



AKUPARA

✦ GAMES ✦

Weird Games, Real Money

Creating Experimental Work in a Commercial World



WHO IS AKUPARA GAMES?

Akupara Games is an ever-growing indie **Publisher and Developer**, focused on bringing exceptional narratives with striking worlds to our players. We are a collective of game industry veterans working together alongside the young rising stars of tomorrow. We temper experience with forward-thinking vision. We strive to make our games and experiences **accessible** in all meanings of the word - **playability, availability, and likability**.

INTRODUCTION

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(any/all)
COO, Akupara Games
Founder, Publisher Pathfinder



Notable Titles:

- Ratchet & Clank: All 4 One
- Resistance 3
- Aliens: Fireteam Elite
- Stuntman: Ignition
- Frontlines: Fuel of War
- WARMACHINE: Tactics
- Starblood Arena
- My Pet Hooligan
- Rain World
- GRIME
- Sorry We're Closed
- Cryptmaster



AKUPARA
◆ G A M E S ◆

Publisher

Pathfinder

\$ WEIRD GAMES, REAL MONEY



Creating Experimental Work in a Commercial World

Making strange, personal, and unconventional games is always possible - but *sustaining that work financially* is harder than most developers expect

During this talk, we'll be discussing:

- What *success* actually looks like (to you)
 - Different *funding avenues* (and the *real tradeoffs* of each)
 - The current *financial landscape* of game development in 2026
- How *recoup and profit* really work (and why most games fail financially)
 - Designing to fuel both your *creative vision* and *your survival*
 - Maintaining *marketplace awareness* vs trend-chasing
 - Some *practical frameworks* for evaluating your games

? WHAT IS SUCCESS?

Success looks different to everyone - it is a spectrum. Make sure you know what is important to you, as this will inform all decisions at both a business and project level. *What does success look like to YOU?*



Financing your next game
Creative fulfillment
Critical recognition and acclaim
Sustainable studio / long-term career
A niche but loyal audience or community
Platform / partnership opportunities
Telling a meaningful story



© 100 - Achievement unlocked
Defined Success!

HOW GAMES GET FINANCED

There are several different avenues for financing games (either alone or in tandem). Consider *what each one buys you* and *what you are giving up* in exchange.

Grants / Funds / Accelerators

Traditional Publishers

Platform Funding

VCs / Angel Investors

Loans

Self-Financing / Bootstrapping

Crowdfunding



Most experimental games are built on invisible labor (sweat equity).

GRANTS / FUNDS / ACCELERATORS

Format / Structure

Typically provides non-dilutive capital (no exchange of equity or IP) intended to support cultural, experimental, or early-stage development. Formal application process, may be tied to milestones, expenses, or reimbursement models vs upfront payments. May also include NO repayment terms.

Pros

- No IP loss
- No rev-share
- No creative control imposed
- Can be combined with other funding sources

Cons

- Highly competitive
- Narrow eligibility criteria
- Long timelines
- Often insufficient to fully fund development

Best For

- Early-stage studios or projects
- Prototype funding
- Social, cultural impact or marginalized developers
- Bridging funding gaps



TRADITIONAL PUBLISHERS

Format / Structure

Funding is usually structured as an advance against future revenue, paid out over milestones. The publisher recoups investment from sales. Agreements include ongoing revenue splits. Publishers provide additional services such as marketing, QA, localization, platform relations, biz dev and distribution.

Pros

- Largest source of mid-range funding
- Financing and services both included
- Industry experience, expertise and access
- De-risks launch execution

Cons

- Contract terms can be predatory
- Creative control can be shared or lost
- Disparity between publisher ability and values
- Doesn't guarantee commercial success

Best For

- Teams with a clear vision but limited reach
- Games with proven genre fit
- Studios comfortable trading upside for stability
- Teams who want to focus on development and outsource marketing



PLATFORM FUNDING

Format / Structure

Funding typically takes the form of a minimum guarantee or advance provided by a console or storefront holder, often in exchange for exclusivity or timed exclusivity. Payments are generally milestone-based and may be paired with marketing placement or promotional support on the platform.

Pros

- Strong upfront capital
- Platform-driven promotion
- High validation signal
- Often lighter creative oversight

Cons

- Audience reach may be limited
- Long-term revenue potential capped
- Platform priorities can change abruptly
- Hard to secure repeatedly

Best For

- Games well-suited to a specific platform
- Teams prioritizing launch visibility
- Projects that benefit from curated promotion
- Teams that qualify for acceleration programs



VCS / ANGEL INVESTORS

Format / Structure

Investments involve providing capital in exchange for equity in the studio rather than a specific game. There is no recoup tied to individual titles, but investors expect long-term growth and a return through acquisition, dividends, or future financing events. Funding is typically flexible in usage.

Pros

- Large capital potential
- Flexible use of funds
- Portfolio mindset allows for failure
- Can fund studios, not just single games

Cons

- Ownership dilution
- Pressure for growth and scalability
- Misalignment if investors lack games expertise
- Reduced founder control over time

Best For

- Studio builders rather than single-project teams
- Companies with traction and growth plans
- Founders comfortable with long-term business scaling



LOANS

Format / Structure

Provides capital as debt that must be repaid on a fixed schedule with interest, regardless of commercial success. Often requires collateral, personal guarantees, or proof of stable revenue, making them difficult for early-stage studios. Loans do not involve revenue sharing or ownership transfer.

Pros

- No IP loss
- No revenue share
- Clear, predictable financial terms
- Full creative control

Cons

- High financial risk
- No flexibility if the game underperforms
- Limited availability for indie studios
- Significant repayment pressure

Best For

- Established studios with predictable income
- Short-term cash flow needs
- Low-risk expansions, ports, or live ops



SELF-FINANCING / BOOTSTRAPPING

Format / Structure

Relies on personal savings, income from contract work, revenue from previous projects, or founder runway. Decisions are made internally, with no external oversight or contractual constraints. Maximizes independence but also ties the studio's finances directly to personal circumstances.

Pros

- Full ownership and creative control
- No external obligations
- Maximum flexibility
- Strong alignment with personal vision

Cons

- Severely limited scale
- High burnout risk
- Significant opportunity cost
- Personal financial exposure

Best For

- Solo developers and micro-teams
- Highly scoped or experimental projects
- Vision-first creators
- Early-stage exploration and prototyping



CROWDFUNDING

Format / Structure

Raises capital directly from players, typically through pre-orders, donations, or tiered reward structures. Funding is usually received upfront after a fixed campaign period, and success depends heavily on pre-existing awareness, strong messaging, and sustained marketing during the campaign.

Pros

- No equity dilution
- No publisher or investor control
- Strong early community building
- Validates demand before full production

Cons

- High marketing and preparation burden
- Public failure risk if campaign underperforms
- Ongoing obligation to backers
- Delivery delays can damage trust

Best For

- Teams with an existing audience
- Highly distinctive or niche projects
- Developers comfortable with public development
- Games that benefit from community involvement





GAME DEVELOPMENT ECONOMICS



How Games Recoup and Profit

Games only recoup and make a profit when the game *exceeds the cost of development*. Sounds simple enough, but what does the actual math look like?

Consider this example scenario:

Small Experimental Indie Game

2 developers

18 months part-time

Very stylized / low production scope

Funded through sweat equity + small publisher advance of \$50k

Many “successful” indie games never actually make money.

\$ PROFITABILITY MODELING \$

Even if unpaid, labor still has value.

COST CATEGORY	CALCULATION	TOTAL
Developers (x2)	\$2500/mo x 18 mos	\$90,000
Audio / Music	Flat Rate	\$2,000
Art Resource	Flat Rate	\$5,000
Software / Tools	One Time Cost	\$1,000
Marketing	Allocated Spend	\$2,000

Total (True) Cost of Game: \$100,000



GROSS VS NET PROFIT



COMPARISON CHART

GROSS PROFIT

REVENUE -

COST OF GOODS AND SERVICES =
(Direct Funding)

TOTAL GROSS PROFIT

NET PROFIT

GROSS PROFIT -

OPERATING COSTS -
(Indirect Funding)

TAXES AND FEES =

TOTAL NET PROFIT

REVENUE REALITY

And the Revenue Waterfall

Game price: \$15

Units sold: 12,000

Gross revenue: $12,000 \times \$15 = \$180,000$

Platform/distributor cut: 30% (\$54,000)

Publisher funded: \$100k (recoups first)

Remaining after recoup: \$76,000

70/30 split (Dev/Publisher)

Dev receives: \$53,200

Money earned by devs: \$53,200

True development cost: ~\$100,000

Net result: -\$46,800 (loss)

PERFORMANCE FLOOR AND CEILING

The performance floor is the *lowest realistic outcome* if the game ships competently to its core audience. “If things go okay-but-not-great, what happens?”

- Basic marketing executed
- Normal store presence
- Genre baseline engagement

The performance ceiling is the *highest plausible outcome* given the genre, platform, and positioning. “If we execute well, what’s realistically possible?”

- Strong reviews
- Streamer lift
- Solid featuring
- Genre breakout success

Your development cost must sit comfortably below your performance ceiling.

THE CURRENT FUNDING LANDSCAPE

A surprising number of publishers cap out at 250k *direct funding* (note: services are considered “*indirect funding*” and may not be included in this total).

Most indie publishers are:

- Small teams
- Cash-flow funded (or backed by a modest revolving fund)

At ~\$250k:

- One project failing won't kill the company
- Two failures hurt, but survival is still likely
- Due diligence can stay lightweight

Publishers fund projects they can afford to be wrong about.



WHY \$250K?

At \$250k, expectations stay “*indie-forgiving*” and fits the “*trust-based deal*” model. Founder reputation matters as much as spreadsheets and greenlights are usually handled by 1-2 key decision makers.

Budgets under \$250k allow:

- Rough edges
- Delayed launches
- Narrow audiences and creative risk

Once funding climbs:

- Timelines harden
- Scope creep becomes lethal
- Marketing expectations rise sharply



THE FUNDING DEAD ZONE

Why aren't people financing between \$250,000 and \$1,000,000? It's simply too big for indies, too small for institutions.

CAPITAL SOURCE	WHY THEY WON'T FUND
Indie Publishers	Risk concentration too high
Angels	Ticket size too large
VCs	Too small to move the needle
Banks	No collateral
Platforms	Want near-finished proof

Result: There is *no natural buyer of risk*.

THE RISK FACTOR

At \$250,000 - \$1,00,000 in funding, you *need a hit* (but *aren't guaranteed one*). Instead, you get mid-scale risk with small-scale infrastructure - this is the danger zone where most studios die. In addition:

- Expectations jump faster than capability
- Budget doesn't buy certainty, it buys complexity and risk
- Failure modes multiply
- You lose optionality

Often, social proof matters more than money.



THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL PROOF

Social proof is the risk-reduction currency of game funding. Investors don't fund games, *they fund evidence*. Social proof answers:

“Are players already telling us what this is?”

“Is demand emerging without paid marketing?”

Examples of strong proof:

Wishlist velocity

Team pedigree

Discord engagement

Demo retention

TikTok organic reach

Festival awards

IN A NUTSHELL

Indie funding isn't capped by ambition, it's capped by risk absorption.

\$250k and below is where intuition still works

\$250k–\$1M is where proof is mandatory

Risk scales exponentially due to complexity

Social proof is the bridge across the dead zone



DEFINING YOUR VISION

Even with the challenges of the financial landscape, you can still create successful, sustainable, weird projects if you do it intentionally and strategically. In fact, *constraint often strengthens experimental design* - this is where innovation thrives.

Define the core experience explicitly:

What emotion must the player feel?

What is the smallest version of this game that is still viable?

If we had to cut 50% tomorrow, what cannot go?

Once the soul of the game is defined, everything else becomes negotiable and scope cuts stop feeling like betrayals.

DESIGNING LEAN

Lean development does not mean making a smaller dream. It means *choosing which parts of the dream are non-negotiable.*

- Scope discipline vs creative compromise
- Systems > content
- Stylization > fidelity
- Sustainable development pace
- Protecting quality of life protects the game



Most experimental games exist *because* of constraints, not in spite of them.

AWARENESS VS TREND-CHASING

Most indie games don't fail because they ignore the market. They fail because they either *obey it blindly or pretend it doesn't exist.*

Understanding the market \neq obeying the market

Trend-chasing almost always fails

Intentional rejection is not the same as accidental irrelevance

Games should design for *someone*, not for *everyone*

Awareness enables resistance

Successful Games need 2 things:

Differentiation (why you're different)

Distinctiveness (why you're remembered)

The goal isn't to follow the ecosystem, it's to know it well enough to resist it intelligently.

INTENTIONAL RESISTANCE

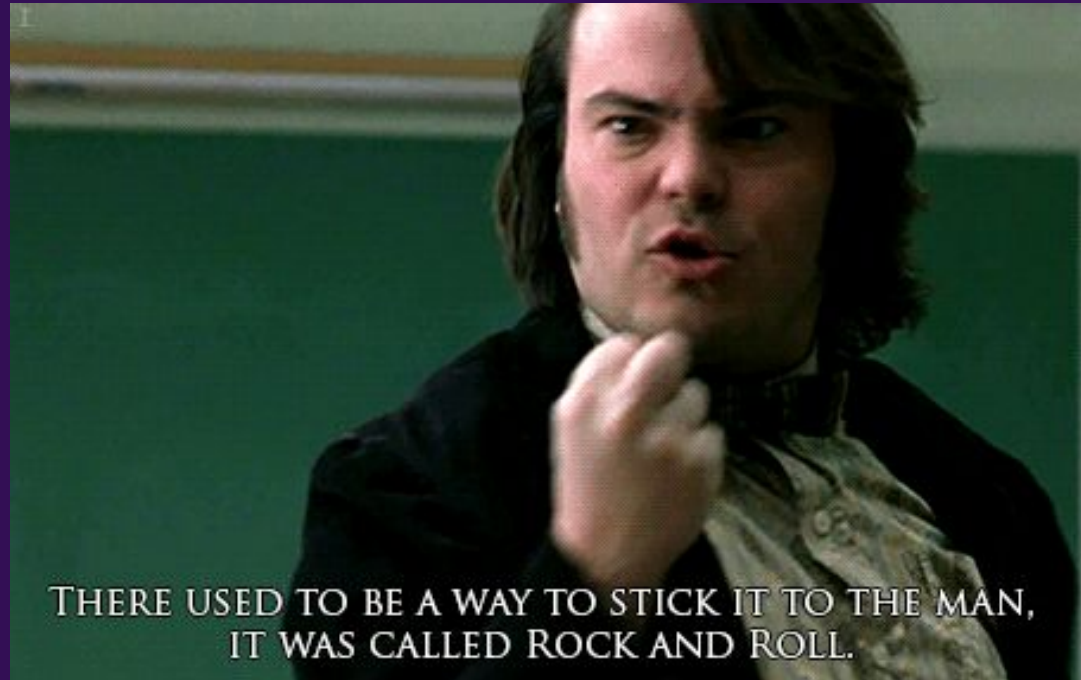
Marketplace awareness is what *enables effective marketplace resistance*. It allows you to gain the superpower of conscious deviation.

When you understand:

- Genre norms
- Platform incentives
- Monetization pressures
- Audience expectations

You can:

- Break rules intentionally
- Subvert expectations cleanly
- Signal difference with clarity



TLDR;

There is no single path to success, and success looks different for everyone.

Sustainability enables artistic freedom

Weird games survive through smart trade-offs, not purity



You don't need to choose between meaningful and viable - but you do need to understand the cost of both.

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That's all Folks!

Any questions?