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Examining the indie ins and outs of today's game distribution platforms

June 19, 2020 | By Liz Henges

The indie game development landscape has changed dramatically over the past 15 years. Indie games in 2005 and 2006 were seen as more of a novelty in the game industry—some smaller, cheaper games to pass the time between the triple-A releases. However, this was a disingenuous view of these games created by smaller teams of people, as players and companies alike would find out.

Essentially, companies began to learn that they can market and host these indie titles on their respective services. Microsoft's [Xbox Live Indie Games](#) and the expansion of [Valve Software's Steam](#) provided dedicated, far-reaching platforms for indie titles—for a cut of the profits, of course. To developers, however, the allure of having their indie titles side by side with the biggest names and titles means a lot in terms of visibility.

But, the early days of Steam and dedicated indie platforms are (mostly) over, and the indie game landscape is a very different place. Games created by one person or a small team of people are far more recognized as a "real" game now, and many players even prefer them to multi-million dollar triple-A efforts. This popularity comes at a cost, though, as more and more aspiring developers try to make their own games.

With [Steam releasing 8,290 games in 2019 alone](#) and the big three console companies no longer separating independently developed games for people to view, it can be hard to stand out. This makes for a rough marketplace for all but so-called "indie darlings," the few that manage to garner huge popularity among the player base. These are titles like *Minecraft*, *Stardew Valley* and *Undertale*—games that known by practically every video game fan.


But even then, there are some advantages that indie developers can take advantage of—if you know where to look. Gamasutra has talked to multiple independent developers on why they might choose platform exclusivity, and the advantages they've received from it.

Epic Gains

Coming onto the scene in late 2018, the Epic Games Store has since made the headlines multiple times, mainly with [its pushes for platform exclusivity](#). Epic Games no doubt has deep coffers due to the [massive success of Fortnite](#) and licensing of Unreal Engine, and the company seems hellbent on making their storefront a success. Big-name titles like *Borderlands 3* and *The Outer Worlds* were suddenly exclusive to this new platform.

These timed exclusivity deals are also extended to small indie developers, and these deals can help exponentially in terms of financial aid and visibility.

"I spent the entirety of 2018 looking for funding," William Chyr, developer of *Manifold Garden*, tells Gamasutra. "I spoke with multiple publishers during this time, and for various reasons, things didn't work out. The partnership with Epic allowed us to get the resources we needed to finish the game."




While Chyr and other developers were unable to discuss the specifics of their Epic exclusivity deals, they all have commented the amount was what they needed to finish the game and get it to consumers. "A lot of people on the [Manifold Garden] team have also foregone receiving a salary—so they're tied closely to the success of the game. Thanks to the deal with Epic, I've been able to secure some stability for the team."

Gwen Frey, the creator of *Kine*, shared a similar story with Gamasutra. "At the time [of the Epic deal] I was working solo on *Kine*, and I didn't have any funding for the game," Frey explained. "I wanted to hire an artist or two to help me polish the UI and environments, and I needed money for QA. The money from the Epic deal covered not only that, but also gave me enough to port *Kine* to consoles and translate *Kine* into eight different languages. I wouldn't have been able to do any of this without their funding."

More information on the financial side of the deal can be gleaned from what the developers of XCOM-like strategy game [Phoenix Point](#) market, and archived on [Backlist](#). Epic guarantees a minimum amount of copies sold on their storefront in order to obtain exclusive rights to the game on PC for a year.

While that sounds like a lofty and ambitious claim, there is one caveat that sweetens the pot for developers. Even if the game does not make that minimum sales threshold, Epic will make sure the developers get the minimum amount promised upon, even if they need to pay it themselves.

However, developers don't seem too worried about the sales projections due to another advantage the Epic Games Store has—increased visibility. "Visibility is a lot better on the Epic Store compared to other PC storefronts," Frey says. "There are 20 games released each day on most PC storefronts, where Epic's store launches something closer to 10 games a month. *Kine* was on the front page of the Epic Store for much, much longer than it would have been on the front page of GOG or Steam."



Chyr mentions not only being "featured on the storefront," but also how Epic helped to market *Manifold Garden*. "Epic reached out to various streamers and YouTubers through the Support-A-Creator Program, which gave the game a lot of visibility."

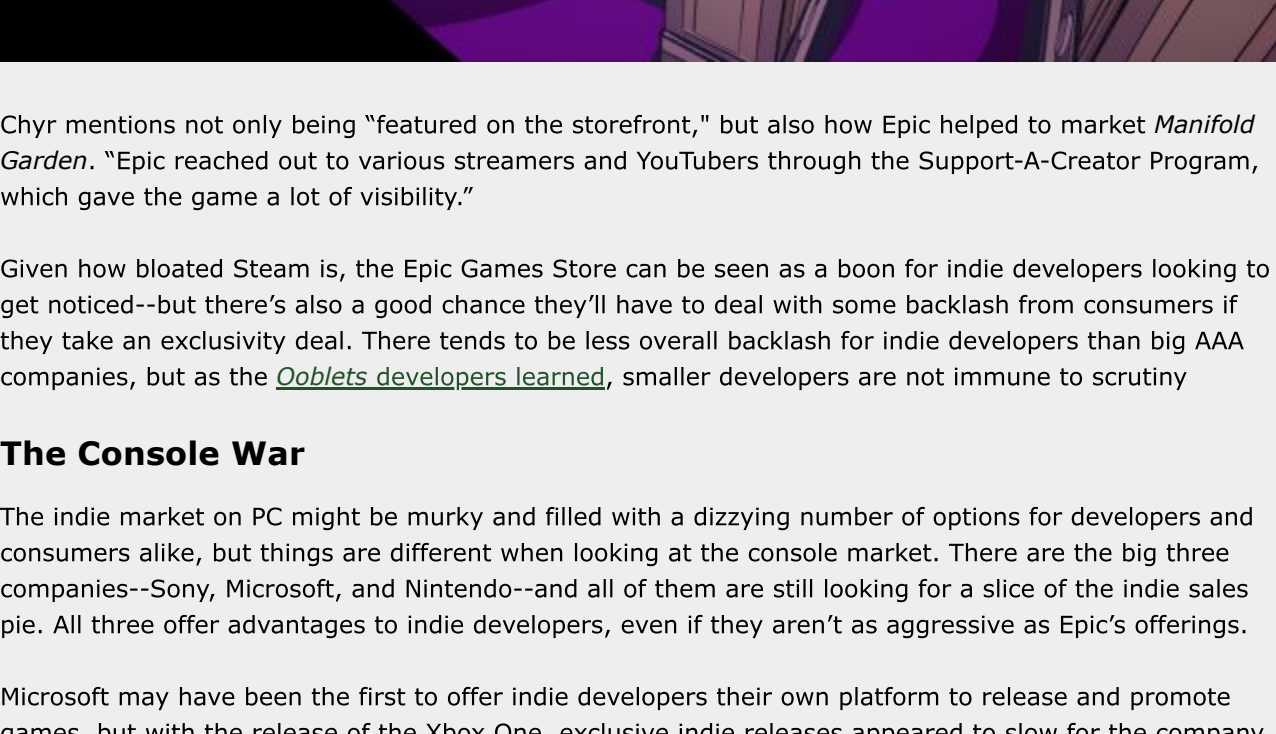
Given how bloated Steam is, the Epic Games Store can be seen as a boon for indie developers looking to get noticed—but there's also a good chance they'll have to deal with some backlash from consumers if they take an exclusivity deal. There tends to be less overall backlash for indie developers than big AAA companies, but as the [Doblets developers learned](#), smaller developers are not immune to scrutiny.

The Console War

The indie market on PC might be murky and filled with a dizzying number of options for developers and consumers alike, but things are different when looking at the console market. There are the big three companies—Sony, Microsoft, and Nintendo—and all of them are still looking for a slice of the indie sales pie. All three offer advantages to indie developers, even if they aren't as aggressive as Epic's offerings.

Microsoft may have been the first to offer indie developers their own platform to release and promote games, but with the release of the Xbox One, exclusive indie releases appeared to slow for the company. It's not for a lack of trying, of course: Microsoft has the [ID@XBOX](#) program, which helps smaller developers get their games funded, completed, and on their platforms.

But when compared to the PlayStation 4, Sony's console gets more indie titles in general. The reason? Sometimes it's just best to go where the most players are.



Dave Crooks, a game designer at Dodge Roll, comments regarding releasing *Enter the Gungeon* on PS4 first. "Working with the data we had, which was largely anecdotally from other developers, without the rare (but powerful) full-throated support from Xbox, indie games were simply selling better on average on the PS4 vs. the Xbox One."

Crooks also mentions that "Sony was generally fantastic to work with and agreed to launch promotion in exchange for a brief console exclusivity period, and easy store placement is everything in the world of 100+ game releases per week that we now live in."

Switching It Up


"Nintendo Switch was a really perfect console for our game, firstly because of the ability to take it anywhere," Calloge Newman Ryder, a marketer for the recently released *Best Friend Forever*, tells Gamasutra. "Having your pet dog with you at all times is lovely!"

Visual novel indies like *Best Friend Forever* and *Murder By Numbers* are finding a new home on the Nintendo Switch. Critics and consumers were quick to draw [the comparisons between Nintendo's hybrid console and the failed Vita](#), but Nintendo offers more advantages to indie developers at this point than the other major console companies.

Dodge Roll may have originally released *Enter the Gungeon* on the PlayStation 4 exclusively, but when it came time to release *Exit the Gungeon* earlier this year, Dave Crooks says they decided to move to the Switch instead. "We knew that as far as console players go, most *Gungeon* fans are buying and playing on Switch. With the decision to limit ourselves to one console certification process at once, it was an easy choice to focus on the Switch for [*Exit the Gungeon*]'s initial console release, as it would reach more of our existing customer base."

That isn't all, however—Nintendo regularly features indie titles on their extremely popular Nintendo Directs, and even creates special [Nindie Showcases](#) for the developers' titles. "In terms of visibility it's hard to argue with being the shadow drop at the end of a Nintendo Direct," Crooks continues. *Exit the Gungeon* was [suddenly released](#) on Switch and Steam on March 17th, right after the Nintendo Indie World video that revealed the game. Marketing pushes and surprises like that are Nintendo's bread and butter, and indies are also able to take advantage of them.

Crooks explains how valuable this sort of marketing can be. "There are many gamers who play regularly on console and not PC, that do not mainline games media or reflexively build mental maps of launch calendars. Those gamers learn about and are reminded about games via the platform's digital store, in their Nintendo account emails, or what is on the shelf at Best Buy. [...] Nintendo or Sony's direct support in promoting a game's launch with their considerable influence has a massive impact on customers' knowledge of your game's very existence."



Best Friend Forever was also featured on Nintendo broadcasts, although Ryder declined to comment on if there was any ongoing deal with Nintendo themselves. Instead, she assures Gamasutra that "the main reason for choosing Switch was because the atmosphere and target audience Nintendo has matches Starcolt's alignment and *BFF*'s target audience too." Sometimes, even in the face of marketing and exclusivity deals, you need to go to where your audience is.

Mobile Motivations

Recently, a new venue for indie games has entered the ring. Apple Arcade and the Google Play Pass offer consumers a subscription-like service, where for a flat fee each month players can download any game that's part of the service.

These might seem like new homes for indie developers, but so far, it's hard to say. Apple Arcade makes it easier for [premium titles to be noticed in a market flooded with free games](#), and Apple pays Arcade developers to get them on their platform, plus additional payment depending on the deal.

But excitement for Apple Arcade has [dropped significantly since its launch](#). Additionally, Apple Arcade games must be previously unreleased on mobile, must not appear on other subscription services, and do not appear on iOS outside of the Apple Arcade subscription.

The Google Play Pass never got much excitement in the first place. It doesn't help that [Google Play Pass paid out to developers based on time spent in the app](#), meaning that it heavily favored longer, more drawn out experiences. This Spotify-like revenue model has been a problem with the music service for many years now, and Google adopting the same for their subscription model was disappointing to some game developers.

But both of these new models are still in their infancy, and while they're no longer making headlines, there is still room to grow. However, it's difficult to say whether this growth will help indie developers or not.

Hit-Driven

Regardless of what path indie developers take, it's important that they use every tool at their disposal in today's industry. "The video game industry is very hit-driven—a handful of titles get noticed, but most games lose money," Gwen Frey states. "Kine was a particularly risky title to develop and the exclusivity deal I signed with Epic gave me the financial confidence I needed to take this risk and make this game."

William Chyr echoes Frey's thoughts. "Game development is a very volatile industry. The conditions of the market are always changing. Even with a solid marketing plan and a great game, something could change on launch day and your entire plan could get derailed." With the security of an exclusivity deal, Chyr was able to complete *Manifold Garden* without so many worries on the mind.

Some consumers might see these deals as selling out, but in reality they provide a security these developers never had before. As a smaller developer in a market flooded with video games, anything can be the difference between a best-seller and a no-seller.

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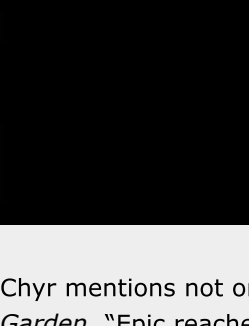
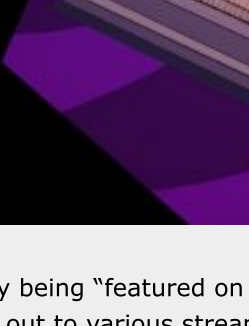

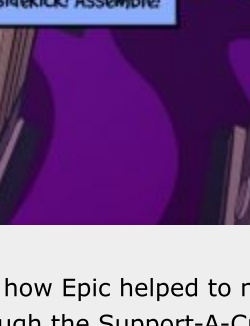
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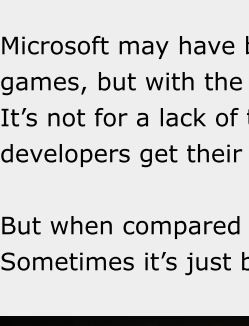
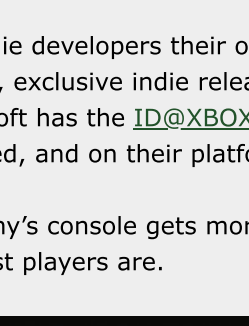
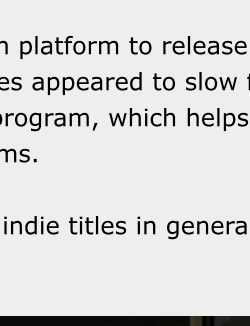
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Comments

Victor Burgos 19 Jun 2020 at 9:23 am PST

However, Epic Games Store is still the closed Garden of Eden. 99.99% of games will never make it onto EGS (until whenever they decide to open it up, which was supposed to already have happened).

EGS, this seemed more like a promotion for EGS than anything else, which may or may not have been your intention, but it's not like developers can just easily launch a game on EGS vs any of the other distribution platforms, including consoles! I have a game targeting PC and all three console platforms. Steam, Xbox, PlayStation, Switch, were pretty cake in regards to barriers of entry. Itch.io & Gamejolt make PC distribution much easier as well.

A few things you missed, Game Pass and Stadia, also should be taken into consideration.

But yeah, it was a nice read anyway.

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Matthew Williams 21 Jun 2020 at 3:59 am PST

I think the reason they didn't discuss Game Pass and Stadia is because both are primarily streaming services. Microsoft has platforms more focused on promotion and distribution whereas Game Pass functions more as a showcase for a pre-existing library.

Also, the barrier of entry being higher on EGS is what makes games stand out. As stated in the article, numerous games are released every week on Steam versus a slim number per month on EGS. Curation helps in the age of game abundance. The 1% of games that do make it onto Epic Games Store are likely going to be strong titles because of the prerequisites for being published there.

I wonder if publishing on platforms with low barriers of entry do more harm than good. You're going to need to spend more time and money marketing your game in order to get eyeballs, and what if the game is a dud? You're burning money that could be spent working on your next project.

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