

# ! a six step program for game design the artsy game incubator

**WORKING ALONE ALLOWS YOU COMPLETE CONTROL OVER THE CREATIVE VISION OF AN ENTERTAINMENT product,** which is something that's often missing from larger games. But making games is a daunting task, and can often be overwhelming for first-time creators. In that sense, it's nice to have feedback from others, and people off whom you can bounce ideas. This guide is intended to both help beginning developers (artists especially) get started, and to help more established prototype ideas they might not otherwise get to experience.

I started the Hoity Toity Writers' Circle when I was started writing books, Vid Critters when I started making movies, and so it only made sense for me to start the Artsy Games Incubator (AGI) when I started to make games. It's easier to make stuff when you're supported and inspired by people doing the same thing.

The AGI is based on the solo model because it makes things simpler to coordinate and gives you less excuses why you haven't made a game—because “your programmer is too busy” or “your artist isn't answering your e-mails” don't apply if you're the one doing it all. And it'll give you a much better idea of what goes into all the aspects of game making if you do end up working in a team environment.

The how-to below is very specific to putting together groups with the artist-focus I was interested in encouraging, and came about originally because I had people in Texas, Tokyo, and Montreal interested in starting something like the AGI in their areas. But obviously it's not “the” formula, just one strategy. If you start something, drop us a line at [agi@nomediakings.org](mailto:agi@nomediakings.org) and let us know!

## GET YOUR POOL OF PARTICIPANTS

» You'll want no less than four people in addition to yourself, and no more than five. Three people feels a little sad, and seven is inclined to break up into multiple groups.

Hopefully you know a couple people who are crazy about games already. Let them know you're planning to start on a certain week that's good for you (and a few months away), and ask them to spread the word. Be up front about the time investment—two to three hours a week for six weekly meetings, and then two to three hours of assignment work.

The more diverse a group you get has a lot to do with how you spread the word: if you post notices only to places you'd go, you're likely to end up with a group of people just like you. Online is a great place to start, but dropping flyers off at places interesting people congregate (bookstores, galleries, etc.), and even posterage if you're keen, will give you a big pool of people to choose from. Odds are you will end up getting one participant at a time, so don't expect a “magic bullet” solution.





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## THIN THE HERD

» Next, you'll want to get a sense of how enthusiastic and dependable your new group seems. With artists in particular, and people in general, the flake-factor has to be considered, so it helps to ask them to do something to see if they'll follow through. I ask for them to tell me their favorite game and why they like it. Pretty simple, but it gives me a sense of where they're coming from and their level of passion. If they don't get around to doing this, they'll never do the assignments and participate fully.

I also ask them what their focus is and if they can send me a sample or web site with their work—most artists have something online that you can check out, and writers may have a blog. The completely subjective question you have to ask is: why will I be excited about helping this person make games? It could be that they have an aesthetic you've never seen in a game, or simply because you share the sensibility. Choosing the people you're involving can make this far more satisfying than working with a group of random people—and probably the only way you'll be paid is in satisfaction—so don't rip yourself off. That being said, choosing a vaguely interested art star over a less talented and super-enthusiastic artist is probably a mistake.

## MIX IT UP

» When putting together your group, consider the mix. A mix of gender, race, art medium, and gaming taste isn't just an equal opportunity thing: it's just more interesting for the group—and ultimately gaming culture—to get a variety of perspectives and concerns. It's harder to do the outreach, and different people are more likely to be awkward or even clash with each other, but everybody benefits in the end. Sometimes it doesn't happen, and you end up with a bunch of white guys, but do your best!

Some programmers have complained that they would benefit from the structure and regularity of the AGI, but my perspective is that there are other projects that give them that—around here, the Toronto Independent Game Development Jam is perfect for people who can program. [It's kind of like people who grow up speaking French joining a beginner's class because their French is "sooo rusty"—it can make real beginners self-conscious.] Still, if they're artists as well, and won't lord it over people with how l33t they are, then you might consider allowing a programmer in.

## FIRM IT UP

» When you have decided on the people, issue a formal-sounding invitation and ask them what days of the week are not good for them, Sunday–Thursday, between 6–9 pm, for the six week period you're considering. Once you know the blackout days, you can figure out the day that's OK for everyone. Then follow up with the exact dates and times and ask if they feel 100 percent about it, mentioning how important it is that they are committed. I suggest emailing people directly rather than CC'ing everyone.

Once everyone's confirmed the dates in a non-flaky manner, you can let the other folks know that sorry, this round's filled up, and could you get in touch if a spot opens up or if you have another round later this year? I don't have to say to do this in a non-dickish way, do I? People want to make games so bad that if they feel like you're the evil gatekeeper they will hate you. Don't say their art wasn't exciting enough or something similar, that'll just drive them nuts. Like the old breakup maxim: it's you, not them.

## GET YOUR PLACE

» Bars or cafes are pretty good for writers' circles, but when you have a laptop going around with people playing a game, it's nicer to have your own space. Snacks and drinks are cheaper as well.

If you ask me: it's not glamorous, but the best spot is one of the participants' living rooms or dorms. Usually people have a TV there, which is good for plugging in the laptop. So ask around and see if someone has the space.

A gallery can be good, as they sometimes even have a projector you can use. There are lots of places that can be had for free, just ask—and get your participants to ask—around.

Obviously computer-savvy people will say: why not meet virtually, in a chatroom somewhere? This does work, but it's not as effective as an in-person deadline (and we have experimented with this). When you have to show up in person and hang your head and say you didn't do the assignment, you're more likely to get it done than if you can just type in an excuse. Plus, you'll be spending so much time making your game on the computer, it's nice to get into meatspace just for variety.

## SNACKS AND DRINKS AND NOTETAKING

» For each session one of the participants should be in charge of bringing snacks and drinks, though if you're in someone's living room you might want to create a pool for shared purchasing of food.

The notetaking duty is for posting to the blog after the session, ideally with screenshots or some kind of images (pics of the group, maybe?). If you ask, someone will usually volunteer, especially at the first meeting, and if not then just ask someone directly if they haven't done it.

Sometimes I feel weird about assigning snack or notetaking tasks,

Get into a rhythm with game making—making, revising, releasing, and moving on. Even when you don't get a lot of useful feedback, putting your work out in public is a good habit to start.

but what I find is that it makes people more involved and brings the group together in an interesting way. It also puts people on an equal footing, as everyone will get a chance to characterize the sessions and to choose what delicious treats (or brand of hummus) you eat.

## CREATING THE SESSION VIBE

» As mentioned before, we don't want to have too big a group, since that tends to break up into smaller groups: great for a party, not so great for a focused team. We want people to be able to feel like their work is getting the attention it deserves, and to provoke considered discussion and feedback—it's a great motivator.

Sliding into jokes is inevitable and a fun diversion, you're making games after all, but it's your job to bring it back to a serious focus and move things along once discussion's dried up. I usually wrap it up by asking if there are any outstanding questions anyone wanted to ask the group about their work.

The point to having a small group is that it's intimate and not intimidating for people who don't have any game making experience. Sometimes you'll have someone in the group who's either made a game or has a lot of knowledge about games—which can be useful so long as it doesn't become a extended monologue about THE LEGEND OF ZELDA. Sometimes they're filling up dead air because they're nervous or talkative so you might just want to ask, say, the painter in the group what they thought about the colors in the game to bring it to someone else's expertise and conversational track.

There's no need to be heavy handed with it, but you're the project



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facilitator, providing structure, and everyone will appreciate it. I suppose this is a duty you could rotate if you were horribly uncomfortable with it, but give it a session to see how it goes first. As you've brought people together you're the natural coordinator. I've heard this model described as "peer mentorship."

## SESSION NOTES

» The AGI should run its course in six sessions, followed by an open house, where the final products are showcased. After each session description, I've added some notes based on my experiences running a few of these.

**Session 1** Everyone is to bring an idea for a game, realized to the best of his or her abilities, to share with the other members of the AGI. Use visuals if you like, but a verbal description is fine too. Essentially you want the other members to be able to "see" the game and what it would be like to play it. Give it a title. You will not be expected to make this game, unless you want to, so don't feel constrained by what you think is possible—just imagine what you consider to be a cool and interesting game, and be able to discuss it.

### NOTES:

- » This is a get-to-know-you exercise, be light on criticism.
- » Go over some of the AGI principles and discuss them. So long as people have good reasons for it, all the rules are breakable. [See the sidebar: AGI Principles.]
- » It's also a good idea to have a couple of achievable indie games that you really like to play, for after the discussion to inspire folks. Encourage people to bring in games they like to future sessions for after the feedback portion.

**Session 2** Using the in-game editor, and following this tutorial ([www.instructables.com/id/How-to-Create-a-Good-N-Level](http://www.instructables.com/id/How-to-Create-a-Good-N-Level)) create a level for the 2D physics platformer N. You will need to play this [very difficult] game a bit to get the sense of what it can do, and if it's not to your taste to create an action level consider trying your hand at a puzzle or a "Don't Do Anything" (a level that functions as a Rube Goldberg machine). Tip: it's best to test a "sketch" version of it first and test it to see how it works, then fill in the details.

### NOTES:

- » The N level editor is a bit finicky, so emphasize saving the level data often and testing it frequently as you go—good practice to get into anyway. Spending hours getting your level just right and then losing it in the level saving process is very frustrating.
- » You will need a keyboard with a numberpad—some Mac notebooks don't have this.

**Session 3** Revise and post your N level at NUMA (the N User Map Archive, [www.nmaps.net](http://www.nmaps.net)) using the feedback you got at the last session.

Choose one of the games that comes with a default installation of Scratch (a free visual programming environment available at <http://scratch.mit.edu/>). Mod it in some way that makes it your own: change the graphics, the sound, the gameplay, whatever it takes. You may want to try out some

of the tutorials, or just start changing the code blocks on your own.

Start thinking about an idea for an original game that you'll be starting in sessions four through six. Depending on the type of game you're interested in making we'll look at the tool options in this session.

### NOTES:

- » The idea behind posting the level on NUMA is to get into a rhythm with game making—making, revising, releasing, and moving on. Even when you don't get a lot of useful feedback, putting your work out in public is a good habit to start.
- » When people have been too ambitious at this stage they've generally gotten frustrated and given up, so emphasize the importance of starting with a game that works and changing it rather than trying to implement an original idea at this point.

**Session 4** Revise and post your Scratch mod to the community at <http://scratch.mit.edu/share>. The game automatically converts to a java applet that is playable within a web browser and embeddable on blogs and so forth.

Depending on what kind of original game you want to make, google and download Game Maker (arcade), Inform 7 (text/graphic adventure), or Adventure Game Studio (graphic adventure/ arcade). You can also use Scratch. See more options on page 15. Spend some time getting to know the app (perhaps via the tutorial, or looking at the other games folks have made with it) and consider its usability, the quality of its forums/support materials, and what platforms it eventually compiles to.

Once you've picked your tool, create and import some of the sounds and graphics that your game will be using. Then get one interaction working.

### NOTES:

- » Once we had a participant who was keen on working in a 3D environment. Once he saw how much work went into animating a 2D environment, and that 3D was an exponential level up from that, he changed his mind.
- » Encourage people to choose a tool that they can get running on their home computer. If they have to make a special trip to a friend's house that's just another obstacle.

**Session 5** Get your game into a playable state. Rough is fine. You want to be able to let the other members play your game at this session and for you to get some feedback, rather than be explaining what the interactions will be.

### NOTE:

- » The key thing here is the playability—even if it looks/sounds great, the core of the game medium is that people can interact with it. It's natural for, say, visual artists to focus on the graphics, as that's their strength, but you need to encourage them to also get the interactions working too.



**Session 6** With the feedback you get and your own vision of the game, polish it up. Ideally you will integrate instructions somehow and have a titlescreen and end state.

#### NOTE:

- Hopefully people have gotten a game into a playable state and are able to get feedback here. While this is officially the end of the sessions, the open house presentation offers another deadline to work toward.

### THE OPEN HOUSE

➤ This is a quasi-public release of the games—it's a great way to motivate the participants and connect them with the indie game community at large. I generally set it up so that it's a series of ten-minute presentations by the participants and by people in the game scene that you invite to present in-progress or new work. I've been pretty open about who I've invited, sometimes new media / hardware demos are included so long as they'd be of interest to gamers. The key thing is to stress the 10 minute limit—less is fine, and can be good, but demonstrations should be absolutely no more than 10 minutes. I've had 5 AGI participants and 5 community folks present, but I think this is the upper limit ... beyond 90 minutes it becomes a bit of a grind.

It can be nice to get an interesting space and a projector for this to give it a bit of ceremony, and try to have a couple laptops so the AGI games can be running after the talks so people can play them. I generally have stated that admission is "a game work-in-progress or a snack for the snack table."

The open house is a great way to meet other developers, as well. If you can tell them the date a few weeks in advance it can serve as a deadline to get an independent project to the state where they can do a ten minute presentation.

Make sure you leave enough time at the end for conversation between the audience and participants. Maybe even have some music playing. With the interesting stuff that's been presented, the conversations will naturally ensue and you will hear months afterward about projects that began that night.

### THE NEXT ROUND

➤ It's an iterative process, so don't sweat it if the first time out isn't mindblowing. I've done three rounds of the Toronto AGI over the last year or

## the agi principles

We know many artists have a passion for games, and would like to make them. We know people in the games community, both industry and players, are excited about games that approach the medium from diverse places. Artists make the game world look good, and games can bring art to a broad audience. Everyone wins!

We use accessible tools. Point-and-click game making suites abound, and until we've developed our gamemaking chops to the point where they're limiting, they'll do. When programmers turn up their noses, we'll tell them that machine language is what real coders use!

We make one-person games. "Team building" can simply be procrastination. When we get to the point when our games "need" better art, or better sound, we'll be able to communicate much better with artists or musicians having done it ourselves on a crude level. Plus they'll see we're able to complete games and be more excited about being involved.

We will leverage our talents. All of us are good at something—visuals, sound, writing—and we'll put that front and center as often as possible. That being said, we will work hard at polishing all aspects until they are as shiny as we want them to be. Placeholder graphics are so beta.

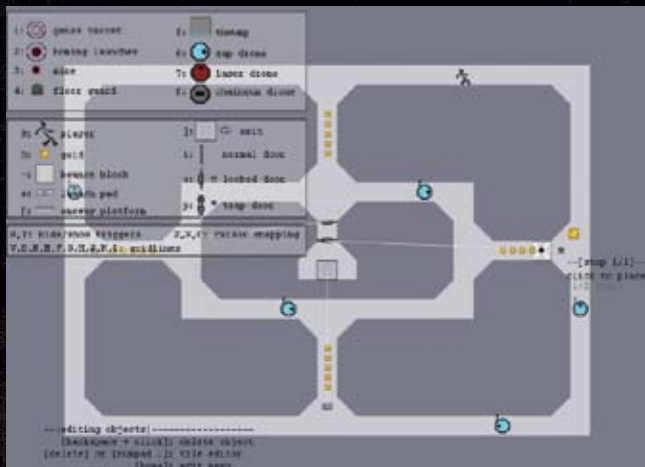
We meet in person, as creative circles have met for millennia, to establish a consensus reality that what we are doing is worth doing. We know that when we sit down to work on something on Monday that people we like and respect will see it and discuss it on Wednesday.

We are all about making games now!



so. [The first round wasn't that productive—we only had four weeks and I was still finding my feet—but the second and third were great.] They gave me the structure to make a couple of games I wouldn't have otherwise found the time for, and to hang out with lots of other game makers. By my measure, it was totally worth doing. 🍷

**JIM MUNROE** makes games, movies and books. As well as the Artsy Games Incubator (<http://nomediakings.org/artsygames/>), he helped start the Hand Eye Society (<http://handeyesociety.com/>)—a group that aims to mesh Toronto's videogame communities. Check out his illustrated text adventure *Everybody Dies* for free at <http://nomediakings.org/ed/>. Email him at [jmunroe@gdmag.com](mailto:jmunroe@gdmag.com).



The Ned or N-Editor allows users to generate their own game levels for Metanet's N.

