

The Indie Steam Launch Checklist

A 12-month playbook for launching your indie game on Steam

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Why this exists

I've spent over a decade in the indie game industry, working with PlayWay, helping build companies like Rockgame and Games Incubator, and running CreativeForge Games as CEO during its hardest year. I've seen what works and what kills games.

This checklist is what I wish someone had handed me when I shipped my first title. It's not a marketing brochure. It's the actual operational sequence, month by month, week by week, that gives an indie game its best shot at not being one of the 30,000+ titles released on Steam each year that no one ever hears about.

You don't need to do every item. You need to know they exist, decide which apply, and not be surprised by the ones you skipped.

How to use this

1. **Don't panic if you have less than 12 months.** Skip earlier phases and start where you are. Many of my own launches compressed Phase 1–3 into a few months. It's harder, but doable.
 2. **Tick items as you go.** Print this. Or open it in any markdown editor. Treat each checkbox as a single, finishable task.
 3. **Use the benchmarks.** Real numbers (wishlist conversion rates, capsule CTR, etc.) are at the end. Compare your game against them as you go.
 4. **When in doubt, talk to other devs.** Or talk to me. I answer DMs.
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PHASE 0: The Foundation (T-12 months and earlier)

Done long before you "feel ready" to start marketing. Skip this and you'll regret it during launch week.

Business setup

- **Registered legal entity** for releasing the game (LLC, sole prop, or local equivalent). You cannot pay Valve from a personal account in many countries without tax headaches.
- **Bank account in the company name**, needed for Steam payouts.
- **Tax forms filed with Steam** (W-8BEN-E for non-US, W-9 for US). Without this, Valve withholds 30% of your revenue.
- **Steam Direct fee paid** (\$100 USD per app, refundable after \$1,000 in adjusted gross revenue).
- **Trademark search** for your game's name. Search the USPTO database and EU TMView. A €600 trademark dispute will ruin your launch.
- **Domain registered** for the game title (.com if possible, plus your country's TLD).
- **Game's exclusive rights** confirmed in writing with all contractors (artists, composers, freelancers). One missing IP transfer and you can't sell the game.

Game readiness

- **Vertical slice** that proves the game's hook in 5 minutes of gameplay. Not a tech demo, a "this is what makes the game special" demo.
 - **Working title is final** (or marked clearly as a working title). Renaming a game after the Steam page is live costs you wishlists.
 - **Genre and tags decided**. Pick three primary tags you'll fight to rank for. These drive 80% of organic discoverability.
 - **Target audience defined**, not "gamers." Specifically: "people who liked X, Y, Z and complain about W."
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PHASE 1: Audience & Identity (T-12 to T-9 months)

Before anyone sees your game, you need to know who they are and why they'd care.

Audience research

- **Compile a list of 20 comparable games** released in the last 2 years.
- **For each: pull review count, Steam tags, price, and rough sales estimates** (use SteamSpy / VG Insights / Gamalytic, paid tools are worth it).
- **Read 50+ Steam reviews** of your top 5 comps. Note exact phrases players use, these become your marketing copy.
- **Identify 3 subreddits, 3 Discord servers, and 2 forum communities** where your audience already lives. Lurk for 2 weeks before posting.
- **Write a 1-paragraph "elevator pitch"** of your game. If your mom can repeat it after one read, it's working.
- **Define the "5-second pitch"**, what someone sees in your first GIF. This drives capsule art and trailer concepts.

Competitive positioning

- **Pick 3 "wishful comparison" titles** ("if you liked X..."). Be honest. Don't compare to Stardew Valley unless you can credibly compare to Stardew Valley.
- **List 5 things your game does better/differently** than the comp set. These become trailer beats and key art moments.
- **Decide your hook in one sentence**, the thing a streamer says in the first 30 seconds of the video. ("It's Dark Souls but with cats.")

Visual identity

- **Logo finalized** (game logo, not company logo). Test it at thumbnail size, if it's unreadable at 184x69px, redo it.
- **Key art concept agreed** with artist. One hero image carries the entire campaign.

- **Color palette locked** (3–5 colors max). Used everywhere, capsule, trailer, socials, store page.
 - **Font choices locked** for marketing materials.
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PHASE 2: Steam Page Foundations (T-9 to T-6 months)

Goal: a high-converting Steam page goes live, and you start measuring.

Steamworks setup

- **Steamworks account created** and verified.
- **App created** in partner backend (you'll get an appID).
- **Builds depot configured**, even if you don't have a final build, set the structure.
- **Banking & tax verified** on the Steamworks side. Test transactions early.
- **Two-factor auth enabled** on all team accounts. Account theft happens monthly to indies.

Required Steam page assets (production-ready)

- **Header Capsule**, 460×215 px. The single most important image of your campaign. It appears in Discovery Queue, Wishlist emails, daily deals.
- **Small Capsule**, 231×87 px. Used in search results and "More like this." Logo must be legible.
- **Main Capsule**, 1232×706 px. Featured on front page if you get there.
- **Library assets** (added later but plan now): Library Capsule (600×900), Library Hero (3840×1240), Library Logo (1280×720).
- **Page Background**, 1438×810 px.
- **At least 5 screenshots** at 1920×1080 (16:9). First 4 visible above the fold, make them count.
- **3+ animated GIFs** (Steam supports them). Each ≤8MB, 4:6 or 16:9. Show *gameplay*, not menus.
- **Announcement trailer** uploaded, 30–90 seconds, ≤1080p, MP4 H.264. Hook in first 3 seconds.

Steam page copy

- **Short description** (max 300 chars). This is what shows in wishlist emails. Lead with the hook, not the lore.
- **Long description**, under 1500 words. Use Steam BBCode for formatting. Include bullet points, headers, and at least one GIF.

- **About This Game section** structured: paragraph 1 = hook, paragraph 2–3 = features, paragraph 4 = team/credibility.
- **System requirements** filled honestly. Lying here = refunds.
- **Languages declared**, only what you actually support at launch. You can add more later.
- **Genre and 15+ tags** added. Steam's algorithm leans heavily on tags. Use all 20 slots.
- **Mature content questionnaire** completed honestly.
- **Demos disabled** for now (we'll talk demos later).
- **Region pricing reviewed**, Steam suggests defaults but check Russia, LATAM, Turkey. Local pricing can boost regional sales 3–5×.

Pre-launch features

- **"Coming Soon" page goes live** with "Add to Wishlist" button enabled.
- **Notify-when-launched** opt-in enabled.
- **Steam Community Hub** turned on (you'll need this for community building).
- **Discord linked** on store page.

First wave press kit

- **Press kit live** at a public URL (use presskit.com, Notion, or a static page).
 - Contains: fact sheet, description (short + long), 10+ screenshots in 1080p, logo (transparent PNG), key art (full-res), trailer (downloadable), team bio, contact email, social links.
 - **Press email address** set up (press@yourgame.com, not a personal Gmail).
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PHASE 3: Audience Building (T-6 to T-3 months)

Goal: build the audience that will buy your game. Wishlists are the by-product, not the goal.

Community channels

- Discord server live.** Bare-minimum channels: #announcements, #general, #devlog, #bug-reports, #suggestions, #fanart. Don't over-engineer it.
- Twitter/X account.** Post 3–5× per week minimum. GIFs perform 2–3× better than static images.
- Bluesky account.** Same content, lower noise floor than X.
- TikTok account,** even if you're "not a TikTok person." TikTok + YouTube Shorts is where indie discovery happens in 2026.
- YouTube channel** with at least one devlog video. Devlogs build *trust*, not just wishlists.
- Reddit account** with at least 60 days of non-promotional activity in your target subs.

Content cadence (sustain for 12 weeks minimum)

- 1 short-form video per week** (TikTok / Shorts / Reels). 15–60 seconds. Reuse the same clip across platforms.
- 2–3 X/Bluesky posts per week** with GIFs.
- 1 devlog per month** (long-form video or Steam announcement). Be honest. Devs and players love watching games get made.
- 1 Steam announcement per month minimum,** keeps the page "active" in Steam's algorithm.
- Active Discord engagement,** your team replies within 24 hours.

Outreach

- Curator list compiled,** 100+ Steam Curators relevant to your genre. Use [Steam Curator Connect](#).
- First 30 keys sent to curators** via Curator Connect (not raw keys, use the system).
- Press list compiled,** 50+ outlets and individual writers. Save in a spreadsheet: name, outlet, beat, last activity date, prior pitches.

- **Influencer/streamer list compiled**, 30+ creators with audience $\geq 10k$ who actively play your genre. SullyGnome and TwitchTracker show who's playing what.
- **Soft outreach to top 10 creators**, no pitch, just "hey, you played X, you might enjoy following our journey." Build the relationship before you need it.

Wishlist gates

- **First milestone goal: 1,000 wishlists.** This is "your game has a pulse."
- **Second milestone: 7,000 wishlists.** Around this number, Steam starts showing your "Coming Soon" page in Discovery Queue.
- **Third milestone: 25,000+ wishlists.** You'll start hitting Popular Upcoming lists. Real momentum.

Mad Octopus benchmark: A "healthy" indie launch in 2026 needs **15,000–30,000 wishlists** to break out of the indie crowd in the first week. Below 5,000, expect a quiet launch unless something viral happens.

PHASE 4: Steam Next Fest (T-3 months, or earlier)

This is the single biggest free marketing event Valve gives you. Do it right.

Pre-Next-Fest

- **Register for Next Fest** at least 4 weeks ahead (slots fill).
- **Choose your Next Fest carefully.** Don't use it as a "we'll do it whenever", use it as a hype gate ~3 months before launch.
- **Demo build ready 2 weeks before** Next Fest starts (not the day of).
- **Demo is 15–45 minutes of polished gameplay.** Not 4 hours. Not 5 minutes. The first 60 seconds matter most.
- **Demo has its own short trailer** (15–30s) optimized for the Next Fest browse page.
- **Demo page has its own short description** that hooks people who've never heard of you.
- **Demo announces clearly** when feedback is collected and how (Discord, in-demo form, Steam discussions).

During Next Fest

- **Two livestreams scheduled** during the week (Steam Broadcasting). Each 1+ hour. Schedule for peak hours in your top region.
- **One livestream is with a friend / fellow dev**, co-streams double watch time.
- **Daily Steam announcement** during the festival, patch notes, dev commentary, feedback responses.
- **Reply to every demo review** within 24h. Even the negative ones. Especially the negative ones.
- **Daily X/Bluesky/TikTok posts** with new GIFs/clips during the festival.
- **Post one "behind the scenes" devlog** during the festival.
- **Track wishlists daily.** Expect 30–60% wishlist uplift if you do this well. Mad Octopus average: ~3,500 wishlists gained per Next Fest for participating titles.

Post-Next-Fest

- **Demo stays up** (don't disable it) until 2 weeks before launch.
 - **Patch the demo** based on feedback within 2 weeks.
 - **Public "what we learned" post**, devlog or X thread. Builds trust.
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PHASE 5: Pre-launch Push (T-3 to T-1 month)

The launch trailer drops. Reviewer keys go out. Influencers get embargoed builds.

Launch trailer

- Launch trailer cut**, 60–90 seconds. Different from announce trailer (which was "this exists"). This one says "buy it now."
- First 5 seconds hook** confirmed via at least 5 people who've never seen the game.
- Trailer ends with: release date, "Wishlist now" CTA, logo.**
- Trailer uploaded to Steam** as primary trailer 4 weeks before launch.
- Trailer mirrored on YouTube, X, TikTok** in their native aspect ratios. Yes, you need a 9:16 vertical cut.

Reviewer & influencer keys

- Embargoed review keys** sent to top 20 press outlets 4 weeks before launch.
- Streamer/YouTuber keys** sent to top 30 creators with a personalized email each.
- Tracking spreadsheet** for keys: who got one, when, did they cover, where, with what audience.
- Embargo date set**, typically 24–48 hours before launch.
- Curator keys** (separate batch), another 50 curators via Curator Connect.

Final assets & QA

- Final build uploaded to default branch** 2 weeks before launch (not launch day).
- Day-1 patch staged** on a separate branch if needed.
- Achievements fully implemented and tested.**
- Steam Cloud configured** if applicable.
- Trading cards** (optional but improves community engagement).
- Localization tested** for any languages you claim to support.
- Controller support tested** end-to-end, Steam Deck verification can be applied for.

- **Apply for Steam Deck Verified status** 6+ weeks ahead. The "Verified" badge meaningfully boosts conversion.

Paid marketing (optional but recommended)

- **\$500–\$2,000 test budget** for Meta/TikTok/YouTube ads, run 4–6 weeks before launch.
 - **Three creatives tested:** gameplay GIF, character-driven, "vs comparison" angle.
 - **UTM-tagged links** to Steam page (use a wrapper service since Steam doesn't accept UTMs directly, track conversion via wishlist uplift, not exact attribution).
 - **Reddit ads tested** in subs adjacent to your game's genre, surprisingly cheap and high-conversion for niche titles.
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PHASE 6: Launch Week (T-7 days)

Everything is set. This week is about not breaking anything and being present.

T-7 days

- **Final QA pass** on the launch build by someone who hasn't played in weeks.
- **Customer support email** monitored. Set up auto-reply that responds within 24h.
- **Refund policy** mentally reviewed: Steam allows refunds within 2 weeks if played <2 hours. Plan for this.
- **Pricing locked.** Going live. Don't change in launch week.
- **Launch discount decided**, 10% launch discount is standard and Steam rewards it in visibility.
- **Steam Bundles configured** if you have prior games (cross-sell).
- **Day-1 patch** uploaded to default branch and tested.
- **Press release final**, short, scannable, with assets attached. Send 48 hours before launch under embargo.

T-3 days

- **Server capacity checked** (Discord, your website, support email), surge incoming.
- **Team on-call schedule** finalized for launch day. Cover 16+ hours.
- **Pre-written launch announcements**, Steam, Discord, X, Reddit, your newsletter, drafted and approved.
- **Pre-written common bug response templates**, saves hours during launch day.
- **Sleep schedule planned.** Yes, really. You'll be useless on launch day if you stayed up coding the night before.

T-1 day

- **Final wishlist count screenshot** for your records.
- **Personal devices and tools tested** (Steam mobile, your phone, dual monitor setup for monitoring).
- **Family/partner informed** you'll be unavailable for 48 hours.



PHASE 7: Launch Day

Be present. Respond fast. Don't panic.

Hour 0–2 (release goes live)

- **Confirm release went live** on Steam. Sometimes it doesn't auto-publish, refresh, check partner backend.
- **Post launch announcement** on Steam, Discord, X, your newsletter, all within 30 minutes.
- **Thank wishlists** in announcement. Personal tone wins.
- **Monitor Steam Community Hub** for first reviews and discussion threads.
- **Pin a launch thread** on Steam discussions: "Day 1 issues? Post here."

Hour 2–8

- **Reply to every review** that comes in, positive or negative. 24h is too late.
- **Monitor Discord** continuously. Pin known issues.
- **Push hotfix** if a critical bug is found (don't push for cosmetic stuff during launch day, focus matters).
- **Post midday "we're alive and reading everything" update** on socials.

Hour 8–24

- **Compile day-1 metrics** for your records: wishlist conversion, refund rate, review score, peak CCU.
- **Public end-of-day-1 post**, thank players, acknowledge issues, set expectations for tomorrow.
- **Plan day-2**, what's the biggest issue and what's the priority fix?

First 7 days

- **Daily Steam announcements** for the first week, patch notes, "thanks", new features hinted.
- **Streamer push**, reach out to the 50 streamers who didn't cover at launch and offer them the game now that it has reviews.

- **First "what's next" roadmap** posted by end of week 1.
- **Apply for Steam Deals**, first one is typically 30 days post-launch.

Mad Octopus benchmark: For most indie titles, the first 7 days deliver 30–50% of total Year 1 revenue. After that you're on the long tail. Plan accordingly.

PHASE 8: Post-launch (T+30 to T+365)

The launch is not the end. Many games make more in months 2–12 than in month 1, if you keep showing up.

First 30 days

- **Major patch released** addressing top community concerns.
- **First sale**, apply for Steam's weekly/monthly featured deals. Aim for $\geq 25\%$ discount to stand out.
- **Apply for upcoming Steam events**, Steam Strategy Fest, Visual Novel Fest, etc., anything matching your genre.
- **Festival applications** for indie showcases (Day of the Devs, Wholesome Direct, MIX events).
- **Console porting decision**, if PC sales hit $\sim 5,000+$ units, console becomes worth considering. Contact porting studios early; it takes 6–12 months.

Months 2–6

- **Content updates monthly** (free DLC, new modes, new languages). Free updates = visibility boost on Steam.
- **Discount cadence** planned, major sales (Summer/Winter/Autumn) participated in, plus 1–2 mid-cycle discounts.
- **Localization expansion**, if your game sold well in a region but isn't localized there, add it. Brazilian Portuguese and Simplified Chinese are usually the highest-ROI additions.
- **Bundle with related indies**, Steam bundles between dev friends move serious units.
- **Re-engagement campaigns** for lapsed wishlists.

Months 6–12

- **Major content drop / DLC / 1.0 release** if you launched in Early Access.
- **Steam Awards nomination push** if relevant.
- **Post-mortem written publicly** (devlog, GDC talk, blog post). Establishes you as a serious dev for game #2.
- **Start planning game #2**. Don't wait until game #1 is "done." The indie devs who survive long-term ship continuously.



Appendix A, Key benchmarks for 2026

Metric	Weak	Average	Strong
Wishlist→sale conversion (first week)	5–8%	10–15%	20%+
Wishlist→sale conversion (year 1)	15–20%	25–35%	40%+
Capsule click-through rate (Discovery)	<3%	5–8%	10%+
Trailer watch-through (Steam page)	<20%	25–40%	50%+
Refund rate	8–12%	5–8%	<5%
Steam review score (% positive)	<70%	80%	90%+
Demo→wishlist conversion (Next Fest)	<10%	15–25%	30%+

These numbers shift year-to-year. Always sanity-check against current data (Chris Zukowski's How to Market a Game blog tracks this religiously).

Appendix B, Tools we recommend

Steam analytics & competitive intel

- VG Insights, paid, best-in-class for sales estimates and tag analysis
- SteamDB, free, essential for understanding any game's Steam history
- Gamalytic, paid, complements VG Insights with revenue modeling

Press & influencer outreach

- presskit.com (dopresskit.com), free press kit template
- Keymailer, influencer key distribution
- Lurkit, newer alternative to Keymailer
- Woovit, another influencer key platform

Trailer & video

- DaVinci Resolve, free, professional trailer editing
- CapCut, free, fast short-form video editing

Community

- Discord, obvious
- Carrd or Notion, simple game websites
- Buttondown or ConvertKit, newsletter

Reference

- Chris Zukowski, howtomarketagame.com
 - Ryan Clark (Brace Yourself Games), "Clark Tank" videos
 - Jason Della Rocca (Execution Labs), funding advice
 - Mad Octopus blog, madoctopus.fun/blog
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Appendix C, Red flags that mean "delay your launch"

If you tick more than 2 of these, seriously consider pushing the date:

- You have fewer than 5,000 wishlists with launch less than 6 weeks away
- You haven't participated in a Steam Next Fest
- No press, influencer, or curator has covered the game yet
- Your day-1 patch isn't tested
- You don't have 24-hour coverage for launch day
- Your demo (if you have one) has a sub-15% wishlist conversion rate

Delaying a launch is professional. Botching one is fatal.

Need help with any of this?

Mad Octopus partners with indie devs on Steam launches, and we keep things radically transparent:

100% revenue to the developer until 1,000 copies sold, then 10% to us. No upfront fees. No long contracts.

If any of the items above feel overwhelming, that's literally what we do for a living. Talk to us at madoctopus.fun or join our [Discord](#).

Either way, good luck. The fact that you read to the end of a 12-month checklist means you take this seriously. That alone puts you ahead of most.

, Piotr