

Things I Wish Somebody Had Told Me When Starting My Geeky Business

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1. Figure out what success looks like for you.

Do you want this to be a self-sustaining on a basic level or do you want this to be what you do for a living exclusively? Those are two very different things. (*Attorney's note*: If you don't care about *either* of those things, it's not a business: it's a hobby. Nothing wrong with hobbies, but don't confuse them with a business. Consult a tax accountant or attorney for more information.)

In the first case, say you need to pay for supplies, some fancy equipment and/or a bit of production and distribution and you're looking for something that basically covers those costs and generates enough profit to allow you to buy some higher-end or experimental stuff to broaden your horizons. If that's the goal, then plan for that.

However, if you're planning on taking the plunge, quitting your current job and switching entirely, then that's several orders of magnitude more complicated and needs some pretty major and advanced planning. We planned for years about "going indie" before we actually did it.

2. As a secondary part of that, understand who will be buying what you're selling.

How many of them are there? Is there enough of a market to meet your goals? This is kind of a feedback loop with Item One. If there's a very small market or group of people that are into what you're looking to do, but you really want to get involved more deeply in that community of people, then let that sort of make the decision for you - maybe it's more of a nights and evenings thing. At least initially. Who knows - you might end up being the biggest fish in that small pond and someday be able to make it your only job.

On the other hand, if you think there's a lot of demand for something and that you can dedicate your full energy and attention toward making something really unique and viable, then maybe that does mean going through the effort, planning, and angst of making it your full time work.

3. Flowing from both of those - if you are going to take the plunge and try to make your passion your job, you still have to treat it like a business.

There is a lot of business-y stuff that's neither fun nor exciting but needs to be done. This includes things like accounting, legal stuff, incorporation and lots of other boring things. And maybe more importantly at least some type of business plan for how you're going to sell things, how many you need to sell, how much you need to make, how much time you have before you need to start making money. Also, how are you going to find customers? Going to shows or expos - if so, how will you pay for those fees and travel (more boringly, do you need to collect sales tax? Do you need a business license even if it's just a onetime show thing?) How will people find out about what you're selling?

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4. And given the need to do those boring business things, remember that they can cost more money than you realize.

It's fun and easy to plan for buying software or supplies or equipment that will allow you to make things, but be sure to budget both time and money for those things. Essentially make sure you create both a business plan that includes "the boring bits" and a budget that realistically *funds* the boring bits.

5. If it seems like a lot, remember that being an independent developer or artist should *never* mean being a lone wolf type.

There is a temptation to want to do everything yourself - from making the game to doing your own trademark search. Kill that temptation. (*Attorney's Note*: Especially the part about the trademark search. Just don't.)

You will need help.

I can't stress how important having our community of indie game devs in Chicago is for us. We rely on one another for advice, for sanity and for information. It's really important to get involved with as many communities as you can. They can tell you things like "that show is a waste of time" or "you need an accountant and you should talk to mine". For us, when we started out we still lived in California (in San Francisco) and the indie dev community there isn't great. Being in back home in Chicago for the past 3 years, just having the people in this community has been a huge help.