of strategies used by small independent game developers across the entire game development industry. Potential delimitations have been provided. The focus will now shift to the significance of the study, specifically its potential impact and relevance.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant due to the disproportionate revenue share earned by indie game developers in the lucrative games industry, as well as its potential contributions to business practices and implications for social change. The games industry is a billion-dollar industry (Styhre & Remneland-Wikhamn, 2019). Despite the industry's vast earnings, indie game developers secure only a fraction of this wealth, having only earned a meager 2% of this revenue over the past decade (Styhre & Remneland-Wikhamn, 2019). This fact underscored the necessity for an in-depth analysis and revision of prevailing business practices, especially when pitted against the commercial clout of large gaming studios. This study's findings could be used or adapted to enhance the profitability of indie game developers, enabling them to better compete against larger, more well-established game studios. Furthermore, this study's findings could promote positive social change by facilitating representation, political and environmental activism, and open dialogues for marginalized groups within the overarching landscape of the games industry and within game development communities in general (Ruberg, 2019; Sutherland, 2020a, 2020b). Access to funding could improve the precarious financial standing of indie game developers, especially marginalized developers, by ultimately

enhancing their monetary competitiveness and sustainability (Ruberg, 2018). According to Politowski et al. (2021), problems in the games industry extend beyond profitability and delve into workplace hierarchies, labor conditions, and mistreatment. Weststar et al. (2019) argued that the employment problems of the games industry have been increasingly reframed as collective and systemic issues rather than as the experiences of individual workers who are not strong enough to “cut it,” or the isolated, anomalous behavior of individual studios. The ramifications of this study extend beyond sheer profitability, potentially catalyzing positive social change by fostering a more inclusive and representative gaming landscape. Consequently, by delving into the factors that contribute to the earnings discrepancy between indies and larger studios and suggesting effective strategies to bridge the gap, this study could potentially usher in transformative changes on both the business and societal fronts, leading to a more equitable and diverse games industry. In this section, I discuss the potential significant contributions to business practices and implications for social change.

Contribution to Business Practice

Effectual business practices are the cornerstone of a thriving industry. This study on effective monetization and marketing strategies used by small independent game developers addressed important gaps in business understanding and practice in the games industry. This study can contribute to the understanding of effective business practices in general by examining the strategies employed by small independent game developers to compete in an industry known for high competitiveness, rapid growth, and ever-evolving innovation (Baltezarević et al., 2018). This study explored the unique challenges faced by

small independent game developers and identified effective strategies for monetization and marketing that can help them grow their businesses. The identification of successful strategies for small independent game developers has implications beyond the game development industry. Insights gained from this study could inform effective business practices across a range of industries. Furthermore, by fostering a more level playing field, such research could potentially facilitate a more balanced, competitive, and dynamic business environment where innovation and excellence are rewarded. Potential contributions to business practice have been provided. The focus will now shift to implications for social change.

Implications for Social Change

Video games are more than mere entertainment; they are potent mediums of expression, reflection, and transformation. Positioned at the intersection of art and commerce, video games can both mirror societal norms and challenge them. The potential of video games to effect social change is monumental, especially when they critique prevalent paradigms or provide marginalized communities with a voice (Ruberg, 2018, 2019). The development of independent video games is at odds with the entire modus operandi of triple-A games and the video game industry in general (Pereira, 2021). Part of the appeal of indie games is their detachment from mainstream ideals as to what a video game should be (Pereira, 2021). It is akin to the low brow art movement, underground comix, outsider art, pulp fiction, and other forms of expression that often challenge and critique mainstream art (Cardinal, 2009; da Silva, 2020; Williams, 2019). These forms of expression exist on the fringes of the mainstream – or are divorced from it

entirely – and act as protest art or create a movement that “outsiders” can be a part of and feel free to express themselves (Cardinal, 2009; Williams, 2019). Indie games are becoming a source of many positive social change initiatives (Ruberg, 2018, 2019). People who create and play indie games tend to be more politically engaged than their counterparts that stick to the mainstream video game industry (Ruberg, 2019). The ability to engage players and creators in political activism and critique affords the indie games community a unique contribution to the broader cultural landscape. By ensuring that indie developers possess the tools and knowledge to sustainably monetize and market their creations, this research could help enrich the cultural tapestry of the larger gaming community.

The findings of this study on effective monetization and marketing strategies used by small independent game developers could have a significant impact on social change in the gaming industry. By identifying successful strategies for small independent game developers, this study could help level the playing field in the gaming industry, promoting diversity and competition. This, in turn, could contribute to the development of a more vibrant and innovative industry that benefits both consumers and developers. By identifying effective strategies for monetization and marketing, this study could help small independent game developers grow their businesses and achieve financial stability while also promoting economic development and prosperity, which could help support the worth, dignity, and development of individuals and communities involved in the gaming industry. Potential implications for social change have been provided, and the focus will now shift to a review of the professional and academic literature.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

I conducted an extensive literature review on effective marketing and monetization strategies used by small independent game developers to complete projects within budget and on time. I drew from various academic journals and seminal scholarly books. To access journal articles, I primarily relied on Google Scholar and the Walden University Library's website. The following databases were utilized to gather relevant literature for this study: Elsevier, Emerald Insight, ProQuest, and Sage Journals. Furthermore, I consulted a range of open-access journals such as Springer Link and ACM Digital Library to obtain literature specifically related to effective marketing and monetization strategies used by small independent game developers to complete projects within budget and on time. These databases served as a valuable resource for peer-reviewed scholarly journals across multiple academic disciplines. Additionally, I utilized ScienceDirect, which provides both subscription-based and open-access content, encompassing a comprehensive collection of scientific journal articles and book chapters. These databases, enriched with content across diverse disciplines, were integral in providing a holistic view of the subject.

My approach for conducting the literature search involved utilizing keywords and phrases to identify relevant literature. This systematic approach was foundational to acquiring quality content for this literature review. I primarily relied on Google Scholar and the Walden University Library's website, especially during the early stages of my literature search. To refine the search results, I applied various filters including specific keywords, a defined range for publication date, and targeted databases relevant to my

topic. Timely and relevant resources were pivotal, given the rapidly evolving nature of the games industry. Therefore, I prioritized articles published in or after 2020 to ensure the literature reviewed was recent, pertinent, and in accordance with Walden University's last-5-year publication rule. The keywords and phrases employed in the search encompassed *assetization, indie games, independent game developers, video game development, video game industry, platform theory, game postmortems, webtoon, indie authors, indie books, Kindle publishing, network effects, monetization, green marketing, crowdfunding, video game marketing strategies, video game monetization strategies, qualitative research, and pragmatic inquiry.*

Ulrich's Periodicals Directory served as a valuable tool for verifying the peer-reviewed status of the journals from which the articles were collected. Out of the 52 total number of references included in this study's literature review, 42 are scholarly peer-reviewed articles, accounting for 80% of the total. There are 10 nonpeer-reviewed sources, representing 19% of the total. There is one book cited, constituting 1% of the total. Among the 52 total number of references in the literature review, 42 (80%) were published within the 2020-2024 period. Out of the 116 total number of references included in this entire study, 89 are scholarly peer-reviewed articles, accounting for 77% of the total. There are 21 nonpeer-reviewed sources, representing 18% of the total. There are six books cited, constituting 5% of the total. Among the 116 total number of references, 76 were published within the 2020-2024 period, representing 65% of the total.

Literature Review Organization

The literature review section of this study includes an exploration of the various aspects of effective marketing and monetization strategies used by small independent game developers to complete projects within budget and on time. To provide a critical analysis and synthesis of the literature, I carefully chose various sources that offered depth and breadth of inquiry, meeting both the quality and timeliness guidelines. The literature review section of this study is divided into several subsections, with each focusing on different themes related to the topic. Through the synthesis of multiple journal articles, reports, and scholarly books, I sought to ensure the inclusion of diverse perspectives.

The first theme, platform theory and its application in independent game development, includes an exploration of the concept of platform theory and its relevance to game development. In the first theme, I delve into the ways in which small independent game developers can leverage platforms to their advantage, drawing insight from relevant literature on the subject. The second theme, monetization strategies for small independent game developers, includes a discussion of the various monetization strategies employed by small independent game developers. The second theme includes an exploration of different approaches, models, and techniques used to generate revenue from games, drawing on relevant literature and contrasting theories. The second theme includes two subthemes. In the first subtheme, monetization opportunities through platform engagement, I delve into the various opportunities for monetization that arise through platform engagement. The first subtheme includes an exploration of the

strategies and techniques employed by small independent game developers to generate revenue from their games. In the second subtheme, assetization and monetization models in the games industry, I critically analyze and synthesize the strategies and techniques that small independent game developers use for assetization and monetization in the games industry.

The third theme, marketing strategies for small independent game developers, is focused on specific marketing strategies employed by small independent game developers. I compare different viewpoints and relationships between previous research and findings, highlighting successful marketing approaches. The third theme includes a subtheme, leveraging platforms for effective marketing strategies, which is focused on marketing strategies specific to small independent game developers. I examine how these developers can effectively utilize platforms to promote their games and reach their target audience. The fourth and final theme, future trends and innovations in marketing and monetization, includes a discussion of future trends and innovations in marketing and monetization strategies for small independent game developers. I explore emerging concepts, technologies, and approaches that may shape the industry going forward.

Application to the Applied Business Problem

The purpose of this qualitative, pragmatic inquiry study was to explore effective marketing and monetization strategies used by small independent game developers to complete projects within budget and on time. Drawing from an exhaustive review of professional and academic literature, the aim of this study was to bridge the existing knowledge gap. I used a qualitative, pragmatic inquiry study approach to explore and

develop a better understanding of the specific business practices and strategies in the context of independent game development. The findings from this study could provide insight into effective marketing and monetization strategies used by small independent game developers to complete projects within budget and on time.

The conclusions gathered from this study might assist other developers in the creation and application of effective strategies for marketing and monetization, which could enhance the success and sustainability of their projects. A better understanding of the underlying strategies could help equip developers with the necessary tools to improve their business practices, leading to increased profitability and competitiveness within the gaming industry. The implications for positive social change include the improved performance of small independent game development companies, which could lead to increased revenue, employment opportunities, and the fostering of diverse and inclusive gaming communities.

Platform Theory and its Application in Independent Game Development

Platform theory provided a lens through which the digital intermediary ecosystem can be understood. Rangaswamy et al. (2020) emphasized the importance of platform theory in understanding the digital intermediary ecosystem, where diverse user groups interact to facilitate transactions. Rooted in foundational work by researchers, such as Shapiro and Varian (1999), platform theory offers a framework for understanding how digital platforms operate to create, capture, and distribute value (Gawer, 2014). Platforms are digital intermediaries that link user groups, such as buyers and sellers, to facilitate boundary-spanning transactions that allow users to generate and seize value (Katz &

Shapiro, 1994; Kretschmer et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2020). Network effects are a key principle in platform theory, which refers to the phenomenon whereby a product, service, or platform becomes more valuable as more people use it (Cutolo & Grimaldi, 2023). The significance of platform theory becomes more pronounced when examining its application in the realm of self-publishing and digital platforms (Poniatowski et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2021). Platforms play an important role in game development, often serving a dual purpose acting as both fundraising and marketing campaigns (Lee et al., 2020). Successfully funded projects gain traction and build a robust community foundation, setting the stage for potential game success. Indeed, the transformative influence of platforms on game development has been well-documented, with streamers acting as gatekeepers to indie game success and crowdfunding holding significant sway on indie game success (Johnson & Woodcock, 2019; Parker & Perks, 2021; Victoria-Mas et al., 2023).

Platforms' capabilities extend beyond merely hosting content. Platforms are pivotal in setting directions, influencing choices, and dictating what game content reaches the masses. This showcases the profound power and influence platforms wield in shaping industries. Platforms like Kickstarter provide independent developers with the means to crowdfund their projects (Victoria-Mas et al., 2023). Communication platforms, such as those that host postmortems and Reddit AMAs, allow for game developers to share their processes and experiences (Lu et al., 2019). Livestreaming platforms are vital to many developers in showcasing their games to potential players (Parker & Perks, 2021). For example, Twitch, a major livestreaming platform, has been pivotal in shaping the content

direction of the games industry (Johnson & Woodcock, 2019). Indeed, Twitch has played an influential role in deciding what game content is broadcasted and viewed, indicating the force platforms can exert on the industry (Johnson & Woodcock, 2019).

Platform theory is useful in self-publishing to help illuminate digital platform dynamics (Zarifis & Cheng, 2022). Platforms adapt and innovate in response to industry changes (Lantano et al., 2022). For example, the transition from physical to digital game distribution has highlighted the significance of platform design and its user offerings (Blancaflor & San Miguel, 2022; Houssard et al., 2023). Dymek and Lankoski (2023) identified a diverse ecosystem that supports indie game development, which includes game platform technologies, asset stores, commission-based artists, and community platforms like Steam and Discord. This multifaceted digital environment indicates a shift in how games are developed, marketed, and distributed (Dymek & Lankoski, 2023). It is not just about obtaining funds, but about building a community, networking with artists, and leveraging multiple platforms to ensure a game's success (Dymek & Lankoski, 2023). The cocreational nature of these ecosystems showcases the collaborative spirit of the modern gaming industry. In this evolving landscape, indie developers need to be adaptable, leveraging a myriad of platforms and resources available to them.

The transformative nature of platforms is not only confined to game development. It is also found in other sectors like indie book publishing. The centrality of platforms in the digital ecosystems is unmistakable (Larson, 2022). Their dual nature, serving as both technological infrastructures and corporate entities influence the economic and socio-cultural trajectories of various domains. This underscored the need for a thorough

understanding of their pervasive influence in the digital age and highlights how platforms, even in derivative forms, have a broad-reaching impact on various sectors. The digital age has seen a transition in many traditional industries, notably the publishing sector, which now grapples with the amalgamation of traditional and platformized practices. Larson (2022) argued that the launch of Kindle in 2007 pivoted authors, a traditional group of creative workers, into platformized cultural producers. These "confluencers," as Larson termed them, operate in industries where both traditional and platformized modalities coexist and interact. These individuals navigate the challenges posed by the platformized environment but also have the advantage of leveraging both digital and pre-digital networks and traditions. Specifically, indie romance authors employ their rich history to shape collective perceptions concerning Kindle Unlimited (KU), challenging Amazon's dominant platform power (Larson, 2022). For indie self-published authors, the rise of eBook platforms has afforded publishing opportunities that have long been unavailable to authors outside of traditional publishing (Larson, 2022; Thomas et al., 2023; Yecies et al., 2020). While platforms offer new avenues and pose challenges, those working in legacy industries possess a unique advantage (Larson, 2022). They can strategically draw from both traditional and new-age practices, creating a balance that potentially empowers them against overarching platform influence (Larson, 2022). Understanding the central role that platform dynamics play in shaping the digital landscape can inform better business strategies.

Monetization Strategies for Small Independent Game Developers

Small independent game developers often face financial challenges and must consider various monetization strategies to thrive. In the contemporary digital era, the industry's transformation from physical to digital distribution necessitates an understanding of platform engagement and its implications. In the evolving landscape of the gaming industry, small independent game developers frequently grapple with financial constraints, making it imperative to delve into pioneering monetization techniques (Styhre & Remneland-Wikhamn, 2019). Farmer (2021) described how small indie game developers negotiate the tensions of haphazard work rhythms and uncertainty of financial security while attempting to grow the industry and attract more creators and consumers. Additionally, small independent game developers frequently grapple with financial constraints, making it imperative for them to explore innovative monetization techniques to sustain their work (Farmer, 2021).

The shift from physical to digital platforms has brought forth new challenges and opportunities, emphasizing the importance of understanding platform engagement, participatory design, and any subsequent repercussions (Thominet, 2021). Blancaflor and San Miguel (2022) argued that creators can make wise judgments about game monetization by weighing economic trade-offs such as distribution costs and changing consumer preferences. Further enriching this narrative, Aygoren and Koch (2021) emphasized the dual benefits of crowdfunding, pointing out that the fervor of community support can often outweigh actual funding numbers in terms of market success. Furthermore, game developers can glean insight from streamers' monetization methods,

which can serve as a blueprint for promoting and monetizing games on analogous platforms (Houssard et al., 2023). Styhre and Remneland-Wikhamn (2019) argued that independent game developers must navigate the tensions between designing novel and creative ideas and building a community. These highlights help show that funding does not necessarily equate to a successful long-term project, but rather, market success comes more from community engagement than initial funding amount.

Platforms have opened new avenues for indie developers to monetize their products, but indie developers need to be able to harness them for commercial success. Platforms play varying roles, from funding to community building, in the game development process. Dymek and Lankoski (2023) pointed out the significance of platforms like Patreon in the indie game development sector, highlighting the eclectic nature of platforms catering to different niches in the gaming world. Dymek and Lankoski's findings suggest that platforms are not just transactional entities but can be pivotal in shaping the identity, community, and success trajectory of a game. The specificity of platforms like Patreon, catering to niche markets, demonstrates the power of targeted community engagement in driving a game's success (Dymek & Lankoski, 2023). Recognizing the niche-specific potential of certain platforms can be instrumental for developers to make informed decisions about where and how to invest their resources.

Valve's Steam, a well-known sales platform for video games, boasts an intricate combination of retail and player-driven economies. Thorhaug (2022) examined the Steam platform and observed that, while the platform retains a traditional retail market catering to big game publishers, the emphasis is significantly on alternative market

contexts reliant on player-driven economies. Thorhauge identified three key economic transaction contexts within Steam: (a) the Steam Game Store, (b) the Steam Community Workshop, and (c) the Steam Community Market. These diverse contexts help highlight the multifaceted nature of the platform, necessitating developers to understand and navigate the intricacies of both traditional retail strategies and the more nuanced player-driven economies (Thorhauge, 2022). For developers, recognizing these multifaceted economic contexts can be pivotal, as it enables them to position their games effectively within the vast ecosystem of a platform like Steam.

According to Su (2023), forecasting revenue for their games is a significant monetization issue for indie developers. Stojiljković et al. (2021) highlighted the importance of crowdfunding for indie developers, specifically its pivotal role in monetization strategies. When faced with an absence of financial backing, crowdfunding represents a unique monetization strategy for indie developers (Victoria-Mas et al., 2023). The success of games like *Rocket League* on Twitch has demonstrated the monetization potential of platforms, especially for titles that may not have traditional marketing backing (Johnson & Woodcock, 2019). Kickstarter serves as a lens for indie developers to harness platforms for financing, a growing trend in the gaming industry (Stojiljković et al., 2021). Szopik-Depczyńska et al. (2020) argued that crowdfunding is a crucial monetization strategy for indie developers as it enables prerelease engagement and community building. Crowdfunding has become an integral strategy for video game development. According to Victoria-Mas et al. (2023), some video game development projects have increasingly utilized crowdfunding platforms like Kickstarter, showcasing a

steady growth rate in success since 2015. By 2020, 40.8% of these campaigns achieved their funding goals (Victoria-Mas et al., 2023). While the average funding amount for successful campaigns is notably high, it is critical to understand that half of the campaigns do not surpass \$1,748 USD in funding (Victoria-Mas et al., 2023). This discrepancy reveals the unpredictability and variability in crowdfunding success, indicating that while some projects gain significant traction, many others struggle to reach even modest financial goals (Victoria-Mas et al., 2023). As game development pivots towards digital platforms, understanding the dynamics of crowdfunding becomes crucial, especially in markets where the strategy is showing promise (Victoria-Mas et al., 2023). The games industry continues to evolve at a rapid rate, thus the need to understand monetization strategies through the lens of platform theory is imperative for small independent game developers. Recognizing the dynamics of platforms and capitalizing on their advantages might be the key to financial stability and success for small indies in this competitive landscape.

Monetization Opportunities Through Platform Engagement

Platforms present significant opportunities for content monetization, especially for independent creators. Shapiro and Varian (1999) viewed platforms as pivotal digital intermediaries, bridging disparate user groups for seamless transactions. Platforms, especially those serving as digital intermediaries, have emerged as game-changers in the domain of content monetization. Chang and Lee (2022) identified an interconnection between video games and online communities, implying that game developers can potentially tap into these communities for monetary gain. Within the broader spectrum of

platform literature, platforms are often characterized as "matching devices" tailored for two-sided markets, reinforcing their role in mediating transactions between diverse groups (Shapiro & Varian, 1999).

Crowdfunding platforms, particularly Kickstarter, have become integral for the development and success of video games. According to Victoria-Mas et al. (2023), Kickstarter has been employed extensively for video game development projects with campaigns experiencing a consistent success growth from 2015 to 2020 (Victoria-Mas et al., 2023). The average funding for these projects is \$17,584.69 USD, with successful campaigns garnering an average of \$53,082.60 USD (Victoria-Mas et al., 2023). The increased success rate of campaigns since 2015 shows a growing significance of crowdfunding in the video game industry (Victoria-Mas et al., 2023). The stark contrast between the average funding and the funding for successful campaigns suggests that while many projects might not secure substantial funds, those that resonate with audiences tend to garner significant financial backing (Victoria-Mas et al., 2023). Indie game development, particularly niche genres, relies heavily on a supportive ecosystem and platform engagement (Dymek & Lankoski, 2023). Dymek and Lankoski (2023) carried out a comprehensive study on indie game development. Their research identified vital components of the indie game ecosystem, which included game platform technologies, asset stores, commission-based artists, and various platforms like Patreon, Steam, and Discord. According to Dymek and Lankoski, an intricate network is required to support niche indie game development. By leveraging multiple platforms and resources, developers in specialized genres can foster creativity and navigate market

challenges (Dymek & Lankoski, 2023). Crowdfunding platforms like Patreon encourage the interplay between creators and their audience, allowing developers to gain support directly from their community (Dymek & Lankoski, 2023). The Steam platform, beyond just serving as a marketplace, plays a role in shaping player experiences and developer strategies (Rizani et al., 2023). Thorhauge (2022) analyzed the Steam platform, presenting it as a configuration of multiple market contexts. According to Thorhauge (2022), Steam is not just a retail market for large game publishers but also a hub for player-driven economies. Valve's multifaceted approach in operating Steam showcases the platform's intricate economic system (Thorhauge, 2022). By offering multiple transaction contexts, Steam supports a broad range of developers and players, promoting a diverse gaming ecosystem (Thorhauge, 2022). The alignment between player-driven economies and the platform's transactional contexts signifies a shift from conventional retail to a more integrated platform economy (Thorhauge, 2022). However, such an integrated approach, while providing multiple avenues for engagement, necessitates a comprehensive understanding of platform dynamics for both developers and players.

Digital game platforms provide small indie developers with opportunities to introduce and market their products in a competitive digital marketplace. There is a predominance of smaller game developers in the professional video game industry (Styhre & Remneland-Wikhamn, 2019). These developers frequently release games on commercial platforms like Steam, which witnessed a surge of 34 games being released per day in 2022 (Kontus, 2022). According to Jones (2024), that number rose to around 40 games per day in 2023. Entry into the Steam platform comes with a relatively low

barrier, but it also results in a crowded marketplace (Parker & Perks, 2021). To stand out, developers often utilize marketing activities like social media promotion and internal tools provided by Steam (Thorhauge, 2022). These tools, including developer-facing analytics, forums, and social media capabilities, aim to foster consumer engagement (Thorhauge, 2022). On Steam, one such engagement tool is the use of Tags (Windleharth et al., 2016). While useful for developers, Tags can sometimes be manipulated by consumers, resulting in potential misrepresentations (Arasu, 2023). The sheer volume of games released daily on Steam suggests the platform's significance in the modern digital game industry (Arasu, 2023). This importance is further emphasized by developers' reliance on platform-specific tools and marketing strategies. However, navigating these tools requires astute market insight, particularly when features like Tags can be manipulated and distort game representation (Arasu, 2023). Despite the potential challenges, platforms like Steam offer indispensable benefits and opportunities, especially for smaller indie developers.

Digital platforms have a broader impact on socio-economic transformations and development. The digital economy, facilitated by platforms, has ushered in significant socio-economic changes across society (Fu et al., 2021). The proliferation of these platforms has been instrumental in shaping the modern economy. The broader implications of digital platforms extend beyond mere economic gains. Platforms like Steam, while being commercial hubs, are also part of the broader tapestry of the digital economy, influencing societal transformations and shaping the way industries evolve. As digital platforms continue to dominate various sectors, understanding their multifaceted

role is crucial for future innovation and development. For example, Larson (2022) highlighted Kindle's 2007 introduction where authors began adeptly navigating both digital and conventional platforms. For self-published indie authors, third-party intermediary platforms like Kindle have been instrumental in helping many achieve sustainable success. Indeed, according to Thomas et al. (2023), indie authors experienced a 50% increase in income from self-publishing in 2022, surpassing traditional publishing earnings. Engaging with platforms can unlock unique monetization prospects for small independent creators across fields.

Recognizing the power of platforms is fundamental to maximizing opportunities in the modern digital landscape. There is a need for small independent game developers to leverage platform engagement for better monetization and outreach. Digital intermediaries like Amazon Kindle, Steam, and Kickstarter have become crucial in numerous sectors. The 2007 launch of Amazon Kindle revolutionized the traditional author role, ushering in the era of platform-based cultural production for indie self-published authors (Larson, 2022). According to Larson (2022), indie romance authors have crafted strategies that offer a form of resistance against the dominant forces of platforms like Amazon, to successful ends. Thomas et al. (2023) highlighted how indie authors, dedicating at least half of their working hours to writing or self-publishing, reported average earnings of \$12,755 in 2022. According to Thomas et al., this figure marked a significant 50% rise from the previous year. While such earnings may require additional income sources for a sustainable living, the data revealed that indie self-

published authors generally earn nearly 50% higher earnings from their writing compared to traditional routes (Thomas et al., 2023).

This shift in platform dynamics is not unique to eBook publishing, but is seen across various creative industries (Larson, 2022). According to Szopik-Depczyńska et al. (2020), the video game market has developed rapidly over the last several years, which is due largely to the benefits available to users and the profits that some indie games achieve. Platforms, such as Google Play, Apple App Store, Steam, PlayStation Store, and Xbox Game Store offer convenient access to products and services for players like never before (Szopik-Depczyńska et al., 2020). For small independent game developers, this means potential customers and revenue (Szopik-Depczyńska et al., 2020). Small independent developers increasingly rely on crowdfunding platforms like Kickstarter to overcome the challenges of securing funding through traditional means. This trend is driven by the reluctance of traditional publishers and venture capitalists to invest in niche or innovative game genres, exacerbating the difficulties in attracting traditional funding and driving an industry shift towards direct consumer engagement (Planells, 2017). Kickstarter presents an opportunity to bypass traditional gatekeepers by allowing developers to directly appeal to fans for support, thereby fostering a more direct connection with their audience. According to Planells (2017), this approach not only democratizes the funding process but also empowers developers to pursue creative projects without publisher-imposed constraints. The potential to bridge multiple disparate markets can amplify the value for all involved, especially when network effects are at play. The diverse platform engagement observed in the niche genres of indie game

development mirrors the broader indie gaming landscape's dependence on platforms for funding, exposure, and community building. Notably, for indie creators and game developers, platforms pave the way for broader reach, monetization, and community engagement.

Assetization and Monetization Models in the Games Industry

The evolution of game monetization strategies points to a substantial trend toward assetization, reshaping how independent game developers approach funding and revenue generation (Bernevega & Gekker, 2022). This trend presents both opportunities and challenges, particularly for small independent game developers. The changing dynamics of platform-based funding represent emerging models of assetization and monetization. In line with this, platforms have begun offering novel means for creators to treat their content as valuable assets and diversify their income streams (Lankoski et al., 2023). A prime example is the crowdfunding model where an appealing game concept is treated as a sellable asset to entice investors (Planells, 2017; Victoria-Mas et al., 2023). Additionally, free-to-play and Game as a Service (GaaS) models have changed how monetization paradigms are thought of, redefining games as long-term sources of income (Bernevega & Gekker, 2022). High-caliber titles like *Fortnite*, *Apex Legends*, and *Call of Duty: Warzone* have not only embraced these monetization practices but have also set industry standards for them (Bernevega & Gekker, 2022).

Independent game developers have been increasingly leveraging crowdfunding platforms as a pivotal means for funding their projects. Platforms like Kickstarter have evolved to be more than just fundraising tools as they provide a lens into market

dynamics and preferences of the gaming community (Victoria-Mas et al., 2023). Research by Victoria-Mas et al. (2023) revealed that crowdfunding, specifically via Kickstarter, is a crucial funding source for video game developers. The steady, continuous growth trajectory of the success rates of campaigns from 2015 to 2020 illustrates the growing acceptance and trust in the platform by both developers and backers, suggesting that the gaming community is gradually opening to the idea of supporting projects in their nascent stages, trusting in their potential and that of the developers behind them (Victoria-Mas et al., 2023). This evolving trust dynamic emphasizes the role of platforms in shaping the future of indie game development, making them indispensable in the modern digital landscape. However, while successful campaigns managed to garner an average funding of \$53,082.60 USD, it is noteworthy that the median value suggested that half of crowdfunded video game projects do not exceed \$1,752.92 USD in their funding achievements (Victoria-Mas et al., 2023). This disparity between the average and median values suggests that while some campaigns gain significant traction and monetary support, many others struggle, indicating the inherent challenges and competitive nature of crowdfunding. This disparity reflects that, even within an enabling platform like Kickstarter, success is not guaranteed and often hinges on various factors, such as the marketability of the game concept or the marketing efforts put into the campaign (Victoria-Mas et al., 2023). While crowdfunding offers a beacon of hope for small indie developers, it also underscores the importance of strategic planning and understanding of platform dynamics to help ensure successful funding.

The gradual shift towards platform-based funding presents a paradigm shift in how games are both conceptualized and monetized. While this evolution offers new opportunities, it also brings unique challenges, especially for small independent game developers, who often struggle due to a lack of structured production and distribution frameworks (Farmer, 2021). Farmer (2021) maintained that young industry players face challenges such as small budgets, disorganized work patterns, financial security, and uncertainties. These challenges are not unique to indie game development. Even larger studios have their fair share of challenges, including workplace hierarchies, diversity, labor conditions, toxic player communities, and normalization of the status quo (Politowski et al., 2021). Švelch (2021) cited inexperienced management as a common cause, which often ends with poor decisions justified with romanticization. Despite the many challenges they regularly face, small indie game developers work to attract creators and consumers (Farmer, 2021).

The global video game industry is massive, with independent developers earning only a small percentage of the industry's revenue (Styhre & Remneland-Wikhamn, 2019). Without a structured production and distribution mechanism in place, small indie developers often find their games competing in a sea of titles by not only other small developers, but larger indies and Triple-A studios as well (Lysova & Khapova, 2019). Due to these challenges, many small indies find themselves overwhelmed in their attempts to navigate this rapidly transforming landscape (Farmer, 2021). However, adversity can drive innovative financing and marketing practices in the gaming realm (Szopik-Depczyńska et al., 2020).

Drawing parallels from other sectors, platforms have become more than just technical structures. As noted by Rietveld and Schilling (2021), platforms now encompass companies, services, and tools that shape market dynamics. Platforms' influences are not limited to game developers. Professionals from other areas, like indie self-published authors, have had their strategies impacted due to the dominance of platforms (Larson, 2022). However, even amidst potential challenges, there's evidence of diversified income patterns for indie authors using these platforms, suggesting that the right business and distribution strategies can still lead to success even against dominant platforms powers (Larson, 2022; Thomas et al., 2023). The assetization of games reflects a shift in how the industry views and monetizes video games, with a focus on continuous value generation and long-term revenue streams (Bernevega & Gekker, 2022). The trajectory of the games industry demonstrates the pervasive influence of platforms, underscoring the need for stakeholders to understand, adapt, and leverage these changes for sustainable growth.

Marketing Strategies for Small Independent Game Developers

The marketing success of small independent game developers relies on understanding industry dynamics and platform theory when designing marketing strategies. For small independent game developers, crafting an impactful marketing strategy requires an acute awareness of the industry's intricacies and dynamics, something which has proved challenging to many small developers (Politowski et al., 2021). Given the crucial impact that perception plays, small independent game developers must navigate the polished public relations image that the games industry

promotes (Bergstrom, 2022). According to Chew (2022), gamers are not exactly fans or audiences, but rather active participants in the game industry. Community participation is particularly relevant to small independent game developers seeking to improve their commercial interests, especially when game design and development optimization is utilized as a marketing point for targeted audiences (Pescarin et al., 2020; Styhre & Remneland-Wikhamn, 2019). According to Aygoren and Koch (2021), community participation fosters player loyalty and advocacy, thus making it a useful indirect marketing strategy that goes beyond conventional marketing strategies. Echoing this sentiment, Cai et al. (2022) highlighted the significance of grasping player motivations behind in-game purchases, thereby tailoring marketing campaigns accordingly.

Furthermore, the importance of perceived authenticity and gamer loyalty as a marketing tactic is paramount to future game sales (Styhre & Remneland-Wikhamn, 2019). This player-centric approach is further reinforced by Chang and Lee (2022), who advocated for a profound understanding of user attitudes to effectively inform marketing strategies. Houssard et al. (2023) highlighted the promise of sites like Twitch.tv, where independent developers can attract niche audiences. Indeed, Twitch has emerged as a key platform for indie game marketing, highlighting the potential impact of livestreaming on a game's visibility and sales (Johnson & Woodcock, 2019). Livestreaming, in its essence, is a promotional tool. Developers can engage with their audience directly, receive immediate feedback, and build a community around their game (Parker & Perks, 2021).

Independent creators, whether in game development or book publishing, share challenges in leveraging online platforms for visibility and success. Sheelam and Mahesh

(2020) argued that self-published indie authors actively seek online platforms to market their works due to a lack of traditional publishing marketing pathways. These authors have experienced growth in the publishing sector and recognize the need for specialized marketing strategies (Sheelam & Mahesh, 2020). Indie authors are aware of the vast potential of online platforms and the importance of understanding and utilizing platform-centric strategies effectively (Sheelam & Mahesh, 2020). The rising use of online platforms by indie creators highlights the need for a deeper examination of platform theory in diverse creative fields. Traditional creative industries and modern digital platforms can intersect, resulting in unique challenges and strategies for indie creators. Larson (2022) argued that the arrival of Kindle turned authors into “platformized cultural producers.” However, while disruptive technologies such as Kindle and YouTube have given rise to new digital creators, many artists from legacy sectors such as traditional publishing must merge traditional practices with new platformized ones (Larson, 2022). This confluence of old and new methods presents unique challenges, but it also offers opportunities such as the ability to tap into both digital and traditional networks, thus allowing creators to carve their own niche and to craft strategies that resist dominant platform powers.

Much like indie published book authors, successful marketing for indie game developers is multifaceted. Social media platforms, when leveraged properly, offer great potential for marketing and monetization opportunities (Rugova & Prenaj, 2016). These platforms often serve a dual purpose, acting both as fundraising and marketing campaigns. Successfully funded projects gain traction and build a robust community

foundation, setting the stage for a game's potential success. However, it is not just about promoting a game but understanding industry dynamics, player motivations, and leveraging platforms effectively. Indeed, Farmer (2021) emphasized the necessity of proactive marketing to ensure visibility in a saturated market landscape. Therefore, for small independent game developers, an informed approach that aligns with industry dynamics, backed by platform theory's principles, is critical for effective marketing and overall success.

Leveraging Platforms for Effective Marketing Strategies

In today's evolving digital landscape, platforms have become essential marketing tools in various industries, connecting users for enhanced interactions and transactions. Blancaflor and San Miguel (2022) highlighted the preference of game companies to prioritize digital versions over physical copies, underscoring the power of e-commerce platforms in shaping consumption patterns. Cai et al. (2022) maintained that comprehending player motivations becomes instrumental in devising targeted marketing maneuvers. Furthering this notion, Chang and Lee (2022) highlighted how online communities, nurtured on platforms, increase the likelihood of gaming engagement. Chew (2022) highlighted the significant influence of platforms on gamer perceptions, particularly through strategic media campaigns, which help shape perspectives and subsequent actions.

Platforms have profoundly impacted the marketing landscape, particularly in the gaming industry. Games like *Rocket League* and PlayerUnknown's *Battlegrounds* have expertly harnessed the marketing potential of Twitch, demonstrating how platforms can

be strategically leveraged for substantial sales and increased visibility (Johnson & Woodcock, 2019). The shift towards platform-centric strategies in the gaming world demonstrates how vital it is for companies, especially independent game developers, to embrace platforms. Small independent game developers would do well to leverage platforms to their own advantage. Yet, for many small indie developers, leveraging these platforms can be an uphill battle. The challenges faced by small indie game developers in leveraging platforms are substantial, especially in terms of discoverability (Parker & Perks, 2021). Parker and Perks (2021) examined the impact of livestreaming on production, promotion, and community-building and found that, despite popular myths about streaming as a route to “discoverability,” indie games remain uncertain careers. Politowski et al. (2021) highlighted issues with targeting the wrong audience and the fact that indie games attract only a tiny fraction of the overall audience on streaming platforms, making it difficult for them to stand out. Triple-A studios benefit greatly from livestreaming, but for small low-budget games, the costs and benefits remain ambiguous (Parker & Perks, 2021). These findings reflect the intense competition and power imbalances on platforms, where larger Triple-A studios dominate, leaving smaller developers grappling for attention. This dichotomy presents what may seem like an overwhelming challenge to small indie developers who do not have the time and resources afforded to larger indies and Triple-A studios, but small independents in other domains have managed to leverage platforms to their own commercial advantage.

Self-published authors have adeptly harnessed platforms for effective marketing. Drawing parallels to the book industry, according to Thomas et al. (2023), indie authors

have successfully leveraged self-publishing platforms, resulting in an eclipse of their traditionally published counterparts in earnings. Just as these authors have successfully leveraged strategies to gain visibility and success, there is an opportunity for small independent developers to apply similar approaches, given the commonalities between the two industries. According to Farmer (2021) and Pereira (2021), making and selling videogames requires a diverse set of skills, including marketing, team management, analytics, community building, and business acumen. Indie developers must manage risks in making, marketing, and selling video games while also doing all the legwork required to manage marketing, game releases, pitching, promotion, and communication with fans and other creators (Farmer, 2021; Pereira, 2021). Small independent developers must juggle these responsibilities while laying the groundwork for future games, building an active fan base, and figuring out how to price their game in an industry lacking standardized pricing for indie games (Farmer, 2021; Ho et al., 2022; Pereira, 2021). Platforms, in their varied forms, have evolved to be a crucial part of industries. Understanding their dynamics is essential for any business strategy. While challenges are present, especially in terms of power dynamics and market monopolization, platforms offer unique opportunities for creators, consumers, and businesses alike. The success of indie authors signifies that, despite challenges, platforms can be used effectively by independent creators to reach wider audiences and achieve commercial success. Understanding platform dynamics and adapting strategies accordingly can afford small indie game developers promising opportunities.

Future Trends and Innovations in Marketing and Monetization

The landscape of marketing and monetization is evolving, with profound shifts in crowdfunding community dynamics, innovative research methods, and changing marketing and monetization strategies in the gaming industry. As industries continuously evolve in the digital age, platforms remain central in catalyzing transformative shifts, especially in realms like game development. Platforms serve as vibrant intersections where myriad user groups congregate, fostering dynamic interactions and transactions. The consistent growth and influence of platforms such as Twitch offer glimpses into future marketing and monetization trajectories within the gaming industry. The evolving role of platforms underscores the potential shifts in how games will be marketed and monetized in the coming years, with livestreaming platforms playing an increasingly central role (Johnson & Woodcock, 2019). A glimpse into the future of marketing and monetization reveals trends driven by both community and technology. Aygoren and Koch (2021) highlighted an intriguing paradigm in crowdfunding where the traditional focus on financial yields is giving way to more intangible, yet impactful, community dynamics. This evolution suggests an industry poised to prioritize engagement and relationships over sheer monetary outcomes.

Bernevega and Gekker (2022) highlighted a shift, wherein the business model has transitioned from the sale of individual game units to an emphasis on games as continuous, renewable revenue streams. This approach underscores the industry's readiness to adapt and align with evolving consumer behaviors and technological advances. Echoing this, Blancaflor and San Miguel (2022) delved into the game

industry's pivot towards digital distribution, a tectonic shift that signifies a departure from tangible sales while also pointing towards innovative marketing and monetization strategies in the foreseeable future. This shift towards continuous revenue models and digital distribution signifies the industry's proactive adaptation to changing consumer behaviors and technological advancements (Blancaflor & San Miguel, 2022). It reflects a holistic approach, where games are not just products but evolving entities that can offer sustained engagement and revenue. With platforms serving as melting pots for user interactions, they hold the potential to significantly influence marketing trajectories (Aygoren & Koch, 2021). Additionally, the shift in monetization priorities from merely financial to community-based dynamics indicates a broader change in the industry's approach to value creation (Aygoren & Koch, 2021). As platforms continue to exert influence, their integration into independent game development becomes increasingly imperative, setting the stage for a discussion on the continued evolution of revenue models in the industry.

As the landscape of marketing and monetization evolves, platforms are central to these shifts, especially in the realm of game development. Platforms, particularly those related to gaming, have evolved to become vital intersections for user interactions and transactions (Larson, 2022). The growth of such platforms provides insights into future marketing and monetization paths in the gaming industry (Johnson & Woodcock, 2019). While these platforms serve as venues for gaming content, they also catalyze transformative shifts in how games are marketed and monetized. As such platforms continue to grow, they offer a preview of the significant changes awaiting the gaming

industry, especially with the rising prominence of livestreaming platforms (Johnson & Woodcock, 2019). Recognizing the power and potential of platforms is crucial for independent game developers, as it paves the way for novel monetization and marketing strategies.

With the landscape of game sales undergoing transformation, it becomes essential to delve deeper into the technological innovations shaping many of these changes. The public perception and reaction to artificial intelligence (AI) technologies like ChatGPT provide insight into the potential applications and implications of AI in the gaming industry (Trim, 2023). Taecharungroj's (2023) study on public reactions to ChatGPT on Twitter (now X) reveals its versatile functionalities, including creative writing, code writing, and answering queries. Taecharungroj argued that the impact of AI technologies has the potential to be both positive and negative. Recognizing the areas where AI chatbots excel (e.g., creative and code writing) can guide developers in integrating these technologies into engaging gameplay and rich narratives (Taecharungroj, 2023). Simultaneously, understanding any potential negative implications can help in addressing challenges and mitigating concerns (Taecharungroj, 2023). As AI technologies like ChatGPT continue to influence public opinion, examining their application in specific gaming scenarios becomes imperative. As technology advances, it is imperative for developers, especially those in the independent sector, to keep pace with AI's potential and its implications. Shaik (2023) argued that AI could play a significant role in enhancing marketing strategies for small businesses. According to Shaik, AI is capable of

assisting marketing managers in various tasks such as lead generation, market research, social media management, and personalized user experiences.

The continued evolution of AI in gaming sets the stage for future innovations, necessitating a deeper understanding and application by independent developers. Indeed, the surge in AI capabilities within gaming showcases the potential and challenges for independent game developers (Melhart et al., 2023). AI technologies are transforming the game development industry through revolutionary changes, enhancing player experiences and offering innovative gameplay mechanisms. These advancements contribute to more immersive gaming experiences, but also present challenges related to marketing dynamics and addressing ethical concerns (Melhart et al., 2023). While AI provides a new layer of complexity and realism to games, developers must ensure that AI-powered gameplay remains enjoyable and ethically sound. According to Mondal et al. (2023), AI technology has the potential to improve people's quality of life and its applications in various industries should be tempered with proper management and regulation. By understanding the complexities and techniques of these successful AI systems, developers can refine their AI integrations, tailoring them to different game genres and ensuring optimized player experiences. As the landscape of AI in gaming evolves, staying updated on the latest techniques and challenges becomes a cornerstone for successful game development. The games industry must adapt their marketing and monetization strategies to stay relevant and successful. This is especially true for small independent game developers. Understanding the ever-shifting landscape of the industry is not just about sustainability but also about thriving. Recognizing the importance of community

interactions, monetization patterns, and embracing new innovations and disruptive technologies can offer small independent game developers a competitive edge in an increasingly crowded and evolving market.

Transition

Section 1 laid the foundation of the study. It provided the background to the problem. It defined the business problem and the purpose of the study, which was focused on identifying and exploring effective marketing and monetization strategies used by small independent game developers to complete projects within budget and on time. It provided operational definitions and discussed population and sampling, the nature of the study, the research question and interview questions, as well as any assumptions, limitations, and delimitations. I used platform theory as its conceptual framework and a qualitative, pragmatic inquiry study approach to conduct an in-depth exploration of the topic. The study is expected to provide meaningful and significant insight into the phenomenon, potentially driving business practices, and promoting social change in the games industry.

In Section 2, I will delve into the project's specifics, discussing in detail the study's purpose, the role of the researcher, participants, research method and design, population and sampling, ethical considerations, data collection and organization techniques, data analysis, and the reliability and validity of the study and its conclusions. In Section 3, I will provide a presentation of the findings and discuss potential implications for practice, social change, and future research.

Section 2: The Project

The goal of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry study was to identify and explore effective marketing and monetization strategies used by small independent game developers to complete projects within budget and on time. I sought to provide insight into the various marketing and monetization strategies used by independent game developers to promote and sell their games to a wider audience, as well as the challenges they face in the process. My aim was to develop an understanding that would contribute to strategies enabling small independent game developers to complete their projects within budget and on time, thereby increasing their chances of success in the competitive gaming industry. This section of this study outlines the study's purpose, the role of the researcher, participants, the research method and design, population and sampling strategies, data collection instruments and techniques, data organization techniques, data analysis, reliability and validity, as well as ethical considerations. An introduction to the project section has been provided. The focus will now shift to the purpose statement.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry study was to identify and explore effective marketing and monetization strategies used by small independent game developers to complete projects within budget and on time.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher in the data collection process was to identify and contact potential participants for the study, collect and analyze data, and draw conclusions based on the results. To begin, I recruited potential participants by reaching

out to successful independent game developers who had experience marketing and monetizing independent game projects. Wray and Barrett (2022) suggested that using an interview protocol allows researchers to gain in-depth insights from participants while providing flexibility in questioning within the study's scope. I utilized an interview protocol to develop detailed information from participants while maintaining a structured yet adaptable approach to the interviews. As someone passionate about independent game development, I acknowledged my vested interest in this topic. To mitigate personal biases, I used a structured interview guide and sought feedback from peers throughout the research process to ensure objectivity. Wray and Barrett suggested that conducting semistructured interviews is effective for gathering qualitative data on specific strategies and their effectiveness. I conducted semistructured interviews to collect qualitative data on specific strategies and evaluate their effectiveness.

I adhered to an ethical protocol as outlined by the Belmont Report, which provides core principles for research involving human subjects. Specifically, I abided by the principles of *Respect for Persons*, *Beneficence*, and *Justice* (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). I ensured that potential participants fully understood the purpose of the study, the nature of their participation, and any potential risks. Informed consent was obtained to ensure participants voluntarily agreed to participate without coercion. Given that the study involved semistructured interviews, participants were informed about the topics to be discussed and had the option to withdraw at any time. As the researcher, my duty was to minimize potential harm and maximize potential benefits by designing the study to avoid

distress or discomfort to participants. Confidentiality was maintained by removing any identifying information from responses, preventing the identification of individual participants. I also ensured that participant selection was fair and equitable by reaching out to successful independent game developers without discrimination or bias. To further reduce potential biases in data interpretation, I employed strategies such as member checking, where participants validated the accuracy of my interpretations of the data collected, and methodological triangulation to corroborate findings using multiple sources or methods. The benefits and burdens of the research were distributed fairly among potential participants. While my primary responsibilities as the researcher involved data collection, analysis, and drawing conclusions, I also had a significant ethical responsibility. I adhered to the principles outlined in *The Belmont Report* to ensure the protection, respect, and ethical treatment of participants throughout the research process.

Once the data were collected, I analyzed them and drew conclusions using statistical analysis tools and other methods to identify patterns and trends. Based on the findings, I made recommendations to guide future research and industry practices, as well as to inform best practices for independent game developers seeking to market and monetize their projects effectively. As the researcher, my role was crucial in ensuring the successful implementation of the study. I aimed to access valuable insights and experiences from successful independent game developers to identify patterns and trends and provide a foundation for drawing meaningful conclusions. Through this study, I sought to contribute valuable findings to the academic community and the broader field

of independent game development. The role of the researcher has been provided. The focus will now shift to the participants.

Participants

For this study, the sample consisted of four small independent game developers who had successfully marketed and monetized their projects for delivery. The overarching research question focused on understanding the strategies used by these developers, making their insights crucial for the study. The sample included four leaders or managers within small independent game development studios or single developers who had independently marketed and monetized their game projects. Participants had experience in the gaming industry and knowledge of marketing and monetization techniques. The study included participants whose games spanned multiple platforms, including mobile, PC, and console. Additionally, the sample included developers who had employed various strategies, such as social media marketing, influencer marketing, email marketing, and paid advertising. However, due to the small sample size, it was not feasible to achieve representation of all possible types of developers and strategies.

Gaining access to participants in a niche industry, such as independent game development, was challenging. As someone familiar with the gaming community, I recognized its close-knit nature and the importance of transparency and trust in this study. Several strategies were employed to facilitate the recruitment process and foster productive relationships. Using virtual networks, like social media, can help researchers reach more people and make their samples more representative, especially when studying hard-to-reach groups, by allowing access to individuals who might otherwise be difficult

to find (Baltar & Brunet, 2012). I used online platforms such as LinkedIn, Twitter, and industry-specific forums or platforms (e.g., IndieDB, Itch.io, and gamedev.net) to gain direct access to potential participants, explaining the purpose and importance of the study and emphasizing the value their insights could bring to the industry. After identifying a few key participants, I used a snowball sampling approach, asking for recommendations of others who met the study criteria, as recommended by Goodman (1961). This method was effective in reaching participants within a tightly knit community, where developers often collaborate and share experiences. To build trust and mutual respect, I adopted strategies to ensure transparency about the research objectives, process, and how the results would be used. I answered any questions from potential participants to ensure they fully understood their role in the research. According to Attia and Edge (2017), researchers need to take time to think carefully about what is happening in their study and actively engage with participants by crafting methods that are responsive to the research environment. Transparency and clear communication between researchers and participants are critical for fostering trust (Guillemin et al., 2018). According to Guillemin et al. (2018), researchers should provide participants with detailed information about the research process, their role, and any potential risks or benefits of participation. Additionally, transparency is crucial in fostering trust and ensuring that participants fully understand their involvement in the research (Guillemin et al., 2018). I obtained informed consent, maintained confidentiality, and carefully considered the impact of the research on participants. This practice helped ensure participants fully understood their involvement in the study and fostered a sense of trust. According to Guillemin et al., it is

necessary that researchers address concerns about confidentiality and anonymity with participants and to clearly outline how their personal information will be handled and protected. This practice helps to build trust and ensures that participants feel comfortable and secure in their participation in the research (Guillemin et al., 2018). I ensured participants that their personal information and responses would be handled with utmost confidentiality, including the use of pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Despite a limited sample size, the inclusion of experienced leaders, managers, and independent developers who had successfully marketed and monetized game development projects provided valuable insight into the industry. With clearly established eligibility criteria and effective engagement strategies, the participants' experiences were central to addressing the research question. Recruitment of the participants has been provided. The focus will now shift to the research method and the design.

Research Method and Design

In this section, I outline the research methodology and design used in this study. A qualitative pragmatic inquiry study design was chosen to investigate the experiences of participants. I will begin by describing the research method.

Research Method

Qualitative research is a suitable approach for understanding and exploring subjective experiences. The aim of qualitative research is to provide useful knowledge that enables effective actions (Åkerlind, 2012). Qualitative research methods, such as interviews and online documentation, allow researchers to gather rich data that offer insight into participants' experiences, attitudes, and behaviors. I selected the qualitative

research methodology because I aimed to explore subjective narratives, making it more appropriate for this study than a quantitative or mixed methods approach. This choice was justified by the study's purpose, which sought to identify and explore subjective experiences and complex phenomena rather than quantitatively measure or compare variables.

The qualitative research methodology was particularly relevant for this study. Through qualitative research, I explored the intricacies of participants' experiences and gained valuable insights into their business strategies. This approach provided a comprehensive understanding of the marketing and monetization strategies employed by small independent game developers, highlighting their subjective experiences and the complexities of their practices. The research method has been provided. The focus will now shift to a detailed description and justification of the design decisions.

Research Design

The pragmatic inquiry study design is a powerful approach that enables researchers to conduct a comprehensive analysis of complex phenomenon in real-life settings. This design allows researchers to compare different experiences, identify common themes, and develop a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2015). Additionally, pragmatic inquiry facilitates the identification of potential best practices across cases, offering valuable insights for practitioners (Patton, 2015). A pragmatic inquiry design was appropriate for this study as it supported a robust identification and exploration of the experiences of small independent game developers.

According to Yin (2018), pragmatic inquiry enables researchers to investigate phenomena within real-life contexts, offering the flexibility to explore practical and meaningful solutions. I chose this approach over other qualitative designs, such as ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory, and narrative research, to identify and explore the experiences of small independent game developers and gain insights into their marketing and monetization strategies. This approach allowed me to delve deeply into the intricacies of the phenomenon while preserving its holistic and meaningful characteristics. Unlike other qualitative methods, pragmatic inquiry provides the breadth and depth offered needed for comparative analysis (Patton, 2015). A pragmatic inquiry design aligned with my research objective to gain a comprehensive understanding of marketing and monetization strategies used by small independent game developers, enabling the identification of common themes and potential best practices that can enhance their business practices. Achieving data saturation involves collecting data until new information produces little or no change in themes or insights, thus requiring no additional data (Bougie & Sekaran, 2019; Guest et al., 2006; Morse, 2015; Saunders et al., 2015). I reached data saturation after the fourth interview, as the fourth participant's responses did not provide any new themes or insights. An overview of the research method and design has been provided. The next section will focus on the population and sampling strategy.

Population and Sampling

The choice of population and sampling strategy was critical to ensure that the participants could provide rich and meaningful data to address the research question. The

population typically consists of a specific group of individuals or cases that share characteristics related to the research question (Yin, 2018). The population can be defined by a range of factors, such as age, gender, ethnicity, profession, or location, depending on the research question. The goal is to select a population that is relevant to the research question and capable of providing rich and detailed information (Yin, 2018). In this study, the population consisted of four small independent game developers who had successfully marketed and monetized their projects. The selection of this population was essential to gather rich and detailed information into the strategies used by small independent game developers. The insights derived from this group were pivotal in addressing this study's objectives. By focusing on this specific group, I aimed to gain insights directly relevant to the research question and develop a comprehensive understanding of effective marketing and monetization strategies employed by this segment of the games industry. The following paragraph provides a more detailed description and justification of the sampling strategy.

Sampling is the process of selecting a subset of the population to participate in a study. Purposive sampling involves selecting participants based on their relevance to the research question and their potential to provide rich and meaningful data (Saunders et al., 2015). Purposive, or judgmental sampling, allows the researcher to target individuals who have a unique perspective on the research question or who have direct experience with the phenomenon being studied (Saunders et al., 2015). Purposive sampling is frequently used when working with relatively small sample sizes and when the researcher aims to select instances that are particularly relevant to the research (Saunders et al., 2015). For

this study, I used the purposive sampling strategy to select participants based on their relevance to the research question. Small independent game developers who had successfully marketed and monetized their projects were chosen, as they possessed the necessary insights and experiences to contribute valuable data. Convenience sampling, a nonprobability sampling technique that involves selecting participants based on their availability and willingness to participate, was considered for this study (Zsila et al., 2022). However, according to Zsila et al. (2022), a convenience sampling method has limitations and cannot allow for general conclusions about the population of gamers, which could lead to biased results and limit the generalizability of the findings. In contrast, purposive sampling allows for the targeting of specific groups of interest, resulting in a more representative sample and increasing the validity and generalizability of the findings (Saunders et al., 2015). Given the specific focus of this study and the need for in-depth exploration, purposive sampling was particularly appropriate for identifying participants who could provide meaningful insight into effective marketing and monetization strategies used in independent game development. For this reason, a purposive sampling method was chosen over others.

The target population for this study was four independent game developers. To align with this study's operational definition of small independent game developers, I recruited four small indie developers from a global, online population who were unaffiliated with large triple-A studios or publishers. The rationale for this specific number was grounded in qualitative research practices, which prioritize depth over breadth. Participants were selected based on two main criteria: (a) They had to be small

independent game developers, and (b) they had successfully marketed and monetized at least one of their games. These criteria ensured that participants had relevant and firsthand experience related to the research question. The number of participants was guided by the concept of data saturation, the point in data collection and analysis when new information produces little or no change (Bougie & Sekaran, 2019; Guest et al., 2006; Morse, 2015; Saunders et al., 2015). Interviews were conducted virtually in settings comfortable for participants, promoting open and honest communication and yielding more comprehensive data. After each interview, I preliminarily analyzed the data for emerging themes. Data saturation was concluded once no new themes emerged from the interviews (Bougie & Sekaran, 2019; Fusch & Ness, 2015; Guest et al., 2006; Morse, 2015; Saunders et al., 2015). By carefully selecting the population, sampling method, and number of participants, I aimed to gather rich and meaningful data directly applicable to the research question. An overview of the population and sampling has been provided. The focus will now shift to ethical research.

Ethical Research

Ethical considerations are paramount in conducting proper research and must be at the forefront of the research process (Yin, 2018). The informed consent process was a crucial component of the ethical considerations for this study as recommended by the National Research Council (2003). I provided an informed consent form that clearly outlined the purpose of the study, potential risks and benefits of participation, the voluntary nature of participation, and participants' right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. To facilitate this process, I included clear instructions on how

to withdraw and provided my contact information for any concerns or questions. The informed consent form also detailed measures to protect participants' confidentiality and privacy, as well as their business/studio and intellectual property. The informed consent form serves as a clear agreement between the researcher and participants, outlining essential aspects such as purpose, risks, benefits, and confidentiality (Saunders et al., 2015). Participants were briefed with a concise explanation of the study and given ample time to review the informed consent form and ask questions before signing it. The signed consent forms were stored securely, separate from the research data, to ensure confidentiality and privacy. Prioritizing ethical considerations ensured that participants' rights were protected throughout the research process. By adhering to ethical guidelines, I maintained participants' confidentiality and privacy, contributing to the overall integrity and reliability of the research findings.

Ethical guidelines and procedures were followed to protect participants in the study. To ensure their ethical protection, I adhered to the guidelines provided by *The Belmont Report* (U. S. Department of Health & Human Services, 1979) the Walden IRB and conducted the research in an unbiased and objective manner. The raw data collected from the study will be stored securely, accessible only to authorized personnel, and retained for a period of 5 years to protect the rights of the participants. The Walden IRB approval number is #12-21-23-1156604. By adhering to these ethical guidelines, I ensured the study was conducted respectfully and responsibly, protecting the rights, confidentiality, and privacy of all participants. These measures demonstrated a commitment to conducting ethical research. Adherence to *The Belmont Report* and

Walden IRB guidelines provided a structured framework for responsible research practices. Through secure data storage and the exclusion of identifiable information, I maintained participants' confidentiality. Following these ethical guidelines and procedures protected participants' rights, confidentiality, and privacy and contributed to the overall credibility and trustworthiness of the research findings.

According to Fry et al. (2019), it is common in some research to provide incentives to participants, but this practice can lead to some negative issues. I did not offer any incentives for participation in this study. I assured participants that their involvement would contribute to broader knowledge within their field and provide invaluable insight into the research questions. To ensure this process was ethical, the informed consent form explicitly stated that participation was completely voluntary and that no rewards or incentives were offered. Fry et al. maintained that transparency reduces the likelihood of coercion or perceived obligation to participate. This approach further ensured the ethical integrity of the study. An overview of the ethical research considerations has been provided. The focus will now shift to the data collections instruments.

Data Collection Instruments

In this study, I used one-on-one, semistructured interviews as the primary data collection instrument. One-on-one interviews allow for the collection of rich, detailed data from individual participants, focusing on their unique experiences, perspectives, and insights (Saunders et al., 2015; Yin, 2018). To complement the interviews, I also collected archival data through online documentation in the form of sales data, devlogs,

postmortems, and third-party game analyses. Triangulating data from multiple sources ensures a comprehensive understanding of the research topic (Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2021; Saunders et al., 2015; Yin, 2018). I collected data with the intent of determining how specific aspects of the game development process aligned with data obtained from the interviews. The combination of one-on-one, semistructured interviews and online archival data enabled the collection of rich, detailed data from diverse perspectives, capturing the complexity of the experiences and strategies used by small independent game developers to market and monetize their projects for delivery. I conducted methodological triangulation by comparing data collected from semistructured interviews with data collected from reviewing organizational documentation and determined that both sets of data had aligned. For this study, one-on-one, semistructured interviews, the primary data collection instrument, were conducted following a prepared interview protocol (see the Appendix), which allowed for the gathering of in-depth and comprehensive data. Researchers use member checking to increase the validity of their research studies (Yin, 2018). Researchers conduct member checking by sending their interpretations of participant's transcribed answers to the participants and asking them to verify the accuracy of such interpretations (Yin, 2018). I conducted member checking by sending my interpretations of participant's transcribed answers to the participants and asking them to verify the accuracy of my interpretations. The use of multiple data sources strengthened the validity and depth of the study's findings. The data collection instruments have been provided. The focus will now shift to the data collection technique.

Data Collection Technique

The data collection technique was essential for obtaining rich and meaningful data. The techniques employed need to be appropriate for the research design and question and capable of eliciting detailed responses from participants (Saunders et al., 2015; Yin, 2018). In this study, I used a combination of techniques to collect data, including semistructured interviews and reviewing online archival data.

Interviews are one-on-one conversations between the researcher and the participant, aimed at gathering detailed information about the participant's experiences, perceptions, and perspectives on a particular issue (Saunders et al., 2015; Yin, 2018). The use of interviews was particularly appropriate for this study because it enabled the collection of rich and detailed information about the strategies used by small independent game developers to market and monetize their projects. Interviews allow for follow-up questions, deeper probing into participants' responses, and clarification of any areas of ambiguity (Saunders et al., 2015; Yin, 2018). I used this approach to explore participants' perspectives in greater detail and address any unclear responses during the interviews. Semistructured interviews use a set of predefined questions while allowing the conversation to flow naturally, enabling participants to expand on their answers and provide additional insights (Saunders et al., 2015; Yin, 2018). I conducted the interviews in a semistructured format to encourage participants to share their experiences. Interviews can be conducted using various methods, such as over the phone or through video conferencing software, with recordings captured for accuracy (Saunders et al., 2015; Yin, 2018). I conducted interviews based on participants' preferences, using either phone or

video conferencing software, and recorded them with audio or video recording tools.

According to Saunders et al. (2015), transcribing recorded data ensures that all nuances of the conversation are captured accurately. I transcribed the recorded data verbatim to preserve the full detail and meaning of the participants' responses.

Semistructured interviews provided a balance between predefined questions and a natural conversational flow, allowing participants to expand on their answers and provide additional insights. The choice of conducting interviews over the phone or through video conferencing software accommodated the preferences of the participants, while audio or video recording software ensured the accurate capture of the interviews. The semistructured nature of the interviews and the use of audio or video recording software facilitated a comprehensive exploration of the participants' perspectives and contributed to a deeper understanding of their experiences. The interview protocol, as detailed in the Appendix of this study, was the structured guide I used to conduct the interviews. As outlined in the protocol, the interviews began with an introduction and study overview, followed by ensuring confidentiality and informed consent, building rapport, asking the interview questions, and finally, closing the interview. This protocol provided a structured process to conduct the interviews, ensuring consistency across all interviews and enhancing the reliability of the data collected. Advantages of this approach included the flexibility to gather in-depth information, which allowed participants to express their views freely and ensured the consistency of the data collection process. Two disadvantages were the potential for time-consumption and the need for significant participant commitment.

Online archival data can complement interviews and facilitate triangulation in qualitative research (Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2021; Saunders et al., 2015; Yin, 2018). I collected online archival data consisting of preexisting data freely available on the internet, including online documentation such as sales data, devlogs, postmortems, and third-party game analyses. Archival data provides valuable insight into the independent game development industry, including marketing and monetization strategies (Lu et al., 2019; Politowski et al., 2018). I collected data in the form of text-based documentation, including developmental blog posts, postmortems, marketing materials, and financial reports. Using online archival data as a data collection instrument allows for the collection of a large amount of data in a relatively short amount of time (Saunders et al., 2015). Additionally, online archival data are secondary and nonintrusive as they do not require direct interaction with study participants (Saunders et al., 2015). However, it is important to consider the reliability and validity of online archival data, as they may be biased or incomplete (Saunders et al., 2015; Yin, 2018). To address these concerns, I triangulated the archival data with the interview data and conducted careful analysis to ensure the validity and reliability of the study's findings. By incorporating online archival data into the research design, I aimed to enhance the comprehensiveness of the data collected and facilitate methodological triangulation. I acknowledged the potential limitations of online archival data, such as biases and incomplete information, and addressed these concerns through methodological triangulation and rigorous analysis.

Member checking, also known as member validation, is a process by which researchers verify the accuracy of their findings with their participants (Saunders et al.,

2015). Researchers conduct member checking by sending their interpretations of participant's transcribed answers to the participants and asking them to verify the accuracy of such interpretations (Yin, 2018). I conducted member checking by sending my interpretations of participant's transcribed answers to the participants and asking them to verify the accuracy of my interpretations. Member checking was critical to ensuring the trustworthiness and credibility of this qualitative research. While the process of member checking was time-consuming and required willingness and commitment from the participants, it proved to be a valuable tool for enhancing the credibility and validity of the findings. The data collection techniques have been provided. The focus will now shift to the data organization technique.

Data Organization Technique

The organization of data involves the process of transcribing, categorizing, and labeling the data collected from the participants (Saunders et al., 2015; Yin, 2018). Organizing the collected data was a crucial step for systematic analysis and interpretation. The first step in organizing the data was to transcribe the audio or video recordings of the interviews and then thoroughly review the transcripts to ensure accuracy. Once the interviews were transcribed and member checking conducted, I began the coding process, which involved identifying key themes and ideas that emerged from the transcripts and the archival data. The coding process helps to identify patterns, similarities, and differences in the data, and enables the researcher to draw conclusions about the research questions (Saunders et al., 2015; Yin, 2018). After coding, I organized the data into categories, which were then labeled and analyzed. This process of categorizing and

labeling the data helped identify commonalities and differences, as well as develop themes and sub-themes. Additionally, I kept a reflective journal. According to Saunders et al. (2015), a reflective journal is used to document the research process and contains the researcher's thoughts, reflections, and interpretations of the data collected. To track data and emerging understandings, I employed a research log and cataloging system. This log was systematically maintained and was used to record all data collection and organization activities.

Ethical considerations are paramount when organizing qualitative data (Saunders et al., 2015; Yin, 2018). I have and will continue to ensure that the data collected remains confidential. Furthermore, all raw data will be stored securely for a period of 5 years to protect the privacy and rights of the participants. The data organization technique described in this study provided a systematic approach to analyze and interpret qualitative data, contributing to the overall rigor and validity of the research findings. The data organization technique has been provided. In this section, I will discuss the data analysis process.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in qualitative research involves making sense of the collected data by systematically organizing, categorizing, and interpreting the data to discern patterns, themes, and relationships relevant to the research question (Saunders et al., 2015; Yin, 2018). My aim was to uncover key insights and cultivate a detailed comprehension of the research topic. The data analysis technique I employed in this study involved the use of the qualitative data analysis software program, LiGRE. I utilized the software to assist

with coding, categorizing, and labeling qualitative data, streamlining the data analysis process. A thematic analysis approach was used to analyze the data. Thematic analysis, a widely used method in qualitative research, involves identifying patterns, themes, and meanings in the data collected (Karlsson et al., 2023; Saunders et al., 2015). The combination of qualitative data analysis software and thematic analysis ensured a systematic approach to analyzing and interpreting the data. Through rigorous data analysis, I aimed to generate valuable insights and meaningful conclusions that would contribute to a nuanced understanding of the research question.

The first step in the analysis process was to transcribe and organize the member-checked data collected from the interviews and online documentation. I conducted a thorough read-through to familiarize myself with the data and identify emerging patterns, themes, or categories relevant to the research questions. I then coded the data into these categories and themes, using both inductive and deductive approaches to develop and refine the codes. After coding, I analyzed and interpreted the data to draw conclusions and answer the research questions. Once key themes were identified from the coding process, I correlated these themes with the literature. This involved comparing and contrasting the identified themes with the findings and theories in existing literature, including studies published after writing this study. The purpose was to evaluate whether the themes supported, contradicted, or expanded on the existing literature. Reflexivity involves examining biases to avoid influencing research, while member checking ensures accuracy by validating findings with participants (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To ensure rigor in the analysis process, I engaged in reflexivity by critically examining my own

biases and assumptions to minimize their influence on the findings. Additionally, I conducted member checking by sharing preliminary interpretations with participants to verify accuracy and ensure their perspectives were authentically represented. Archival data refers to preexisting documentation used to provide context and support the research findings (Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2021; Yin, 2018). Methodological triangulation involves cross-verifying information from multiple sources, such as interviews, archival data, and thematic analysis to enhance the validity and reliability of the research results (Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2021; Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Yin, 2018). I conducted methodological triangulation by comparing data collected from semistructured interviews with data collected from reviewing organizational documentation and determined that both sets of data had aligned.

The final output of the analysis process was a narrative report presenting the key themes, patterns, and findings derived from the collected data. By following a systematic approach to analysis, including transcription, organization, coding, and interpretation, I aimed to address the research question in a reliable and valid manner. The data analysis process has been provided. The focus will now shift to reliability and validity.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability

Reliability is crucial for ensuring the consistency and dependability of the research findings (Saunders et al., 2015; Yin, 2018). To ensure the reliability and validity of this study, several steps were taken. First, I employed a pragmatic inquiry study design that involved collecting data from multiple sources, enabling a thorough and varied

understanding of the phenomenon. This approach facilitated triangulation. Second, I used a detailed coding process to ensure consistency in interpreting the data. This involved identifying themes and patterns, which were then organized into categories. According to Korstiens and Moser (2018), member checking enhances the credibility of the findings and provides an additional layer of reliability to the research. Member checking was employed to ensure the accuracy of the findings by sharing the results with participants, enabling them to provide feedback and validate the findings. The combination of the pragmatic inquiry study design, detailed coding, and member checking ensured the reliability of the data in this qualitative study. Triangulating data from multiple sources and involving participants in the analysis process further contributed to the overall reliability of the findings. The subsequent section will focus on addressing validity in this study.

Validity

Validity refers to the extent to which the findings accurately reflect the experiences, perspectives, and meanings of the participants (Saunders et al., 2015; Yin, 2018). In this study, validity was ensured through strategies such as member checking, reflexivity, and transparent reporting of the methodology. Purposive sampling is a research technique in which participants are deliberately selected based on their knowledge, experience, or relevance to the research question, ensuring the collection of rich and meaningful data (Saunders et al., 2015). I used purposive sampling to select participants who have relevant experience in the game development industry. According to Saunders et al. (2015), providing a detailed account of the research methodology

enhances transferability by allowing others to assess the applicability of the findings to different contexts. To address transferability, I provided a thorough description of the research methodology, including participant selection through purposive sampling, data collection methods, and data analysis procedures. Employing multiple data collection methods enhances transferability by providing diverse and comprehensive data that captures a broader range of perspectives (Saunders et al., 2015). In this study, I employed multiple data collection methods, including one-on-one interviews and online archival data, to gather rich and diverse data that supports triangulation and strengthened the transferability of the findings.

Reflexivity is the practice of critically examining one's own biases, assumptions, and influence throughout the research process to ensure the findings remain grounded in the data and free from personal preconceptions (Berger, 2015; Fusch & Ness, 2015; Saunders et al., 2015; Yin, 2018). I engaged in a process of reflexivity to ensure that my own preconceptions did not unduly influence my analysis, thereby keeping the findings accurate, credible, and grounded in the data. Also, I used member checking as a form of validation. By involving the participants in the analysis process and seeking their feedback on the findings, I validated the accuracy of the interpretations and ensured that the participants' perspectives were accurately portrayed. Transparency enables readers and future researchers to effectively assess the transferability of the findings to other contexts (Saunders et al., 2015). To further ensure transparency, I maintained an audit trail of the research process, including decisions made during data collection and analysis. Finally, data saturation occurs when collecting new data no longer adds

significant new insights or themes to the study (Guest et al., 2006; Saunders et al., 2015). I ensured data saturation by continuing data collection until redundancy was reached and no new information emerged from the participants. The implementation of these strategies contributed to the overall reliability and validity of the research findings.

Validity was essential to accurately reflect participants' experiences and perspectives. I employed various strategies to ensure validity. Purposive sampling, multiple data collection methods, open-ended questions, reflexivity, and member checking were implemented to ensure the findings accurately represented the participants' experiences and perspectives. By implementing these strategies, I aimed to strengthen the validity of the qualitative data collected. The next section will summarize the key points of the research proposal.

Transition and Summary

This study outlined a qualitative pragmatic inquiry study aimed at identifying effective marketing and monetization strategies used by small independent game developers to complete projects within budget and on time. I employed purposive sampling to recruit small independent game development teams or single developers who have successfully marketed and monetized their projects. Data were collected through one-on-one, semistructured interviews and online archival data and a detailed coding process was employed to ensure consistency in data interpretation. The collected data were analyzed to identify patterns and trends. Member checking and reflexivity were used to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings. This research study presented a comprehensive approach to investigating marketing and monetization strategies in the

small independent game development industry. The use of purposive sampling, interviews, online archival data, coding, and analysis contributed to a rigorous exploration of the topic that facilitated reliability and validity.

In Section 1, I introduced the research problem and purpose; the research question; the nature of the study; the conceptual framework; the significance of the study; and the potential assumptions, limitations, and delimitations. In Section 2, I provided an overview of the project, including the role of the researcher, the participants, the research method and design, population and sampling, ethical considerations, data collection and organization, data analysis, and reliability and validity. Section 3 of this study will present the results of the study and discuss any implications. The findings will inform recommendations to guide future research and industry practices as well as support best practices for independent game developers.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

In Section 3, I outline the study's purpose, present the research question, and share the findings. This section also covers the practical applications of my research, its implications for social change, recommendations for action and further research, and my reflections. Lastly, I provide the conclusion statements.

The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry study was to identify and explore effective marketing and monetization strategies used by small independent game developers to complete projects within budget and on time. I conducted semistructured interviews with successful independent game developers who used successful marketing and monetization strategies to complete projects within budget and on time. Participants were recruited through online gaming forums, developer communities, and direct outreach through social media channels. Other data sources included relevant archival documentation, such as sales data, devlogs, postmortems, and third-party game analyses. Analysis of the data revealed four key themes: (a) building and engaging a strong community, including the role of demos and free content, and collaborations and cross-promotions; (b) using multiple platforms for marketing and distribution strategically, alongside adaptive marketing strategies; (c) leveraging crowdfunding and financial management for sustainability, emphasizing financial prudence and cost management; and (d) targeting specific niche markets. These themes highlight the multifaceted approaches necessary for indie developers to succeed in a competitive market.

Presentation of the Findings

The overarching research question for this qualitative pragmatic inquiry study was as follows: What effective marketing and monetization strategies do small independent game developers use to complete projects within budget and on time? To answer this research question, I conducted semistructured interviews with four successful independent game developers who had experience in these areas. Additionally, I reviewed archival documentation, such as sales data, devlogs, postmortems, and third-party game analyses, to gather data from multiple sources to conduct methodological triangulation.

Theme 1: Building and Engaging a Strong Community

The first theme that emerged from the analyzed data was that community building and engagement are crucial for the success of small independent game developers. From the interviews, it became evident that all four developers emphasized the importance of fostering a strong and engaged community. Various strategies and behaviors were associated with effective community engagement. These included community feedback, personal branding, and early community building efforts. Specific tactics such as using daily social media updates and leveraging social media and sales platforms were highlighted as key methods to enhance community interaction. I identified two prominent strategies used by indie game developers to foster community building and engagement, which are (a) the strategic use of demos and free content to build trust and engagement and (b) collaborations and cross-promotions to expand reach and deepen community connections. These interconnected strategies and behaviors collectively contribute to a robust community that supports a game's development and success.

Strategic Use of Demos and Free Content to Build Trust and Engagement

The importance of demos and free content emerged as a significant strategy for indie developers to foster building and engaging a strong community. All four developers used several tactics to foster trust and engagement with their communities. The key aspects of this strategy are (a) using demos to attract attention and build trust, (b) offering free games to reduce entry barriers and encourage further purchases, and (c) leveraging free content to maintain ongoing community interaction.

Developer A and Developer B both emphasized the effectiveness of demos in drawing initial interest and gaining trust from potential players. They noted that providing a playable sample allowed players to experience the game firsthand, which increased the likelihood of them becoming invested and supportive. This finding aligns with Farmer's (2021) argument that marketing a video game effectively involves releasing early versions, such as small playable demos, to gauge reception and attract initial interest. Furthermore, Farmer emphasized that allowing potential players to experience the game firsthand through these demos increases the likelihood of them becoming invested and supportive, as it provides a tangible representation of the game's world and gameplay. According to Developer A,

People have really enjoyed getting to play [the demo], and they're always asking for the demo to be expanded with more scenes . . . And then when the demo does get an update, we get an influx of people downloading it and posting about it.

Developer A's statement highlights the importance of consistent releases and updates to maintain player engagement and trust. Regularly updated demos can keep the community

excited and involved, providing continual points of interaction that sustain interest. Therefore, it is important to consider the context of game releases and delays. According to Grewal et al. (2022), a significant portion of games experience release delays. On average, when games experience a release delay, they tend to be postponed once and typically for a duration of 14 days. Most delays are relatively short-term and occur just once per game. Moreover, the frequency of delays has increased over the years, as 54% of games had a delayed release in 2020 compared to 28% in 2016 (Grewal et al., 2022). Notably, early access and indie games, which often rely heavily on community engagement and feedback, tend to delay releases more frequently than nonearly access and nonindie games (Grewal et al., 2022). This trend underscores the value of demos in maintaining player interest and trust despite delays. While delayed releases are generally perceived slightly less positively by players, the difference in positive review rates between delayed and on-time releases is negligible, suggesting that early and consistent engagement through demos can mitigate potential negative perceptions and sustain player support (Grewal et al., 2022).

In organizational documentation, Developer A discussed the strategy of leveraging demos and free content to increase the visibility of their games and gather valuable player feedback. One notable title from Developer A stands out not only for its innovative customization features but also for its successful demo release. By offering demos on platforms such as Steam and Itch.io, Developer A has managed to build a strong community around their games. My review of Developer A's organizational documentation, which included insights shared in a previously published interview,

revealed that they strategically utilized demos to foster early player engagement, creating a sense of trust and transparency. This finding was supported by data from semistructured interviews, where Developer A discussed how demos allowed players to experience the game firsthand, increasing their investment in the project and building a loyal community. Additionally, the positive reception of these demos has helped Developer A's studio secure a dedicated fan base and maintain a high rating on Steam, illustrating the significant impact of offering free, accessible content as part of their marketing strategy. Arditi (2024) highlighted that platform-specific strategies, such as those used by Developer A, are crucial in building and sustaining a community. Arditi argued that leveraging digital platforms allows developers to connect with audiences more effectively and create continuous engagement through interactive content. This finding aligns with Developer A's approach of using demos to build trust and maintain transparency with their player base. Additionally, Arditi discussed the role of community interaction in enhancing the gaming experience, which supports the idea that positive reception and active engagement are key to fostering a dedicated fan base. Developer A's approach underscores the benefits of community interaction in fostering a broader reach and deeper engagement, reflecting the strategies highlighted by Arditi in leveraging platform-specific tools to create continuous and meaningful player engagement.

Similarly, Developer B discussed the effective use of demos and free content to enhance the visibility of their games and collect valuable player feedback. Developer B stressed the importance of leveraging free content to attract players and discussed the

strategies they used to offer value to prospective players with free small games.

According to Developer B,

I see these two games more like advertisements for what we are capable to do, than really commercial . . . for me, they are marketing tools. So, we didn't get much money back from it, but it wasn't the point, because we got tons of visibility for our main big project, which is [redacted for privacy], and that's what I was aiming for with those games, actually.

Developer B's approach aligns with the concept of unending consumption discussed by Arditi (2024), where the integration of various media forms within video games can foster continuous engagement and attract a broader audience. By offering free content and demos, Developer B capitalized on this model, effectively using these tools as marketing strategies to build a dedicated community and maintain player interest over time. In organizational documentation, Developer B discussed having actively participated in various game jams, a tactic that allowed them to release demo versions of their projects and gain significant exposure. These demos served as a platform for testing game mechanics and storytelling techniques while engaging with the community. By gathering player feedback through these demos, Developer B was able to refine their games and build a loyal fan base even before the full release. This strategy not only helps improve the games based on player input but also fosters a sense of transparency and trust within the gaming community. Arditi highlighted the importance of continuous engagement and interaction within the gaming community, underscoring how such practices can lead to sustained player interest and trust. By leveraging game jams and

demos, Developer B effectively utilized these principles to create an iterative development process that engaged players early and built a strong community around their games.

Developer C adopted a strategy of releasing free games with paid downloadable content (DLC), which lowered the barrier to entry and enabled players to engage with the game without an initial financial commitment. This approach was designed to encourage players to later purchase additional content if they enjoyed the base game. This practice aligns with the established industry norm where post-launch paid extensions and the use of DLCs have become common to extend a game's life and profitability (Bernevega & Gekker, 2022). Regarding making free games and monetizing through DLCs, Developer C maintained, "I make free games, and I make the DLCs cost money so that people can get engaged. They can understand what I'm giving them, and then, they can get the game."

Furthermore, Developer C noted, "I think people are more prone to play a game that's free and then, like [if] they really enjoy it, get a DLC." According to Arditi (2024), this approach is supported by the concept of unending consumption, where DLCs are leveraged to sustain player engagement and generate ongoing revenue, effectively extending the life and profitability of a game. Arditi also highlighted that players are more likely to invest in DLCs after a positive initial experience with a free-to-play game, as demonstrated by strategies where free access draws players into the ecosystem and encourages in-game purchases to enhance their experience, aligning with Developer C's approach. The importance of perceived value and engagement in successful monetization,

as emphasized by Arditì, reinforced Developer C's focus on engaging players through free games and subsequent DLC purchases. According to Arditì, games such as *Fortnite* and others use free-to-play access as a gateway to introduce players to engaging content, fostering a sense of value and incentivizing further investment through microtransactions and DLCs, thus reinforcing the link between perceived value, engagement, and successful monetization. My review of Developer C's organizational documentation, sourced from a third-party interview with Developer C, revealed that they effectively utilized free games and downloadable content to engage and expand their player base. This finding was supported by data from semistructured interviews, where Developer C discussed how offering free games lowered entry barriers, encouraging players to try their games, while paid downloadable content provided ongoing engagement and monetization opportunities. By leveraging both free and paid content, Developer C was able to maximize their reach and engagement, ensuring a steady growth in their community and sustaining their game's popularity. Arditì emphasized that the combination of free-to-play access and paid content, such as DLCs and micro transactions, effectively boosts player engagement and retention by lowering entry barriers and providing ongoing value to sustain interest and investment. Free content attracts a broad initial audience, while paid DLCs leverage the established player base's engagement, encouraging further spending within the game ecosystem (Arditì, 2024). This strategy not only maximizes reach but also maintains a steady growth in the community by continually providing new content that keeps players engaged and invested in a game's ecosystem.

Developer D highlighted the impact of offering a demo on Steam, which significantly enhanced their game's visibility and allowed for valuable player feedback. The demo served as a practical tool for players to evaluate the game, thus fostering a sense of trust and transparency between the developer and the community. Thorhaug (2022) noted that demos are included in the total number of items available on Steam, emphasizing the importance of games and demos with proper release dates to ensure they are published and not abandoned. This inclusion of demos highlights their role in the Steam platform economy, underscoring their significance in increasing game visibility and engaging players. The large user base on Steam, with over 90 million active users and detailed player statistics per month, supports the idea that demos can significantly impact game visibility and player feedback (Croissant & Frister, 2021). When asked about the role of the demo in their overall strategy, Developer D noted that "the demo has been a very important step and a very important milestone, because ever since the demo went online, we had a really great gain in visibility and reach." According to Developer D, by having a demo available, "People can try out the game and make an opinion and get a first look into it. So that's a really important thing to get a demo out as early as possible." This surge in visibility and engagement underscores the importance of early demo releases in capturing player interest and fostering a supportive community. According to Croissant and Frister (2021), increased gaming activity during the COVID-19 pandemic further supports the effectiveness of demos in enhancing visibility and engagement on platforms like Steam. Therefore, incorporating demos as a strategic tool

in the early stages of game marketing is crucial for independent developers aiming to build a strong and engaged player base.

My review of Developer D's organizational documentation, which included insights shared in a previously published interview, revealed that they strategically used a demo on Steam to showcase their game's unique mechanics and narrative elements, enhancing visibility and engagement. This finding was supported by data from semistructured interviews, where Developer D discussed how the demo played a crucial role in attracting players early on and gathering valuable feedback for further improvements. Developer D also noted that the demo played a crucial role in showcasing the game's unique mechanics and narrative elements, allowing players to experience the interaction between the characters. According to the findings of a study by Croissant and Frister (2021), demos are effective in enhancing visibility and engagement on platforms like Steam. By offering a free demo, Developer D aimed to enhance the game's visibility, collect valuable player feedback, and foster a sense of trust and transparency with their community. This strategy aligns with successful approaches in the games industry, using demos to engage potential players and generate interest in the full release (Croissant & Frister, 2021; Thorhauge, 2022). This approach not only helped Developer D build a dedicated player base but also ensured ongoing improvements and refinements based on player feedback, demonstrating the critical role of demos in a successful game development and marketing strategy.

The alignment of data from interviews with organizational documentation confirmed that the strategic use of demos and free content is indeed an effective approach

for building and engaging strong gaming communities. The interviews provided firsthand insights into the developers' strategies for using demos and free content to attract and engage players. For instance, Developer A and Developer B emphasized the effectiveness of demos in generating initial interest and building trust with potential players. They noted that providing a playable sample allowed players to experience the game firsthand, increasing the likelihood of them becoming invested and supportive. This was further corroborated by organizational documentation, which detailed the positive reception of these demos and their role in securing a dedicated fan base and maintaining high ratings on platforms like Steam.

Similarly, Developer C's strategy of releasing free games with DLC was supported by both interview data and organizational documentation. Through the interviews, I found that this approach lowered the barrier to entry, enabling players to engage with the game without an initial financial commitment, and encouraged subsequent purchases of additional content. Developer C's previously cited organizational documentation revealed that they effectively leveraged both free and paid content to maximize reach and engagement, ensuring steady community growth and game popularity. This finding was consistent with data gathered from semistructured interviews, where Developer C discussed their approach to offering free games to attract players and using paid content to maintain ongoing engagement and support. Developer D highlighted the impact of offering a demo on Steam, which significantly enhanced their game's visibility and allowed for valuable player feedback. This was consistent with the findings from organizational documentation, which underscored the importance of demos

in increasing game visibility and fostering trust and transparency with the community. Developer D's previous cited organizational documentation provided concrete examples of how the demo played a crucial role in showcasing the game's unique mechanics and narrative elements. This finding was consistent with data gathered from semistructured interviews, where Developer D discussed how the demo helped attract early interest by allowing players to experience the game's features firsthand. Further review of the same organizational documentation revealed that beautiful aesthetics and strong writing centered on a choice-driven narrative were pivotal to greater player engagement and support. Overall, all four developers shared that demo and free content played a crucial role in their marketing strategies by facilitating early engagement, building trust, and encouraging ongoing interaction. These tactics not only helped in securing a loyal player base but also provided critical feedback that informed further development and improvements. The interconnected aspects of offering demos and free content, therefore, are essential for sustaining community support and driving the success of independent game projects.

Collaborations and Cross-Promotions to Expand Reach and Deepen Community

Connections

Collaborations and cross-promotions emerged as a significant strategy under community building and engagement. All four developers recognized the importance of working with other developers and content creators to enhance visibility and engagement with their games. This strategy includes several key tactics that the four developers used to leverage collaborations and cross-promotions to expand their reach and deepen

community connections: (a) partnering with content creators, influencers, and fans; (b) integrating cross-promotional elements within games; and (c) establishing mutual promotional opportunities with other developers or influencers.

Developer C actively engaged with the community on platforms such as Twitter and TikTok, leveraging these social media channels to foster a growing interest in their games and their creator brand. Developer C emphasized that establishing a brand and building a partnership with potential players helped to reach new audiences and enhance overall marketing efforts. Parker and Perks (2021) noted that independent game developers use social media engagement as a key means of cultivating a loyal, participatory community of fan-consumers who feel a personal connection to the creator's work. According to Developer C,

If you don't have an identity or you don't have a brand, then people won't know what to come [to you] for . . . because I've branded myself like this, if I make anything similar to this, even if it's not super out of the water breathtaking, it's what people expect from me and get really excited for, because I've hit their hearts with . . . my most popular game, [redacted for privacy].

This strategy aligns with the broader industry trend where indie developers focus on building authentic connections with their audience through social media platforms to promote their games and sustain long-term engagement (Parker & Perks, 2021). By creating and nurturing an identity for themselves and their games, Developer C was able to tap into the fan base of their genre, thereby expanding their own community. My review of Developer C's organizational documentation, which included insights shared in

a previously published interview, revealed that their initial game promotion and subsequent growth were significantly boosted through the strategic use of social media channels. This finding was consistent with data gathered from semistructured interviews, where Developer C discussed how platforms like Twitter, Discord, and TikTok played a key role in increasing visibility and fostering community engagement. Announcements on Twitter and engagement in a private Discord server helped the game to gain initial visibility and build a small yet dedicated fandom by late 2022. Parker and Perks (2021) highlighted that indie game developers effectively use social media to create a distinctive identity, which attracts a dedicated fan base. Maintaining active and authentic communication on platforms like Twitter and Discord is crucial for building and sustaining a loyal community around indie games (Parker & Perks, 2021). This approach allows developers to foster deeper connections with their audience and drive the success of their projects through community engagement and support.

According to Developer C, the engagement of influencers played a crucial role in the game's success. Prominent YouTubers posted gameplay videos, some of which garnered significant views and likes, thereby attracting more players and broadening the game's audience. Additionally, Developer C's TikTok content related to the game received viral engagement, dramatically increasing its visibility. For example, a TikTok posted in July 2022 garnered approximately 549,500 plays and 143,400 likes within 5 months. This surge in TikTok viewership coincided with the game climbing to the top of the Apple application store's video game chart, illustrating the powerful impact of viral social media content on a game's popularity. Parker and Perks (2021) highlighted the

growing role of livestreaming and influencer engagement in the indie game development scene, emphasizing that platforms like YouTube and Twitch offer significant opportunities for developers to reach wider audiences and build communities. This case highlights the effectiveness of using social media for cross-promotion and collaborations, engaging influencers and fans to expand reach and fostering a dynamic and supportive community.

Developer D highlighted collaborations with other game developers and content creators, noting that these partnerships allowed for a broader reach and deeper engagement within their community. By incorporating characters or elements from other popular games, Developer D created mutual promotional opportunities that benefited both parties involved. These collaborations were seen as essential for maintaining a vibrant and engaged community. Speaking on collaborations, Developer D noted,

You can also . . . basically cross promo by putting characters or other things from other games or content creators into your game . . . and basically make a cross promo. I think that was very unexpectedly successful in a way where we have, for example, the collaboration with this content creator [redacted for privacy], where the character actually shows up in our [game], and we could reach his community by doing that.

Cutolo and Grimaldi (2023) emphasized that engagement in digital platform ecosystems is often motivated by a strong passion and these platforms help create extensive online communities of users with shared interests who generate content accessible to all members. This claim supports the idea that collaborations within these communities can

significantly enhance visibility and engagement, aligning with Developer D's strategy of leveraging partnerships to deepen community connections. Additionally, Developer D maintained that "the important thing is that it gets . . . handled as a marketing stunt, so everyone can put Easter eggs of games in their game." Victoria-Mas et al. (2023) maintained that collaborations with other game developers and content creators are essential for successful marketing and community engagement. Crowdfunding campaigns often integrate promotional strategies to engage backers and enhance visibility (Victoria-Mas et al., 2023). This includes leveraging networks and partnerships to increase reach and support. Developer D's collaboration with other game developers and content creators aligns with the idea of using crowdfunding not just for funding but for broader promotional opportunities, enhancing community engagement.

These partnerships allow developers to reach new audiences by tapping into the fan bases of well-known content creators, thereby expanding their own community. Such collaborations are key to fostering a vibrant and engaged community, enabling mutual promotional opportunities and deeper engagement within the community. Victoria-Mas et al. highlighted the importance of community support and collaborative culture in the success of crowdfunding campaigns. Developer D's approach of incorporating characters or elements from other popular games demonstrates this collaborative ethos of community support and collaborative culture in successful crowdfunding campaigns, fostering a vibrant and engaged community through shared interests and mutual promotional efforts. Engaging with the community, including other developers and

content creators, helps refine the product based on diverse inputs, ensuring broader audience appeal.

My review of Developer D's organizational documentation, which included insights shared in a previously published interview, revealed that they described the development process and inspirations behind their game with a focus toward the narrative design and unique setting. This finding was consistent with data gathered from semistructured interviews, where Developer D elaborated on how these elements were central to creating an immersive player experience and driving the game's development. The game was conceived after the producer encountered popular themed TikToks, which led to a collaboration with a well-known online personality, integrating cross-promotional elements that enriched the game's authenticity and reach. This partnership exemplifies how drawing inspiration from popular content creators can lead to successful collaborations, enhancing both the game's development and its promotional efforts. According to Victoria-Mas et al. (2023), successful crowdfunding campaigns often result from strategic partnerships and collaborations that expand reach and deepen community connections. Developer D's strategy of creating mutual promotional opportunities with other developers exemplifies this approach, as it leverages the existing fan bases of partners to broaden their own community. This collaborative strategy not only enhances visibility and engagement but also fosters a supportive and interconnected gaming community, ultimately driving the long-term success of independent game projects.

The utilization of crowdfunding by Developer A is an example of how indie developers can leverage platform-specific tools and advertisements to promote their

games effectively. This approach not only increased the visibility of their games but also helped in building a loyal community that actively engaged with their content. Developer A utilized Itch.io to promote their Patreon, noting that Itch.io

Can be helpful in pushing people towards the Patreon, which rivals Steam in terms of how much money it brings in . . . you can't really advertise Patreon on Steam, but you can do that on Itch, so that's a big perk of Itch.io.

Platforms such as Patreon provide essential support for indie developers by enabling direct engagement with their community and continuous financial backing, thus enhancing visibility and fostering a loyal player base (Lankoski & Dymek, 2020). This approach underscores the importance of strategic platform use in indie game development. Several crowdfunding platforms have surfaced in recent years, including low entry selling platforms such as Itch.io along with more established digital distribution platforms like Steam (Lankoski & Dymek, 2020). An alternative funding model on Patreon allows project members to fund projects through monthly payments or when work is published, hosting many game development projects. Patreon also allows developers to interact directly with their supporters, providing regular updates and early access to content, which helps in building a strong, loyal community (Lankoski & Dymek, 2020).

According to Victoria-Mas et al. (2023), the success of many recent “indie” games can be attributed to their distribution through major platforms like Steam, Microsoft, Sony, and Nintendo. However, although these games are labeled as *indie*, many are published by large publishers or platforms (Victoria-Mas et al., 2023).

Essentially, many of these games are indie in name only (Victoria-Mas et al., 2023). Nevertheless, these platforms provide the necessary infrastructure and audience reach that can greatly enhance the visibility and sales of indie games by true indie developers (Victoria-Mas et al., 2023). My review of Developer A's organizational documentation, which included insights shared in a previously published interview, revealed that they described the development process and inspirations behind their game, focusing on the narrative design and unique setting. This finding was consistent with data gathered from semistructured interviews, where Developer A discussed how these elements were key to creating a compelling experience and shaping the direction of the game's development. Developer A mentioned the success of their titles on both Steam and Itch.io, and how strategic use of these platforms allowed them to connect with a wider audience and drive support to their Patreon. This method of leveraging platform-specific tools and advertisements proved crucial in fostering a dedicated community around their games. Lankoski and Dymek (2020) noted that platforms like Itch.io provide a low entry selling platform alongside more established ones like Steam, offering essential distribution, sales, and communication tools for developers. For instance, developers can use Patreon to distribute games, where paying members receive early access to the latest versions, which helps in maintaining continuous financial backing and engaging the community (Lankoski & Dymek, 2020). This is important for indie developers because, while big platforms help indie games reach more people, they also bring these independent games into a commercial environment, underscoring the importance of strategic collaborations

and platform-specific promotions in enhancing game visibility and community engagement for indie developers.

Developer B also leveraged cross-promotion on social media sites by interacting with influencers, other developers, and potential players. This strategy not only increased the visibility of their games but also helped build a loyal community that actively engaged with their content. Developer B mentioned the importance of Twitter and Tumblr in their strategy. Developer B stated,

From the beginning, I am on Twitter and Tumblr. Twitter, because when I started, it was really a place where a lot of devs gathered, and like every time I was talking on Discord with other dev, they were like, here's my Twitter, and so it seems like a mandatory place to be at the time.

According to Scully-Blaker (2024), through the careful curation of games with emotionally edifying characteristics, developers can utilize social media to build a dedicated community. Scully-Blaker presented the example of a Twitter account managed by the name of @_wholesomegames by Matthew Taylor and his colleagues. The account curates games that emphasize emotionally edifying characteristics with the intent to build a dedicated community around wholesome games (Scully-Blaker, 2024). The account started with brief descriptions and links to developers' websites and then expanded to include a Discord server and other social media hubs, highlighting the role of multiple platforms in community engagement. The curation by Taylor and his colleagues on these platforms helped establish criteria for what makes a game wholesome and facilitated connections within the community (Scully-Blaker, 2024). These practices underscore the

powerful role of social media in fostering connections and creating engaged communities around niche gaming experiences. Additionally, Developer B highlighted the significance of Tumblr by stating that they selected “Tumblr because it was the only social media I used at a personal level, so I felt familiar with it, and I was like, well, it’s worth it to make an account on this platform.” Developer B also emphasized the unique interaction they found on Tumblr. Developer B stated,

I think Tumblr is actually giving more results than people give credit for, because it’s really an interactive place, actually, more than Twitter . . . like for me, Twitter, it was professional networking. I will speak with content creators, all the devs [developers], and stuff like that . . . there, and it’s kinda corporate in some way, while Tumblr is a place for fandom . . . I see more genuine fans on Tumblr than on Twitter, like fans who are just people and not devs themselves.

Ståhl (2021) discussed Tumblr’s unique interaction dynamics compared to other social media platforms and highlighted ways Tumblr fosters a more interactive and fandom-oriented environment, allowing for genuine fan engagement, unlike more corporate platforms like Twitter. Ståhl’s finding aligns with Developer B’s experience, emphasizing Tumblr’s significance for building a dedicated community of genuine fans. This distinct interactive quality makes Tumblr a valuable platform for indie game developers to connect with their audience on a personal level, as mentioned by Developer B. These platforms enabled Developer B to maintain a strong presence and build a dedicated community, engaging directly with their audience and other creators, which proved crucial for their marketing and promotional efforts.

According to Victoria-Mas et al. (2023), such collaborations not only amplify visibility but also deepen community engagement, making them a crucial strategy for maintaining an active and supportive community. My review of Developer B's organizational documentation, which included insights shared in a previously published interview, revealed that they highlighted the significant impact of using platforms like Tumblr and Twitter to interact with fans and other developers. This finding was consistent with data gathered from semistructured interviews, where Developer B discussed how these platforms were instrumental in building a dedicated community and fostering engagement through direct interaction. According to Developer B, this helped in building a loyal community that actively engaged with their content. Developer B also leveraged the popularity of certain characters, creating additional content such as DLCs based on fan demand. This approach proved successful in maintaining a vibrant and engaged community around their games. Scully-Blaker (2024) discussed the strategic use of social media, particularly Twitter and Tumblr, for community engagement in the context of wholesome games, emphasizing the role of these platforms in fostering dedicated fan bases and genuine interactions. Overall, Developer B's approach underscores the importance of leveraging multiple social media platforms to build and sustain an engaged community, driving the success of their indie game projects.

All four developers shared that collaborations and cross-promotions to expand reach and deepen community connections significantly contributed to the success of their marketing strategies. By leveraging the existing audiences of influencers and other developers, they were able to enhance their reach and create a more interconnected

gaming community. This leverage, in turn, fostered a sense of belonging and loyalty among players, which is crucial for the long-term success of indie game projects. The interconnected aspects of collaborations and cross-promotions highlight the importance of sustaining community support to help drive the success of independent game developers. The alignment of data from interviews with organizational documentation confirmed the effectiveness of the four developers' strategies, which is consistent with the literature. Developer A effectively used platform-specific tools such as Itch.io and Patreon to promote their games and build a loyal community. By fostering direct engagement with their supporters and offering exclusive content, Developer A sustained ongoing financial backing and community interest. This finding aligns with Lankoski and Dymek's (2020) work in that platforms such as Patreon enable developers to maintain continuous financial backing and engage directly with their community. Similarly, Developer B leveraged cross-promotion on social media sites like Twitter and Tumblr, interacting with influencers, other developers, and potential players to enhance visibility and build a dedicated community. These platforms enabled Developer B to engage directly with their audience, fostering genuine connections and community engagement. This finding aligns with Parker and Perks' (2021) work in that the role of social media in creating a distinctive identity and attracting a dedicated fan base.

Developer B's emphasis on Tumblr's interactive and fandom-oriented environment is supported by Ståhl's (2021) findings on Tumblr's significance for building genuine fan engagement. Developers C and D exemplified how nurturing a brand identity and integrating cross-promotional elements could lead to viral success and

broaden audience reach. Developer C actively engaged with their community on platforms such as Twitter and TikTok, leveraging these channels to foster a growing interest in their games and creator brand. This finding aligns with Parker and Perks' (2021) work in noting the importance of building authentic connections with the audience through social media. Developer D specifically highlighted collaborations with other game developers and content creators, noting that these partnerships allowed for a broader reach and deeper engagement within their community. This finding supports the findings of Cutolo and Grimaldi (2023), who emphasized the role of digital platforms in creating extensive online communities and enhancing visibility through shared interests.

In summary, the strategic use of social media platforms, influencer engagements, and collaborative promotions were pivotal in establishing and maintaining robust communities around indie games. These strategies, underscored by insights from Parker and Perks (2021), Cutolo and Grimaldi (2023), and Victoria-Mas et al. (2023), illustrate the multifaceted approaches necessary for indie developers to thrive. Ultimately, the combined efforts of social media engagement, influencer partnerships, and community-focused promotions are essential in cultivating a supportive and engaged player base, driving the overall success and sustainability of indie game projects.

Correlation to the Conceptual Framework

Theme 1 relates to Shapiro and Varian's (1999) platform theory by demonstrating how small independent game developers leverage digital platforms to connect with and engage their audiences, creating value through these interactions. Platform theory emphasizes how platforms act as digital intermediaries connecting different groups of

users and enabling transactions between them. The use of demos and free content by developers, such as Developer A and Developer B, to attract and retain players reflects platform theory's notion of creating value for interconnected participants. By offering playable samples and continuous updates, Developer A and Developer B engaged their communities and fostered loyalty, enhancing the overall value proposition of their games. This approach aligns with the idea of platforms facilitating value creation and capture through boundary-spanning transactions and interactions. Similarly, Developer C's strategy of releasing free games with paid DLC aligns with platform theory by lowering entry barriers and encouraging subsequent transactions. This method not only maximized reach and engagement but also facilitated ongoing interaction and value creation, demonstrating the practical application of platform theory in the digital games industry.

Furthermore, Developer D's emphasis on leveraging partnerships and cross-promotional opportunities illustrates how platforms can enhance visibility and engagement through interconnected relationships. This strategy of integrating cross-promotional elements within games and collaborating with other developers and content creators aligns with platform theory's concept of digital intermediaries enabling interlinked participants to create and capture value. Overall, the strategies employed by the developers in this study exemplify how platform theory can provide a useful lens for understanding the dynamics of the digital games industry. By leveraging digital platforms to connect with their audiences, small independent game developers were able to build and engage strong gaming communities, achieving sustainable success.

Theme 2: Using Multiple Platforms for Marketing and Distribution Strategically

The second theme that emerged from the analyzed data was the strategic use of multiple platforms for marketing and distribution to complete projects within budget and on time. All four developers emphasized the importance of utilizing various platforms to maximize their reach and effectively engage with their target audiences. Different platforms cater to different user demographics and behaviors, making it crucial for developers to tailor their marketing strategies accordingly. I identified three prominent strategies that the developers used, including (a) the selection of platforms based on audience preferences, (b) the adaptation of marketing content to fit platform-specific formats, and (c) the importance of maintaining a presence on multiple channels to enhance visibility and engagement. By strategically leveraging multiple platforms, developers can create a comprehensive and effective marketing strategy that supports the successful launch and sustained popularity of their games.

Adaptive Marketing Strategies

Adaptive marketing emerged as a significant strategy under the strategic use of multiple platforms. All four developers demonstrated flexibility in their marketing approaches, adjusting their strategies based on platform performance and audience behavior. This strategy includes several key aspects: (a) tailoring content to fit the unique dynamics of each platform, (b) continuously monitoring and responding to changes in platform algorithms and user engagement, and (c) maintaining a consistent yet adaptable marketing approach to optimize reach and effectiveness.

Developer A focused on creating engaging content across multiple platforms, emphasizing the importance of adapting their marketing materials to suit each platform's specific requirements. This included modifying video lengths for TikTok, utilizing interactive posts on Twitter, and creating visually appealing content for Instagram. While engaging content is important, consistency is also relevant (i.e., daily updates). According to Developer A,

I do something that not everyone does, but I think has helped build a community, and that is, I post every single day what I did that day, whether I say the development progress I've gotten done, or if it was a day off. And so, everyday people come to just sort of look and see what I did that day, and they can know how the game is progressing on a day-by-day basis. And that's been sort of a way to keep people feeling confident in the project, and to keep them following along with how it all comes together.

By being upfront about their projects and consistently sharing updates, Developer A was able to build trust and maintain interest in their game.

Small indie game developers can benefit from adopting the successful approaches used by self-published indie authors. Consistently sharing engaging and tailored content across multiple platforms is a common strategy employed by self-published indie authors to build a strong and loyal community, ensuring they remain connected with their readers and maintain trust in their work (Hartiningtyas, 2023). Indie authors benefit most from minimizing barriers to distributing their work and maintaining open lines of communication with their readers (Hartiningtyas, 2023). Sharma et al. (2023) emphasized

the importance of relational labor, where consistent communication with readers helped to sustain ongoing work and build a dedicated audience. Thomas et al. (2023) emphasized the importance of indie authors using a variety of platforms for distribution and marketing, noting that consistent and regular engagement with readers across these platforms is crucial for building a loyal audience and sustaining interest in their work. According to Sharma et al., digital platforms empower indie authors to engage consistently with their audience, utilizing multiple channels for regular updates and interactive content, which is crucial for building and maintaining reader interest. Consistent updates and engagement across multiple channels, as practiced by Developer A, can effectively build trust and a loyal community, mirroring the success of many indie authors in the self-publishing industry. My review of organizational documentation, which included insights shared in a previously published interview, revealed that Developer A utilized multiple platforms to maximize their reach and engagement. This finding was consistent with the data collected from conducting semistructured interviews, where Developer A emphasized the importance of leveraging various platforms alongside providing consistent updates to maintain visibility and foster community engagement. They relied heavily on Kickstarter and Patreon for funding, coupled with sales from their prior game series, to support their projects. This multiplatform strategy ensured a steady stream of resources and visibility. Further review of the same organizational documentation revealed that the accessibility of Developer A's game, offering a free base experience, made it easier to attract new players. This finding was corroborated by data collected from semistructured interviews, where Developer A discussed how lowering

barriers to entry was a key strategy for expanding their player base and enhancing engagement.

Developer B maintained a consistent marketing strategy but adapted based on community feedback, ensuring that their approach remained relevant and effective. By listening to their audience and making necessary adjustments, Developer B was able to sustain interest and engagement over time. According to Developer B,

I spend a lot of my time answering every [comment] I get on social media. I'll meet you on Discord . . . In our mailing list . . . I introduce myself . . . And I say, if you answer me, I will answer you back. And some people do answer me, and then, they're mostly surprised I really answer them back . . . and it's something I find funny, because I said, I will, but it's still surprising to them, which shows how much people overlook this aspect of community building, like nurturing your community.

Furthermore, Developer B stated, "Sometimes, I will see a trend, and I will find it funny, and I will jump on it. But, overall, I plan my marketing like one or two months in advance, so there is actually [little] time for adaptation." Developer B maintained a consistent marketing strategy by focusing on their core values, such as delivering deep narrative experiences for mature audiences. My review of organizational documentation, which included insights shared in a previously published interview, showed that Developer B studio engaged deeply with their community by being highly responsive to feedback and making necessary adjustments. This finding aligned with data from semistructured interviews, where Developer B emphasized the importance of community

interaction and adapting their development process based on player input to sustain long-term engagement. This is supported by the finding that indie authors benefit most from reducing barriers in distribution and communication with their readers, highlighting the effectiveness of engaging directly with the audience (Thomas et al., 2023). Much like Developer A, Developer B placed a strong emphasis on personal engagement and communication with their audience. Further review of the same organizational documentation indicated that Developer B spent significant time interacting with fans, reinforcing the importance of being approachable and responsive to community input. This was further supported by data collected from semistructured interviews, where Developer B highlighted their commitment to maintaining direct communication with their audience as a key factor in fostering a loyal and engaged community. According to Thomas et al. (2023), engaging deeply with the community and reducing barriers in communication and distribution between authors and readers is essential for maintaining relevance and achieving positive outcomes. Such an approach helps build a loyal and interactive community, mirroring Developer B's strategy of direct engagement with their audience.

According to Cutolo and Grimaldi (2023), digital platforms have reshaped the dynamics of value creation, delivery, and capture, offering new opportunities for entrepreneurs to reach a broader audience through tailored content. Furthermore, Cutolo and Grimaldi noted that platforms enable creators to experiment with different business strategies and directly monetize their content, which can significantly enhance their visibility and engagement within platform-based ecosystems. This approach leverages the

unique characteristics and audience expectations of each platform, ensuring that marketing efforts are both effective and engaging. Hartiningtyas (2023) noted that alternative publishing offers opportunities for new authors and creates a platform for them to connect with their readers, emphasizing the accessibility and engagement facilitated by digital platforms. Developer B demonstrated the importance of planning and strategy in their development process, focusing on starting with manageable projects and building up to larger ones. Developer B's previously cited organizational documentation revealed that they utilized planned marketing efforts months in advance, while remaining adaptable to trends and feedback. This finding was consistent with data gathered from semistructured interviews, where Developer B discussed their strategic approach to marketing, highlighting the importance of flexibility and responsiveness to audience behaviors and emerging trends. This strategic approach ensured that Developer B's projects were well-received and effectively engaged their target audience. This aligns with the idea that new business models like crowdfunding and Patreon platforms can drive significant revenue growth by directly appealing to the audience (Thomas et al., 2023). Additionally, reducing barriers in distribution and communication between creators and their audience has been shown to positively affect income (Thomas et al., 2023). Developer B's approach to marketing and community engagement highlights the crucial balance between consistency and adaptability in maintaining relevance and effectiveness. By adhering to core values and a well-planned strategy, while also being responsive to audience feedback and trends, Developer B successfully sustained interest and deepened engagement over time.

Developer C adjusted their focus to platforms they were most comfortable with and observed to be the most effective. This flexibility allowed them to maximize their impact on those platforms while minimizing wasted effort on less effective channels.

According to Developer C,

I use TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube the most. I would say what influenced me was, how much time I spend on them, honestly . . . I like TikTok . . . I like the trends. I like the music. I like the vibes. I'm on TikTok quite a lot. So, I understand the culture.

Referring to their use of platforms to sell games, Developer C stated,

I've used Steam. I've used Itch.io. I've also used App Store and Google Play . . . Itch.io is just the easiest thing to get up there, like Itch.io costs nothing . . . you just upload and you're good. Steam . . . you need a hundred dollars, and you have to resize all this different kind of images to fit . . . I think it took me [the] first time I did it . . . a week or 2 weeks. And then . . . you have to wait 2 weeks to actually . . . publish it after you pay. Apple Store . . . it's like a hundred or . . . 90-something every year. But so many more people go on the Apple Store or the App Store, right? Because it's so accessible. So many people have more phones than they do PCs and computers that can actually run a game . . . I think Google Play is like \$25 flat . . . And then you're good, which is so nice.

Developer C added that “there's pros and cons to everything. If I would, I would just upload everywhere. But I'll just take the easiest route first, and if it's popular, or whatever, then I will make it [available elsewhere].” Finally, Developer C argued that

“social media is a giant learning curve . . . that takes time, and it’s hard . . . it looks really easy, because everyone’s doing it.” According to organizational documentation, Developer C focused on platforms they were most comfortable with and found effective to launch their campaign. This allowed Developer C to maximize their impact and minimize wasted effort on less effective channels. Rusfan and Junipriansa’s (2024) emphasized the importance of managing social media content effectively by tailoring it to the needs and interests of the target audience, which can significantly increase engagement and deliver meaningful results. My review of organizational documentation, which included insights shared in a previously published interview, revealed that Developer C Kickstarter campaign was initially unsuccessful, but paid DLCs and Patreon became a steady income source, illustrating the effectiveness of adapting funding strategies based on community support and market demand. This finding was further corroborated by data collected from semistructured interviews, where Developer C discussed the importance of flexibility in funding approaches to align with community-driven feedback and evolving market conditions.

Developer C’s previously cited organizational documentation revealed that experimentation with different platforms was a key part of their strategy to identify the most effective channels for reaching their audience. This finding aligned with data from semistructured interviews, where Developer C emphasized the importance of testing various platforms to optimize audience engagement and refine their marketing efforts. Flexibility was key in Developer C’s approach. Developer C understood that not all campaigns would succeed immediately and that learning from less successful attempts

was crucial. This adaptability allowed them to refine their strategies and try again, which was vital for their long-term success. Victoria-Mas et al. (2023) emphasized the significance of incorporating platforms like Kickstarter and Patreon into a multi-platform strategy to maximize reach and engagement. They noted that Kickstarter, in particular, leverages rewards-based crowdfunding to secure resources and promote independent production, helping maintain visibility and societal impact. Victoria-Mas et al. found that crowdfunding enabled developers to appeal directly to players for funding, facilitating a form of negotiation that allows developers to modify their initial project objectives based on user feedback. This aligns with Developer C's strategy of using a free base experience to attract new players, allowing for ongoing feedback that can inform and adjust the game's development. Victoria-Mas et al. highlighted how crowdfunding allows for flexibility and experimentation with different channels. Victoria-Mas et al. emphasized the importance of refining strategies based on past failures and applying principles such as signaling theory—encompassing social ties, investment preparation, presentation, and effective communication with the crowd—to significantly increase the probability of success in future campaigns. Developer C's experience with a failed Kickstarter campaign highlighted the challenges inherent in using crowdfunding. This experience underscores the importance of learning from failure, as emphasized by Victoria-Mas et al., who stressed that adaptability is crucial for achieving long-term success in crowdfunding. Further review of the same organizational documentation revealed that Developer C demonstrated strategic planning by setting specific financial goals and adapting the project scope based on the funding received. This finding was supported by

data from semistructured interviews, where Developer C discussed their approach to managing finances and adjusting project objectives to align with available resources, ensuring sustainable development. According to Developer C,

I make free games. I Kickstart something, and then I make the [paid] DLCs, and it's been going well, other than the fact that it's taking longer. I keep on adding more things that I shouldn't need to, and I'm over-scoping a lot, but it is happening. And it's at a very financially reasonable pace.

The ability to adjust strategies based on platform effectiveness is crucial. Rusfan and Junipriansa (2024) emphasized the importance of tailoring content to specific audiences on social media to enhance engagement and achieve desired outcomes. This mirrors Developer A and B's approach of planning marketing efforts in advance while remaining flexible and adaptable, which aligns with Developer C's decision to concentrate on platforms that were both familiar and effective, optimizing their content marketing to achieve the best results.

Developer D shifted their attention to Instagram as Twitter's influence declined, demonstrating the importance of being responsive to changing trends and user behaviors. Developer D emphasized the importance of "observing where the people go." According to Developer D, "react to situations and see what's the next best step." Developer D further stated that they "try to engage [their] audience . . . They comment on our post, so they feel included ...in the development process." This strategy is supported by the findings of Rusfan and Junipriansa (2024), who concluded that effective content management on social media, when tailored to the specific needs and interests of the

target audience, can lead to a significant increase in followers and insights. Social media marketing involves creating and sharing content to achieve branding and promotion goals by facilitating customer communication, collaboration, and interaction with the brand, thereby encouraging engagement (Rusfan & Junipriansa, 2024). Cutolo and Grimaldi (2023) discussed how digital platforms offer significant flexibility and resources that can help individuals maximize their impact while minimizing wasted effort. This aligns with Developer C and Developer D's strategy of focusing on the most effective platforms for their respective use case. Cutolo and Grimaldi also noted that platforms significantly reduce the costs and time for users to become aware of the attention and appreciation their content can generate, allowing them to effectively adapt their strategies based on what works best. Similarly, the researchers emphasized the importance of leveraging digital platforms to deliver value through targeted strategies, demonstrating the need to stay responsive to changing trends and user behaviors to maintain effectiveness.

Developer D's adaptive marketing tactics proved successful. According to organizational documentation, Developer D's Kickstarter campaign significantly surpassed its goal, raising more than five times the target amount for its goal. This allowed the developer to plan for a fully fleshed out version of the game with additional features and characters. This achievement underscores the importance of strategic planning and adaptability in response to community support and market trends.

In summary, leveraging various platforms for effective marketing and distribution is crucial for indie game developers aiming to maximize reach and engagement.

Developers should tailor content to each platform's unique dynamics, ensuring their

marketing resonates with specific user demographics. This adaptive approach, demonstrated by Developers A, B, and C, involved continuously monitoring and adjusting strategies based on platform performance and audience behavior. Consistent updates and active community engagement were essential, as they build trust and foster loyalty, mirroring successful practices in the self-publishing industry. The ability to experiment with and focus on the most effective platforms, as seen in Developer C's strategy, underscored the value of learning from both successes and failures. Additionally, being responsive to changing trends, as demonstrated by Developer D's shift in platform focus, was crucial for maintaining relevance. The strategic use of multiple platforms, adaptive marketing strategies, and consistent community engagement were crucial for maximizing reach and maintaining relevance. These approaches, as demonstrated by all four developers, were supported by the findings of Hartiningtyas (2023), Thomas et al. (2023), and Rusfan and Junipriansa (2024). Ultimately, a multifaceted, adaptive platform strategy is vital for indie developers to ensure the successful launch and sustained popularity of their games.

Correlation to the Conceptual Framework

Theme 2 aligns closely with Shapiro and Varian's (1999) platform theory by illustrating how small independent game developers strategically utilize multiple digital platforms to maximize their reach and engagement, thereby creating and capturing value. Platform theory posits that platforms act as digital intermediaries, facilitating transactions and interactions between different user groups. The adaptive marketing strategies employed by Developers A, B, C, and D exemplified this by showing how these

developers tailored their content to fit the specific dynamics of various platforms, thereby enhancing their visibility and connection with audiences. This approach reflected the platform theory's concept of value creation through interconnected, boundary-spanning transactions, where developers continuously engage with their communities across multiple platforms, fostering loyalty and sustaining interest in their games. Moreover, the emphasis on adapting marketing strategies based on platform performance and audience behavior, as seen in Developer B's and Developer C's strategies, underscored the dynamic nature of platform-based value creation. By adjusting their approach to leverage the strengths of different platforms, these developers were able to optimize their reach and maintain a consistent presence, aligning with platform theory's notion of digital platforms as facilitators of value capture through ongoing interactions. The flexibility demonstrated by Developer C in experimenting with various platforms, and Developer D's responsiveness to shifting trends, further illustrated how platform theory provides a robust framework for understanding the strategic use of digital platforms in the indie game development industry. Through these strategies, small independent game developers effectively engaged their audiences, creating sustainable value and achieving long-term success.

Theme 3: Leveraging Crowdfunding and Financial Management for Sustainability

The third theme that emerged from the analyzed data was the leverage of crowdfunding and financial management for sustainability independent game development. Developers consistently emphasized the importance of leveraging diverse funding sources to complete projects on time and within budget. By strategically utilizing

platforms such as Kickstarter and Patreon, developers were able to secure the necessary resources while adapting their project scopes based on available funds. I identified three key strategies that the developers used, including (a) implementing adaptive budgeting to respond flexibly to varying funding outcomes, (b) maintaining financial prudence and cost management to ensure long-term project sustainability, and (c) leveraging external funding sources such as governmental grants and client work to supplement crowdfunding efforts. These financial strategies allowed developers to navigate the challenges inherent in indie game development, ensuring their projects could progress and achieve sustainable success without overextending resources.

Implementing Adaptive Budgeting to Respond Flexibly to Varying Funding Outcomes

All four developers underscored the necessity of meticulous financial planning and disciplined resource management to ensure the viability and sustainability of their projects. Key aspects of this approach included (a) employing adaptive budgeting to adjust project scopes based on the fluctuating outcomes of crowdfunding campaigns, (b) maintaining strict financial discipline and frugality to optimize the use of available resources, and (c) supplementing project budgets by leveraging external funding sources such as governmental grants and client work. These strategies collectively enabled developers to manage their finances effectively, ensuring that their projects remain on track and financially sustainable.

Developer A and Developer B discussed the importance of adaptive budgeting, where project plans are adjusted based on the amount of funds raised through crowdfunding platforms such as Kickstarter and Patreon. This flexibility allowed the

developers to scale their projects appropriately and avoid overextending their resources. According to Developer A, “We were on Kickstarter, and that’s a big way [the game] got funded. But we also get funding through Patreon and have sales from our prior game series.” My review of organizational documentation, which included insights shared in a previously published interview, revealed that Developer A demonstrated strategic financial management by securing significant funding through Kickstarter while also relying on consistent financial support from Patreon and sales from previous game series. This finding was supported by data from semistructured interviews, where Developer A discussed the importance of using Patreon as a financial baseline to manage cash flow effectively and plan their budget. Additionally, my review of the organizational documentation revealed that Developer A employed adaptive budgeting by utilizing consistent monthly income from Patreon as a financial baseline. This finding was supported by data from semistructured interviews, where Developer A emphasized the importance of relying on stable Patreon income to manage cash flow and plan their project budget effectively. This strategy allowed Developer A to ensure financial stability while scaling the project scope based on available resources, demonstrating a careful balance between income and project development. When it came to planning a budget, Developer A stated,

I was able to sort of look at how much we get per month on Patreon, and that stays pretty consistent. And so that was kind of like our base of what we could expect to have. And then there’s also things that fluctuate a lot more like game sales.

Developer A also strategically planned their Kickstarter campaign with a realistic funding goal. According to Developer A,

We did plan to have a Kickstarter. We weren't entirely sure how much we would get from that! But we were pretty confident about the base goal we set . . . if we had that, then we would be able to do everything we wanted to with the game, including the Patreon funds. If we just had the [base goal] we wouldn't have been able to do as much as the game has. But then the Kickstarter did even more than that, and so we were able to add stretch goals to expand the features even more.

Developer A maintained that budgeting and project planning does not always go hand-in-hand.

Maintaining Financial Prudence and Cost Management to Ensure Long-Term Project Sustainability

Financial prudence and cost management emerged as essential components within the broader strategy of crowdfunding and financial management. While the budget may allow for a larger scope, available workforce may not allow it. Developer A's previously cited organizational documentation revealed that they recognized the importance of balancing an increased budget with the availability of manpower, which could limit the project's scope. This finding was supported by data from semistructured interviews, where Developer A discussed the challenges of expanding the project despite having additional funds due to constraints in available workforce. According to Developer A,

When we hired [our team] they had rates they wanted to go by, and I sort of planned how much content in terms of . . . art would we have based on how much

they wanted to be paid and how much we had, and [we] just kept getting more money than expected. So now it's not really . . . a matter of trying to budget, and more like I don't know if we could do even more if we wanted to.

I found in Developer A's previously cited organizational documentation that they emphasized leveraging multiple funding sources, including Kickstarter, Patreon, and sales from previous games, as crucial for ensuring financial stability. This finding was supported by data from semistructured interviews in that Developer A discussed the strategic importance of diversifying income streams to maintain consistent funding throughout the project. This multi-faceted approach enabled them to maintain consistent funding and adapt to changing financial needs. Developer A's strategy involved adaptive budgeting by using the consistent monthly income from Patreon as a financial baseline. Additionally, they highlighted the importance of setting realistic funding goals based on past experiences, using Kickstarter to secure additional funds and expand the project's scope. The success of their Kickstarter campaign allowed Developer A to exceed their initial goals and introduce additional features through stretch goals, demonstrating their adaptability in budgeting and project planning. Furthermore, Developer A underscored the balance between budgeting for content creation and managing financial resources based on the funding received, noting that while an increased budget can allow for a larger scope, the availability of manpower can be a limiting factor. This approach demonstrated Developer A's ability to adapt to increasing budgets while ensuring the project's scope remained feasible. Helgadóttir and Grosen (2024) highlighted the importance of flexibility in economic strategies and the necessity of alternative

approaches in managing financial resources, especially in nonmainstream or grassroots contexts. This finding supports the approach taken by Developer A, who leveraged multiple funding sources, such as Kickstarter and Patreon, alongside sales from prior projects, to maintain financial stability and adapt project scopes based on available resources. This adaptive budgeting enabled Developer A to expand their project's features and scale without overextending their resources, ensuring the feasibility and success of their endeavors.

Similar to Developer A, Developer B strategically used crowdfunding and financial management to sustain their game development by emphasizing adaptive budgeting, financial prudence, and leveraging diverse income streams. According to Developer B, "I self-funded everything until the Kickstarter for the game. So, it was my personal money, my [savings from] my [job] and stuff like that." My review of organizational documentation, which included insights shared in a previously published interview, revealed that Developer B's studio initially relied on self-funding before moving to external funding sources like Kickstarter. This finding was supported by data from semistructured interviews, where Developer B discussed the transition from personal savings to crowdfunding as a strategic approach to sustain development and expand the project. Developer B also stated,

I didn't spend that much compared to what we got from the Kickstarter . . . I spend . . . [money] to prepare for the Kickstarter . . . I add some techniques to lower the budget costs of the game like having only the face of the character displayed and not their full body, having stock [images] . . . [I commissioned] the

least amount of art possible, knowing that I handle the writing, and that the music is done for free, because the man who does the music, he is in revshare, so he will get a cut after the game is released.

This approach highlighted the importance of adaptive budgeting and cost management.

Developer B maintained that

It was like a balance between . . . where I can put cost on the art, which I knew I couldn't find a really talented artist willing to get to work for revshare, because, unfortunately, there is a lot of promises, but not delivering, and a lot of artists are wary to work for free, which I completely understand and respect.

Furthermore, in reference to making a steady income, Developer B stated,

I could have a more regular income, because the problem with living with your games . . . you have the money, the months you release your game. So, if you work [on] your game during 2 years and you don't have a back catalog, you have no money during 2 years, basically.

By using consistent monthly income from Patreon as a financial baseline, Developer B underscored the importance of financial prudence and adaptive budgeting in their game development process. According to Developer B,

Patreon is a safer option for me . . . unless I [make] a big [mistake] and ...lose half of my [supporters] in one day . . . Every month I'm going to have this, and once I reach the amount I need to live properly . . . I can, maybe, drop my work or go off time, or something like that. Because I know . . . every month I'm going to have

an income coming in my bank account and not just baiting on the [game's] success.

This mirrors the financial challenges faced by indie books publishers. According to Aritenang and Dewi (2022), indie authors often have limited resources, creating a necessity to adapt their strategies to maintain their projects. This parallel highlighted that both indie game developers and indie book publishers operate under similar constraints, where strategic resource management is crucial for achieving and sustaining success. For indie game developers such as Developer B, adopting these strategies is essential to successfully navigate the unpredictable nature of crowdfunding and self-funding, ensuring their projects can progress without exceeding available resources. This finding underscores the broader relevance of adaptive budgeting and cost management across various indie creative industries, where resource limitations are a common challenge (Aritenang & Dewi, 2022). According to Aritenang and Dewi,

[Because] indie publishers haven't implemented a business development strategy, their book production process is less efficient . . . As a result, productivity is slow, with only one book potentially being published per year due to the significant amount of time and effort required for each project.

Developer B's approach to adaptive budgeting and financial prudence illustrates the critical role of strategic resource management in sustaining indie game development. By leveraging diverse income streams like Patreon and carefully controlling costs, Developer B effectively navigated the challenges of crowdfunding and self-funding. This mirrors the financial strategies necessary for success in other indie creative industries, such as book

publishing, where resource limitations demand similar adaptive approaches. Developer B's experience underscores the broader importance of strategic financial management in achieving sustainable progress in independent creative projects.

Developer C highlighted the necessity of being frugal and financially minded, focusing on cost-effective solutions and prioritizing essential expenses to sustain development. By carefully managing their finances, Developer C was able to maintain stability and continue working on their projects without compromising quality. According to Su et al. (2020), given that indie games often have limited resources compared to high-budget games, they are usually developed and published by a small team or a single person with constrained resources. Financial independence means that these developers typically have to fund their games themselves, making adaptive budgeting essential (Su et al., 2020). Regarding maintaining financial discipline and frugality, Developer C stated,

Cost . . . I'm very, very . . . frugal and . . . money minded. So, when I was thinking about raising the funds, I only wanted to do it if we made enough to last a year . . . just on the funds alone . . . just to last a year of working on [the game], even though it was supposed to take like 2 to 3 months and I did take a break from it.

Additionally, since game developers often engage in self-publishing, where they handle the entire publishing process independently, the ability to adjust their plans based on available funds becomes crucial to avoid overextending their resources (Su et al., 2020). Unrealistic scope is a common pitfall in indie game development, often leading to

projects that are too ambitious for the available resources and timelines (Politowski et al., 2021). Indie developers, typically working with limited budgets and small teams, must carefully balance their creative vision with what is feasible within their constraints. Developer C argued that “a lot of people . . . over-scope, especially for indie games. This tendency to over-scope can lead to burnout, delays, and ultimately, a compromised final product,” which is supported by other researchers (Politowski et al., 2021).

By maintaining a realistic scope, developers can focus on delivering a polished game that meets expectations while staying within budget and time limits. According to Developer C, “I make free games, and I make the DLCs cost money so that people can get engaged. They can understand what I’m giving them, and then, they can get the [paid DLC].” Developer C argued that their method of initially releasing free content to build interest and then monetizing through DLCs helped them to maintain financial stability. My review of organizational documentation, which included insights shared in a previously published interview, revealed that Developer C utilized a Kickstarter campaign to raise funds for their video game, Title C. This finding was supported by data from semistructured interviews in that Developer C discussed their focus on using cost-effective solutions, having financial discipline, and using paid DLCs to sustain development and maintain financial stability. Additionally, I reviewed organizational documentation and found that Developer C emphasized the importance of funding additional DLC content, maintaining that making paid DLCs helps to engage players and generate revenue. This finding was supported by data from semistructured interviews, where Developer C discussed how monetizing through paid DLCs contributed to their

financial stability and player engagement. This finding mirrors the financial challenges faced by indie book publishers, where alternative publishing options offer a space for authors to maintain their idealism while also necessitating frugality and adaptive budgeting to ensure financial viability (Hartiningtyas, 2023; Sharma et al., 2023).

Hartiningtyas (2023) and Sharma et al. (2023) discussed how alternative publishing, such as indie publishing, often requires authors to manage their finances carefully. For instance, when self-publishing, authors need to deal with the minute details and some upfront financial risk, which highlights the importance of careful financial management to avoid costly mistakes (Hartiningtyas, 2023; Sharma et al., 2023). This action reflects Developer C's strategy of prioritizing essential expenses and focusing on cost-effective solutions to sustain development without compromising quality, budget, or timely product delivery.

Leveraging External Funding Sources Such as Governmental Grants and Client Work to Supplement Crowdfunding Efforts

Developer D emphasized the role of diversified income streams, such as governmental grants and client work in providing additional financial stability. These external funding sources allowed them to support their game development efforts while reducing reliance on unpredictable crowdfunding results. My review of organizational documentation, which included insights shared in a previously published interview with Developer D, revealed that the development of their game leveraged diversified income streams and external funding sources to support their project. This finding was supported by data from semistructured interviews, where Developer D discussed the strategic use of

multiple funding avenues, including governmental grants and client work, to ensure financial stability during development. Developer D stated,

We have the client work that we're doing that really helped us . . . we have been doing that . . . for about 10 years now, and that made us very stable financially. And also, we have . . . funding . . . we are located in [redacted for privacy]. So, we received funding from [redacted for privacy] to make these projects happen . . . these . . . grants and funds really help push a studio into the right direction because they give us the possibility to develop . . . video games.

This highlighted Developer D's strategic use of diversified income streams and financial prudence through adaptive budgeting and leveraging external funding sources such as grants, client work, and crowdfunding platforms, which is crucial for small indie game developers facing the volatile and competitive nature of the games industry. According to Developer D,

We have really good funding opportunities. [Grants] fund the concepting of a game, and then they fund the prototyping of a game, and then they fund the production of a game. They don't always fund a hundred percent, and it's always possible to get a publisher . . . but, [these] funds, have been very important in the games industry, especially for smaller studios . . . if they're starting out, or . . . if they want to break into the entertainment industry like we want to, or we've been trying to do.

I found in Developer D's previously cited organizational documentation that their team managed to secure significant backing through their Kickstarter campaign. This finding

was supported by data from semistructured interviews, where Developer D discussed how the success of their Kickstarter campaign provided a substantial financial boost, allowing the project to expand its scope and reach its development goals. Additionally, a review of the organizational documentation revealed that Developer D Kickstarter success provided a substantial financial boost, with their campaign exceeding its goal by over five times the amount. This finding was supported by data from semistructured interviews, where Developer D discussed how this overwhelming support allowed them to expand the project's scope and further invest in its development. Developer D maintained that "Kickstarter [is a] very important thing . . . it's mostly important for community building . . . because the game really gets out there, and ...you can reach an audience that you couldn't reach before." Developer D also stated that "Kickstarter really helps . . . bring additional content to the game. For some studios, it's very important. They need [Kickstarter] to fund the whole game, but the best side effect of it is you get a lot of visibility." This approach not only diversified Developer D's income streams but also provided a safety net for ongoing development activities. According to Su et al. (2020), indie developers must focus on their return on investment (ROI), keeping in mind that game revenue should be greater than market cost. This highlights the importance of exploring diverse income sources to enhance financial stability.

The importance of diversified income sources is echoed in the findings of Ehlinger et al. (2024), which discussed how indie authors often navigate complex financial landscapes. Ehlinger et al. highlighted several key financial challenges faced by indie authors, particularly regarding income and the financial aspects of self-publishing,

including (a) income disparity, (b) financial autonomy, (c) potential for higher earnings, and (d) market saturation and competition. According to Ehlinger et al., indie authors experience significant income disparity, with a “winner takes all” market where a few superstar authors earn disproportionately large amounts of the total revenue. The top 1% of indie authors earned 31% of the total revenues, while the top 10% accounted for 71% of the total revenues. Additionally, indie authors are drawn to the indie publishing path because it allows them unparalleled control over every aspect of the publishing process, from creative elements to commercial aspects like pricing and marketing. However, this autonomy comes with financial challenges, including the need to cover upfront production costs (e.g., editing, cover design, marketing), which are typically covered by traditional publishers. Also, while indie authors can potentially earn more per sale due to higher royalty rates (up to 60-70% for physical and e-books), they also bear the financial risks associated with self-publishing, as they must cover all production costs themselves. Finally, as the indie market has grown and technology has lowered barriers to entry, the market has become saturated, leading to increased competition. Indie authors must therefore enhance the quality of their work and marketing efforts to stand out, which adds to their financial burdens. These findings from Ehlinger et al. underscored the financial pressures and challenges indie authors face, particularly the need for careful financial management and diversification of income streams to sustain their careers.

Similarly, small indie game developers such as Developer D, encounter comparable challenges, including the unpredictability of income from single sources such as crowdfunding and the high costs associated with game development. According to

Developer D, “We have considered publishers. But . . . we decided to go with self-publishing . . . to go . . . through the whole thing of publishing a game yourself, like . . . the marketing and the Kickstarter and everything.” Developer D added that

Finding a publisher at this point in the industry is very hard as well, because there have been a lot of layoffs. And in general, the industry isn’t doing so good, and . . . a lot of publishers not that willing to invest anymore.

According to Developer D,

A lot of publishers have also been cutting ties with developers, and thus the developers had to have like layoffs. So, the industry is [not] in a good place right now to find a publisher. Which is why a lot of studios [have turned to] self-publishing. [Self-publishing is] harder because of the financial risk and getting all the funds in, but also, it’s a bit more secure in [the] industry right now, where every publisher is . . . going through a rough time as well.

By diversifying their income streams through governmental grants, client work, and crowdfunding, Developer D mitigated the risks associated with relying solely on one financial source. This diversified approach not only provides financial stability but also allows developers to maintain creative control over their projects, similar to how indie authors benefit from financial autonomy.

In summary, adaptive budgeting, diversified income streams, and financial prudence was shown to be critical in sustaining indie game development. Successful developers, such as Developers A, B, C, and D, demonstrated a consistent approach by relying on multiple funding sources and adjusting their project scopes based on available

financial resources. Adaptive budgeting emerged as a key strategy, with Developer A using consistent income from Patreon as a financial baseline and Developer B strategically managing costs to balance self-funding with crowdfunding. This flexibility allowed them to scale projects in response to funding, particularly through platforms like Kickstarter, avoiding the risk of overextending budgets. Diversified income streams were equally important, as the developers did not solely rely on crowdfunding but also leveraged additional sources such as client work and governmental grants. This diversification provided a financial safety net, ensuring project continuity despite fluctuations in any single income source. Financial prudence and strategic resource management were consistently emphasized, with all four developers prioritizing essential expenses and employing cost-effective solutions to maintain quality and timely delivery. These strategies, demonstrated by all four developers, highlight the importance of careful financial management in ensuring the long-term viability and success of independent game projects, aligning with the findings of Helgadóttir and Grosen (2024), Su et al. (2020), and Ehlinger et al. (2024). These strategies collectively enabled the developers to navigate the unpredictable nature of indie game development while ensuring sustainable financial stability and creative control.

Correlation to the Conceptual Framework

Theme 3 correlates with Shapiro and Varian's (1999) platform theory by illustrating how small independent game developers utilize digital platforms not only to connect with their audiences but also to secure and manage financial resources effectively. Platform theory posits that platforms serve as digital intermediaries, enabling

value creation and capture through interconnected transactions among various participants. In the context of crowdfunding and financial management, platforms like Kickstarter and Patreon function as critical intermediaries that facilitate these transactions, allowing developers to generate and sustain funding for their projects (Victoria-Mas et al., 2023). Developers A and B exemplified how leveraging these platforms can lead to adaptive budgeting, where project scopes are adjusted based on the amount of funds raised. By using platforms such as Patreon to establish a consistent financial baseline and Kickstarter to secure additional funding, these developers created value both for themselves and their supporters. This approach reflects platform theory's notion of digital intermediaries enabling value creation through interconnected, boundary-spanning transactions.

Similarly, Developer C's strategy of initially releasing free content and later monetizing through paid DLC demonstrated the practical application of platform theory. By engaging players on a platform and encouraging subsequent transactions, Developer C maximized reach and engagement while ensuring financial sustainability. This mirrors the theory's emphasis on platforms facilitating ongoing interaction and value capture. Developer D's use of diversified income streams, including client work and governmental grants, further underscored platform theory's relevance. While these sources extend beyond digital platforms, they complement the crowdfunding efforts by providing additional financial stability, illustrating how platforms can integrate with broader financial strategies to enhance value creation and sustainability in the digital games industry. This finding aligns with platform theory by demonstrating how small

independent game developers effectively utilize digital platforms to manage their financial resources, engage with their communities, and achieve sustainable success. This correlation reinforces the value of platform theory as a framework for understanding the financial dynamics and opportunities within the digital games industry.

Theme 4: Targeting Specific Niche Markets

The fourth theme that emerged from the analyzed data was the strategic focus on niche markets. All four developers highlighted the importance of identifying and targeting specific market segments to differentiate their games and attract dedicated audiences. By catering to unique player interests and preferences, developers can create games that stand out in a crowded market and foster a loyal community. I identified three prominent strategies that the developers used, including (a) tailoring game development to niche audiences, (b) creating games that meet the distinct needs of niche audiences, and (c) developing personal branding within specific genres. By focusing on niche markets, developers can leverage specialized knowledge and passion to achieve greater success and recognition in the indie game development industry.

Tailoring Game Development to Niche Audiences

The strategic focus on tailoring game development to niche markets emerged as a significant strategy under niche market appeal. All four developers highlighted the importance of identifying and targeting specific market segments to differentiate their games and attract dedicated audiences. By catering to unique player interests and preferences, developers can create games that stand out in a crowded market and foster a loyal community.

Developer A targeted a niche market of visual novels with SIM-like qualities, incorporating role-playing elements that allow players to personalize gameplay. This unique combination appeals to players who enjoy immersive storytelling and character customization. By focusing on creating detailed and interactive games, Developer A was able to carve out a specific segment within the indie game market, attracting a dedicated audience interested in the genre. When asked about the unique thematic elements of their game (i.e., SIM-like or role-playing qualities that allows the player character to grow alongside their love interest), Developer A stated,

We sort of knew from feedback, based on the players of the prior game, what they wanted to see more of, or like, what could have been more complex in terms of creating your own custom character, because that simulation part is a big part of the story where you get to design them and choose how they act.

Developer A's approach is similar to how indie authors tailor their content to specific niche markets, as stated by several researchers (Ehlinger et al., 2024). Ehlinger et al. (2024) and Hartiningtyas (2023) highlighted that many indie authors cater to niche audiences with unique or specialized content that might not appeal to mainstream publishers. This ability to focus on niche markets is a significant advantage for indie authors, allowing them to build a dedicated readership around particular genres or themes that may not be as commercially viable in traditional publishing (Ehlinger et al., 2024; Hartiningtyas, 2023). This strategy of targeting niche markets enabled many indie authors to create content that is more closely aligned with the specific interests and preferences of

their audience, thereby fostering a stronger connection with their readers and often leading to higher engagement and loyalty.

This focus on niche markets is paralleled by Developer A's strategy of creating a video game with a unique combination of SIM-like qualities and role-playing elements, appealing to a specific segment within the indie game market. According to organizational documentation, Developer A highlighted ways their game series caters to their chosen niche market by letting players highly customize their experience, including the protagonist and their relationship with the love interest. This approach allows players to connect with the world and experiences themselves, making a customizable main character an obvious choice. My review of organizational documentation, sourced from a third-party interview with Developer A, revealed that they maintained the importance of allowing players to customize the player character, as they wanted people to connect with the world and experiences themselves. This finding was supported by data from semistructured interviews, where Developer A emphasized how player customization enhances personal connection to the game. Additionally, Developer A highlighted the importance of building a personal brand. According to Developer A,

I'm definitely not an expert. I don't feel like I'm doing anything special with the marketing, but I feel like we do just have a pretty unique game with very beautiful art. And so . . . if [people] just see it at all, they're kind of prone to give it a chance if it's the type of game that they like.

This echoes the findings that quality and visual appeal of content play a significant role in differentiating indie products in a crowded market (Ehlinger et al., 2024). Further review

of the same organizational documentation revealed that Developer A emphasized the game's visual appeal, along with its unique offering, as key factors that make it easy for players to try it. Building on this, my review of Developer A's organizational documentation revealed that they credited their game's attractive visual appearance as the driving force behind people wanting to try it. This finding was supported by data from semistructured interviews, where Developer A echoed the sentiment that their game's distinct visual style plays a crucial role in attracting player interest and emphasized the importance of visual appeal in drawing players to the game.

Ehlinger et al. (2024) discussed the importance of community building for indie authors, arguing that the indie publishing industry allows authors to engage directly with their readers. According to Ehlinger et al., direct engagement "from the ground up" fosters a sense of community and support, which is crucial for building a dedicated readership and sustaining long-term success. Indie authors often rely on networks and supportive communities, such as online forums and groups, where they can share knowledge, experiences, and encouragement (Ehlinger et al., 2024). This sense of community is vital as it helps indie authors navigate the challenges of self-publishing, particularly in the early stages of their careers, where they often experiment with various strategies to build their audience and reputation (Ehlinger et al., 2024). This aligns with Developer A's approach of building a community around their game by engaging with their audience on a day-to-day basis, sharing development progress, and fostering a personal connection with their players. According to Developer A,

I do something that not everyone does, but I think [it] has helped build a community . . . I post every single day what I did that day, whether I say the development progress I've gotten done, or if it was a day off. And so, every day people come to just sort of look and see what I did that day, and they can know how the game is progressing on a day-by-day basis. And that's been sort of a way to keep people feeling confident in the project, and to keep them following along with how it all comes together.

Developer A's strategy of targeting a niche market with a unique blend of visual novels, SIM-like qualities, and role-playing elements demonstrates a focused approach to game development that parallels the strategies of successful indie authors. By focusing on a specific segment within the indie game market, Developer A effectively tapped into the preferences of a dedicated audience that values immersive storytelling and character customization. Just as indie authors build strong connections with their readers through tailored content, Developer A's emphasis on player customization and immersive experiences fosters a deeper connection with their audience, enhancing engagement and loyalty. Moreover, the importance of community building, as discussed by Ehlinger et al. (2024), is evident in Developer A's day-to-day engagement with their audience. By regularly sharing development progress and creating a transparent, interactive environment, Developer A cultivated a supportive community that mirrored the networks and forums utilized by indie authors to share knowledge and sustain their careers. This community-driven approach not only helped in building a loyal player base but also reinforced the personal brand Developer A established, making their game better stand

out in a crowded market. The combination of niche targeting, community building, and strong visual branding is key to Developer A's success in carving out a distinct space within the indie game industry.

Developer D targeted the cozy game niche, recognizing the demand for relaxing and low-stress gaming experiences. By creating games that emphasized comfort, simple mechanics, and pleasant aesthetics, Developer D was able to attract players who were looking for a soothing and enjoyable gaming experience. This strategic focus on cozy games helped Developer D build a dedicated community of players. When it came to identifying and targeting a specific market segment, Developer D stated, "We . . . have discovered that we are very good at doing cozy games . . . We really try to establish ourselves in [the cozy game] niche specifically and try to build on that."

According to Freeman et al. (2020), indie developers often focus on niche markets to differentiate themselves from mainstream gaming, capitalizing on unique and specific narrative content to appeal to particular audiences that are often underserved by larger game companies. This approach not only allows for greater creative freedom but also increases the potential for building a loyal and engaged audience, which is essential for long-term success in the indie game industry, something that many indie game developers struggle with most of the time (Su et al., 2020). This strategy of targeting niche markets allows indie developers to build a dedicated community around their games, fostering a strong connection with players who are drawn to these unique experiences. According to Developer D,

A lot of people have the need to . . . have games that they can play after work or after stressful days, to decompress . . . where it's really just nothing stressful. No stakes. You can't really lose at the game. You don't have to put a lot of concentration in. And because everyone is so stressed. Everyone is having a hard time, like, you know, and . . . we really want to create things that make people feel good and not stressed.

This direct verbatim from Developer D aligned with the strategy of targeting niche audiences that have specific desires or needs that may not be fully met by mainstream games, thereby providing a unique value proposition that resonates deeply with those players. The strategy of focusing on niche markets, as emphasized by Freeman et al. (2020) and Sutherland (2020a), is a crucial element for indie developers, such as Developer D, allowing Developer D to leverage this approach to create a strong brand identity and attract a dedicated player base. My review of organizational documentation, which included insights shared in a previously published interview, revealed that Developer D' game uniquely focused on comforting gameplay and interactive character experiences, aligning perfectly with the growing demand for cozy gaming experiences. This finding was supported by data from semistructured interviews, where Developer D emphasized the importance of creating a soothing and immersive game environment to meet the preferences of the cozy gaming audience. Sutherland highlighted ways niche games, such as *Stardew Valley*, have successfully targeted specific market segments by appealing to cultural ideals and emotional responses. According to Sutherland, *Stardew Valley* attracts players appreciating nostalgic and tranquil gameplay, which is a stark

contrast to the fast-paced action of popular first-person shooters and sports games. Stardew Valley's focus on peaceful farming life resonates with a broad audience, offering a form of escapism and a connection to nostalgic rural life. Its international appeal suggests that such cultural ideals are widely shared, making it a model for the success of other games that offer slow-paced, sim-like qualities and cozy experiences. By identifying and catering to specific player interests, such as immersive storytelling and character customization for relaxing, low-stress experiences for cozy games, developers like Developer A and Developer D can successfully carve out unique segments within the indie game market.

This focus on niche markets not only distinguishes developers like Developer A and Developer D from mainstream competitors but also allows them to cultivate a loyal and passionate community around their games, enhancing both their visibility and success. Social media plays a large role in achieving success (Su et al., 2020). I reviewed Developer D's previously cited organizational documentation and found that the success of niche games, such as Title D, was particularly evident through the viral reach achieved on platforms like TikTok and strategic collaborations with influencers. Building on this issue, my review of Developer D's organizational documentation revealed that they recognized the crucial role social media and content creators play in making games go viral and increasing their visibility. This finding was supported by data from semistructured interviews, where Developer D emphasized ways leveraging these platforms helped amplify their game's reach, resonate with a wider audience, and gain popularity within its niche. According to Developer D,

Social media has . . . a very important role in [game development] ...Content creators as well, because they . . . are [the] reason why games go viral and get visibility. Also, small games from small developers no one has ever heard before. If someone with a lot of reach plays this game, you get a lot of visibility, and people find you and people buy the game . . . that's very good. So, content creators, especially on Youtube or Tiktok, are very, very, very important.

According to Developer D, there are specific tactics to succeed with social media.

Specifically,

I think the most important thing is try to build a community early on and try to hook the audience with a screenshot or short video . . . It doesn't even have to be [a] video from the game, especially if the game isn't far enough developed yet, but you can easily create a scene where you animate the gameplay . . . just to have something to show to the . . . potential audience and say, 'Hey, this is my game!' And try to build a community very early on, because these are the people in the end that gladly buy your game and recommend your game to friends and write good reviews, and I think that's the most important thing, to really try and work with the audience.

Developer D also argued that collaborating with content creators involves engaging with other games and creators. This can be achieved through cross-promotion, such as developers incorporating characters or elements from other games or creators into their own game. This strategy can be unexpectedly successful. According to Developer D, "This is also a small thing that helps with the community, and then again with the wish

lists, and then again with the overall monetization of the game.” I reviewed Developer D’s organizational documentation and found that Developer D’s successful Kickstarter campaign surpassed its funding goal and engaged the community by incorporating popular content creators and leveraging their platforms for cross-promotion. This finding was supported by data from semistructured interviews, where Developer D emphasized how collaborating with influencers and using cross-promotion strategies helped boost both funding and community engagement. Community engagement and targeted marketing are critical for niche market success, as they help build a sense of belonging and loyalty among an audience (Freeman et al., 2020; Ruffino, 2020; Su et al., 2020). This finding aligns with Developer D’s strategic focus on niche markets, specifically their efforts to establish personal branding within specific genres and their creation of games that met the distinct needs of their targeted audience.

Creating Games That Meet the Distinct Needs of Niche Audiences

Developer B’s strategy involved two free games with no DLC, alongside one commercial game within a specific romance-oriented genre, *Game B*, which included DLC created in response to popular demand. Developer B’s approach focuses on attracting players who are interested in these types of games and catering to audience feedback for their commercial release while using DLC to provide a more intensive experience for players who are willing to pay for additional content. This meant adapting content creation to market demands. My review of organizational documentation, which included insights shared in a previously published interview, revealed that Developer B adapted content creation to market demands by expanding their original games with

DLCs, allowing them to explore additional narrative paths and respond to player interests. This finding was supported by data from semistructured interviews, where Developer B emphasized how this strategic approach helped meet player expectations while maintaining engagement with their games. This strategy aligns with how indie authors have leveraged digital platforms to target niche markets more effectively, despite the challenges posed by algorithmic systems (Sharma et al., 2023). Similar to indie authors, Developer B has cultivated a niche community by tailoring their content creation to meet market demands and sustain engagement within their specific genre.

Additionally, I reviewed organizational documentation and found that a significant part of Developer B's decision to expand the game was driven by the overwhelming response to the base game, particularly toward a character initially intended as a minor cameo. This finding was supported by data from semistructured interviews, where Developer B highlighted ways player feedback influenced their decision to further develop this character and incorporate additional content based on audience interest. According to Developer B,

And they will make what we call “asks,” which is [fans] can send question[s], and you can answer them publicly, as most of the time . . . they are anonymous, but you can answer them publicly, and they will ask a lot of question[s] about the game lore, the characters . . . it's actually a very fun way to interact with your community and to show that you care about what they think.

I conducted a further review of the same organizational documentation and found that Developer B's aim was to engage their community through character-driven stories and

interactive content. This finding was supported by data from semistructured interviews, where Developer B emphasized how focusing on compelling characters and interactive experiences helped build a strong connection with their player base. This mirrored the experiences of indie authors engaging directly with their readers to build a dedicated community around their niche content (Aritenang & Dewi, 2022; Sharma et al., 2023). Developer B's approach to game development closely mirrored the strategies employed by successful indie authors, as both rely on leveraging niche markets and engaging directly with their audience to sustain success. By offering free games with paid DLC in a specific romance-oriented genre, Developer B was able to cater to the unique preferences of their player base, much like how indie authors use digital platforms to target specialized reader markets (Sharma et al., 2023). This strategy of expanding original content based on community feedback not only strengthens the connection between Developer B and their audience but also aligned with the practices of indie authors who similarly adapt their content to meet market demands. Both Developer B and indie authors benefit from the ability to cultivate dedicated communities around their niche offerings, using targeted content creation and direct engagement to build loyalty and maintain long-term success despite the challenges posed by the broader market.

Developing Personal Branding Within Specific Genres

Developer C emphasized personal branding, establishing themselves within the Not Safe for Work (NSFW) and dating sim niche. By focusing on a genre that catered to adult themes and romantic interactions, Developer C was able to attract a loyal following of players who were specifically interested in these types of games. This strategy aligned

with findings by Lankoski and Dymek (2020), which showed that developers who created games in niche genres, particularly those involving adult content, have successfully leveraged platforms such as Patreon to build strong community bonds and offer content that deeply resonates with specific audiences. This niche focus allowed the developers to create content that resonated deeply with their audience, fostering a strong sense of community and player loyalty. On the topic of personal branding, Developer C stated,

I think that's like one of the most important things. I think if you don't have an identity or you don't have a brand, then people won't know what to come [to you] for . . . But because I've branded myself like this, if I make anything similar to this, even if it's not super out of the water breathtaking, it's what people expect from me and get really excited for.

My review of organizational documentation, which included insights shared in a previously published interview, revealed that Developer C approach consisted of a Kickstarter campaign for their game, with a focus on interactive storytelling and appealing characters. Building on this finding, my review of Developer C's organizational documentation revealed that offering games with romantic interactions and NSFW content successfully attracted an audience that values these unique experiences. This finding was supported by data from semistructured interviews, where Developer C emphasized ways these elements helped differentiate their games, attract backers, and build a dedicated player base by engaging their audience. Lankoski and Dymek (2020) noted that the success of niche-focused projects is often driven by the strong communities

that developers cultivate, offering not just the product but also an ongoing, personalized relationship with their audience. This strategy mirrored Developer D's focus on personal branding and niche marketing, creating a distinct identity that resonates with specific player interests. Planells (2017) noted that crowdfunding platforms like Kickstarter often feature games from specific genres and themes. These genres tend to be nostalgic and cater to a dedicated fan base, often ignoring more mainstream and current genres like first-person shooters and MMOs. This observation supports the idea that targeting niche genres can successfully attract a dedicated audience by appealing to their specific interests and nostalgia for certain gameplay experiences. Developer C's focus on the NSFW and dating sim niche highlights the effectiveness of targeting specific, underserved markets within the gaming industry. By leveraging personal branding and creating content that resonates deeply with a dedicated audience, Developer C was able to build a strong community and achieve success through platforms like Ko-Fi and Patreon. The combination of niche targeting, community building, and strong branding underscores the importance of aligning content with the specific interests of a dedicated audience, ultimately driving loyalty and sustained success.

In summary, creating content for niche markets is a highly effective strategy for indie game developers, as it allows them to differentiate from mainstream competitors and build loyal, engaged communities. All four developers targeted specific segments within the indie game market—ranging from narrative-driven video games with SIM-like qualities to cozy games, romance-oriented genres with paid DLC, and NSFW dating sims. By tailoring their content to meet the unique preferences of their audiences, these

developers were able to foster strong connections with their players, enhancing engagement and loyalty. This approach mirrored successful strategies in indie book publishing, where targeting niche markets and building community are key to long-term success. These strategies, supported by findings from Freeman et al. (2020), Sutherland (2020a), and Lankoski and Dymek (2020), emphasize the critical role of tailoring content to specific audience interests, which is key to enhancing visibility and achieving lasting success. To thrive in the competitive games industry, indie developers must leverage personal branding and community engagement, continuously adapting their content to resonate with niche audiences and ensuring long-term success and a dedicated following.

Correlation to the Conceptual Framework

Theme 4 relates to Shapiro and Varian's (1999) platform theory by illustrating ways small independent game developers effectively leverage digital platforms to target niche markets and build dedicated communities. Platform theory emphasizes the role of platforms as digital intermediaries that connect different groups of users, facilitating transactions and value creation through boundary-spanning interactions. Developer A's strategy of combining SIM-like qualities with visual novels, and Developer D's focus on cozy games, demonstrated how these developers used digital platforms to connect with specific player segments, thereby creating value through highly tailored content. This approach aligns with platform theory's concept of creating and capturing value by catering to the distinct preferences of interconnected participants. Similarly, Developer C's focus on NSFW and dating sim niches, combined with strong personal branding, reflects platform theory's notion of enhancing engagement and loyalty through ongoing,

specialized interactions on platforms such as Patreon. All four developers' ability to target niche markets and foster strong community ties illustrated the practical application of platform theory in the digital games industry, demonstrating that digital platforms enable small independent developers to achieve sustainable success by engaging deeply with their audiences.

Applications to Professional Practice

In conducting this study, I aimed to help aspiring game developers, especially those who have played games and dreamed of making their own but felt overwhelmed by the complexities of planning, marketing, and monetization. Recognizing the gap in accessible, actionable guidance for small independent game developers, I focused on exploring effective marketing and monetization strategies used by small independent game developers to complete projects within budget and on time. The findings from this study can provide actionable insights for small indie developers looking to refine their marketing and monetization strategies. One of the key takeaways is the importance of leveraging digital platforms, much like many indie authors in the publishing industry have successfully accomplished. Both indie game developers and authors face the challenge of reaching audiences directly without the financial backing or market access of their larger competitors. By effectively using available platforms, these creators can bypass traditional gatekeepers, establish their brands, and cultivate dedicated communities. To effectively apply the findings of this study to professional practice, small independent game developers can enhance their marketing and monetization

strategies by adopting a platform-centric and data-driven approach, similar to how successful indie authors operate in the publishing industry.

Data-driven approaches can be critical in optimizing marketing and monetization strategies. Chris Fox left a career in iPhone development in 2014 to become a writer (Fox, 2016). Fox was one of the earlier voices in the self-publishing community to emphasize the importance of Amazon's AI and machine learning capabilities in selling eBooks. In his book, *Six Figure Author: Using Data to Sell Books*, Fox (2016) highlighted how platforms, such as Amazon, use data science and machine learning to refine audience targeting and predict consumer behavior with high accuracy. Amazon opened its Kindle Store in 1995 and has since gone on to make billions of dollars each year just from the sale of books alone (Lee et al., 2023). According to Fox, nearly all major corporations are now leveraging data science. By supplying Amazon with the right data, authors can potentially achieve thousands or even tens of thousands in sales. For indie authors, this means they can leverage Amazon's data capabilities to increase visibility and tailor marketing efforts to specific audiences, allowing them to bypass traditional publishing routes to directly reach their readers (Lee et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2023; Sharma et al., 2019). Additionally, staying informed about Amazon's evolving algorithms allows authors to continually optimize their strategies for better results (Fox, 2016). Machine learning has allowed Amazon to create a recommendation system that pitches authors and their books to the readers most likely to click that “buy now with 1-click” button (Lee et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2023; Sharma et al., 2019).

Currently, indie game developers can leverage data from platforms like Steam, Kickstarter, or Itch.io to analyze player engagement, understand market trends, and tailor their strategies to reach specific audience segments. By adopting a data-focused approach, developers can optimize their marketing efforts, much like how indie authors use Amazon's algorithms to boost book sales. According to Pradhan et al. (2024), most video game companies depend significantly on demand forecasting and knowledge bases to predict sales trends. However, there has been no research investigating the factors that drive industrial salespeople to engage in and contribute to the sales forecasting process (Pradhan et al., 2024). Pradhan et al. maintained that years of playing video games have generated a substantial amount of gaming data, encompassing player preferences and behavior patterns. This is data that game developers can leverage to gain insights that enhance their games (Pradhan et al., 2024). Machine learning algorithms are effective tools for extracting hidden insights from large datasets, enhancing both prediction efficiency and accuracy and can be utilized to glean important actionable insights from this data to better predict video game sales (Pradhan et al., 2024).

Amazon's AI and machine learning systems have revolutionized the way indie authors reach their audiences. By harnessing vast amounts of consumer data, Amazon's algorithms can predict user preferences, suggesting books to readers based on their browsing history, past purchases, and engagement with similar titles. This practice allows indie authors to be discovered by readers who might not have encountered their work otherwise, leveling the playing field with traditionally published authors. Machine learning enables targeted marketing, where Amazon's system continuously refines its

recommendations based on consumer behavior. As Fox (2016) noted, Amazon's AI can help deliver thousands of sales when indie authors supply the right kind of data, making it a powerful tool for reaching and building a dedicated audience. For small independent game developers, a similar system could be transformative, though such a sophisticated AI platform for games doesn't currently exist on the same scale as Amazon's for eBooks (Pradhan et al., 2024). However, developers can begin to leverage existing tools to emulate these benefits. For example, data analytics from platforms such as Steam, Itch.io, or Kickstarter can offer insights into player preferences, engagement patterns, and purchasing behavior. While these platforms do not yet possess the same predictive AI as Amazon, developers can use these third-party analytics tools to collect and analyze player data, tailoring their marketing strategies accordingly. Over time, as machine learning and AI evolve in the gaming industry, indie developers could eventually access systems that recommend games to players based on personalized user data, mirroring Amazon's success in the book industry. By preparing now by understanding the importance of data, audience segmentation, and targeted engagement, small game developers can position themselves to take advantage of future AI-driven opportunities.

In addition to data-driven decision-making, indie game developers should consider adopting flexible business models such as episodic content, subscriptions, or GaaS models. Just as authors use Amazon's Kindle Unlimited program to increase visibility and generate passive income through interconnected series of books, indie game developers can explore subscription-based or episodic content models to maintain a steady revenue stream (Ehlinger et al., 2024; Fox, 2016; Sharma et al., 2019). This

parallels the rise of GaaS models, where developers continuously release new content to sustain user engagement and monetization over time (Bernevega & Gekker, 2022). These models can provide developers with a consistent revenue stream while maintaining ongoing player engagement by releasing new content periodically (Bernevega & Gekker, 2022). This fact allows small developers to better manage cash flow and project sustainability, reducing the financial strain of relying solely on one-time game purchases (Bernevega & Gekker, 2022).

One of the most actionable insights is the power of leveraging digital platforms like Steam, Itch.io, Patreon, and Kickstarter to provide game developers with direct access to their target audience. This practice allows indie game developers to bypass traditional publishing models and gatekeepers. For indie game developers, building a strong presence on these platforms is crucial for fostering community engagement, increasing visibility, and creating a loyal player base (Victoria-Mas et al., 2023). Indie developers can implement adaptive marketing strategies, similar to those used by indie authors who harness data from platforms like Amazon to refine audience targeting (Lee et al., 2023). Analyzing player engagement data, feedback, and purchasing behavior from platforms like Steam or Kickstarter allows developers to fine-tune their marketing efforts, improve audience segmentation, and develop more effective promotional platform campaigns. Additionally, leveraging analytics tools available through these platforms enables developers to monitor market trends and adjust content to align with evolving player preferences. This data-driven approach empowers developers to create personalized experiences, increase player retention, and optimize monetization.

The key findings of this study provide small independent game developers with actionable strategies to navigate the complexities of the game development industry. By leveraging digital platforms, using data-driven decision-making, and adopting flexible business models, developers can create sustainable paths to success. These findings offer a roadmap that small game developers can use to navigate the challenges of the industry, turning their passion for game creation into viable, long-term businesses in this fast evolving and competitive industry.

Implications for Social Change

The findings of this study offer significant potential for positive social change, particularly within the gaming industry and broader digital creative spaces. By identifying effective monetization and marketing strategies, small independent game developers can not only achieve financial sustainability but also foster inclusivity, diversity, and representation in gaming. The indie gaming space has long been a platform for marginalized voices, offering alternative narratives that challenge mainstream gaming conventions. Ensuring that indie developers have the tools and knowledge to effectively market and monetize their projects could lead to greater visibility for underrepresented groups and socially conscious content, enriching the cultural fabric of the overall gaming industry. Moreover, the economic implications of this study extend beyond individual developers. By empowering small developers to succeed, the study promotes economic development and job creation within communities. Solo developers and small indie studios often operate with tight budgets and limited resources, but with effective strategies in place, they can grow into stable enterprises that provide employment

opportunities and contribute to local economies, increasing the local tax base that can be used for projects to benefit the local community. In this way, the findings of this study could catalyze broader socio-economic benefits by enhancing the competitiveness and sustainability of small independent creators.

Recommendations for Action

Based on the findings of this study, there are several key recommendations that can help small independent game developers implement effective marketing and monetization strategies to complete projects within budget and on time. First, it is essential for indie developers to build and engage a strong community from the early stages of development. Based upon this study's findings, successful developers often rely on the strategic use of demos and free content to foster trust and community interaction. To replicate this success, developers should prioritize releasing free demos or beta versions of their games on platforms such as Steam and Itch.io to attract initial attention. Indie developers should also engage with their audience regularly through social media updates, live streams, and community feedback sessions. This practice not only builds a loyal fanbase but also provides valuable insight into what players want, which can guide the game's development. Second, developers should utilize multiple platforms for marketing and distribution. Adapting marketing content to the unique formats of each platform, such as Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), and YouTube, may increase visibility. Developers can also consider leveraging cross-promotions with other indie developers or influencers in the gaming community, which has proven successful in expanding reach. In this study, I found the importance of platform-specific strategies, so it is crucial for

developers to monitor the effectiveness of each platform and adapt their approach as trends evolve. Third, small indie developers should adopt financial prudence by managing their costs and diversifying revenue streams. Crowdfunding platforms such as Kickstarter and Patreon can serve as both marketing tools and funding sources. Additionally, offering paid DLC or merchandise linked to the game can generate supplemental income, helping to sustain the project over time. This approach mirrors successful strategies used by indie authors, particularly those who rely on platforms like Amazon to manage their financial planning and reach new audiences through data-driven insights. Lastly, for the fourth and final key recommendation, indie game developers should consider targeting niche genres in market segments that resonate with their unique themes and gameplay mechanics. As the findings suggest, focusing on niche markets allows developers to differentiate themselves in a crowded industry and attract a dedicated audience. Developers should identify underserved genres or niche communities and tailor their marketing efforts to the preferences of these players. This practice aligns with the publishing practices of indie authors targeting niche genres that cater to a hungry audience. Building a personal brand within these niches, much like indie authors do with specialized genres, can foster a strong, loyal following. Developers should engage directly with their audience through platforms such as Patreon, Itch.io, and Discord, using feedback to refine their games and cater to the evolving needs of their target market to further expand their reach and enhance their market position.

The findings from this study should be disseminated through relevant industry conferences, workshops, community-driven events, and online forums where indie

developers gather to share insights. Additionally, the results could be published in game development journals, indie developer communities, or even used as training materials for aspiring developers. These platforms offer an excellent opportunity to share best practices and collaborate with peers who face similar challenges, fostering a win-win scenario where the entire indie development community can grow and succeed together.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study has provided valuable insights into effective marketing and monetization strategies for small independent game developers. However, several areas warrant further investigation to enhance the scholarly understanding of this field. Future research can build upon the limitations identified in this study and explore additional dimensions to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing indie game developers.

One of the key limitations identified in this study was participant recruitment, particularly the challenge of obtaining a diverse sample of small independent game developers. Given the niche nature of the indie game development community, recruiting participants was a uniquely challenging endeavor. Future studies would need to overcome the same recruitment challenges, but there is much to be learned from expanding the participant pool. For example, the reliance on a small sample size in this study limited the generalizability of the findings. Future researchers should aim for a larger and more diverse sample to enhance the representativeness of the data. A larger and more varied participant pool from different development platforms (e.g., mobile, console, PC) could

provide the opportunity to explore whether the strategies identified apply universally or are platform specific.

Other research possibilities I identified while conducting this study include the use of crowdfunding platforms and the psychological and social aspects of conducting business in the indie game community. While this study has highlighted the importance of crowdfunding, future research could examine how the dynamics of crowdfunding evolve over time, especially in the face of market saturation. As platforms such as Steam and Kickstarter become increasingly competitive, exploring how small indie developers can stand out from the crowd and maintain long-term community support through postcampaign strategies (e.g., stretch goals, continued engagement through platforms like Patreon) might be valuable. Additionally, future studies could investigate the long-term sustainability of games funded through crowdfunding and how these developers maintain their financial viability postlaunch.

Unexpected findings from this study, such as utilizing different but related conceptual frameworks and the growing importance of community-driven content and user-generated experiences, warrant further exploration. An interesting possibility for additional research concerns the opportunity to integrate additional conceptual frameworks into future research. In this study, I used platform theory as a foundational framework, but future research could incorporate other theories such as network effect theory or the attention economy. Investigating how indie developers manage to capture and maintain player attention in a highly competitive digital marketplace could offer new perspectives on the challenges of marketing in the indie game space. Tangentially related,

researchers could investigate how indie developers can further harness the power of their communities through innovative crowdfunding models or deeper engagement with content creators such as streamers and YouTubers to attract and keep players' attention or to utilize networking to attract even more players to their game. Additionally, the role of transmedia strategies, such as branching into comics, merchandise, and novelizations, also presents an intriguing area for future research. Many successful indie games now integrate comics, merchandise, and novelizations as supplemental income streams (Ho et al., 2022). Future research could explore how transmedia strategies impact both game development and community engagement, particularly in niche genres where fan loyalty is a critical factor for success.

Unexpected findings in this study point to new areas of inquiry. One such area is the evolving role of artificial intelligence and machine learning in the marketing and monetization of indie games. While AI and machine learning was not a primary focus of this study, it emerged as an important tool that could be leveraged to enhance marketing efficiency and personalize player experiences. AI and machine learning were developing rapidly during the course of this study, moving at light speed and evolving in real-time. This fast-paced environment creates a dynamic environment where new tools and strategies emerge continuously, making it essential to consider how indie developers could adapt to these swift changes in technology. Future research could investigate how AI-driven marketing tools, such as recommendation algorithms or AI-generated content, are being adopted by indie developers to maximize reach and engagement. As new marketing and monetization strategies emerge, it would be beneficial for future research

to continuously examine how indie developers adapt to changes in technology, especially as platforms and digital ecosystems continue to rapidly evolve.

Reflections

This study allowed me to delve deeply into the intricate dynamics of small independent game development. Independent game development is a field where passion and innovation are often challenged by limited resources and competitive market pressures. When I began this study, I held the belief that effective marketing and monetization strategies were crucial for the sustainability of indie game developers; however, I underestimated the profound impact of community-building and niche engagement as pivotal factors for success. This realization grew as I conducted interviews and engaged with developers who emphasized the importance of cultivating dedicated player bases and leveraging digital platforms in unique and resourceful ways. The selection of platform theory as the conceptual framework was foundational in my approach to understanding the challenges indie developers face within digital ecosystems. Initially, I anticipated the framework would primarily reveal insights into transactional and engagement strategies. However, it broadened my perspective on the larger, interconnected dynamics of community support, adaptive marketing, and financial management. The framework offered a lens through which I could appreciate the nuanced, boundary-spanning interactions indie developers navigate to capture value within a highly competitive space.

I am mindful of the potential for my own biases to have influenced the study, particularly due to my personal enthusiasm for independent creative industries.

Throughout the process, I made conscious efforts to mitigate these biases by adhering to rigorous methodological practices, including maintaining a neutral stance during interviews and respecting all perspectives shared by participants. I also aimed to maintain neutrality during data analysis, ensuring that my interpretations accurately reflected the participants' insights without distortion. This commitment to objectivity was crucial in allowing the findings to emerge organically, with minimal influence from my own expectations.

Engaging directly with developers was an invaluable aspect of this study. Their openness highlighted the resilience and adaptability required to thrive in an industry dominated by larger, resource-rich studios. I was moved by the creativity and tenacity exhibited by participants in navigating financial, marketing, and community challenges. These insights deepened my understanding of the indie game industry and underscored the importance of research that respects and amplifies the voices of smaller creators.

Conclusion

This study highlighted the importance of strategic marketing and monetization practices for small independent game developers in completing projects within budget and on time. I found that, for indie game developers, success depends not only on their creative output but also on their ability to build and engage a loyal community. This requires that developers leverage multiple platforms adaptively, manage finances prudently, and target niche markets effectively. The strategies identified can help indie developers seeking to navigate an increasingly competitive landscape by (a) enhancing their visibility through optimized platform usage, (b) building sustainable financial

models, and (c) establishing resilient connections with players who value their unique contributions to the gaming industry. A key takeaway is the role of digital platforms as intermediaries that enable independent developers to engage directly with their audiences, bypassing traditional industry barriers. Additionally, effective strategies employed by indie book authors, as well as the use of AI and machine learning, highlight important parallels and emerging tools that indie developers can leverage to enhance visibility and optimize engagement and monetization. These findings contribute to the broader understanding of how digital platform ecosystems shape the success trajectories of independent creators and emphasize the transformative potential of community-driven, platform-centric approaches in the gaming industry.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

- I. Introduction
 - a. Express gratitude to participant for their time.
 - b. Briefly state the study's purpose and its importance.
 - c. Outline the topics to be covered during the interview.
 - d. Emphasize how their participation enriches the research.
- II. Confidentiality
 - a. Assure participant of the confidentiality of their responses.
 - b. Explain the procedures for data handling and secure storage.
 - c. Detail measures for ensuring privacy and data protection.
 - d. Motivate participants to share freely, ensuring an open dialogue.
- III. Informed Consent
 - a. Stress the significance of informed consent in the research process.
 - b. Present the informed consent document, guiding participants through it and addressing any questions. Briefly but clearly explain what providing consent involves, including details about the interview process, use of audio/video recordings, interview duration, confidentiality assurances, and the participant's right to withdraw at any time.
 - c. Provide participant with a copy of the signed consent form for their records.
- IV. Building Rapport
 - a. Introduce professional background as the researcher and relevance to the study.
 - b. Encourage the participant to ask questions or express concerns at any time.
- V. Interview Questions
 - a. Begin the interview with a pre-planned, broad question designed to allow participant to share their experiences or viewpoints freely.
 - b. Gradually narrow the focus to more specific topics pertinent to the research objectives.
 - c. Prompt participant to elaborate on their responses and share detailed examples.
 - d. Listen actively and attentively to all responses, posing follow-up questions when necessary to clarify or expand on the information provided.