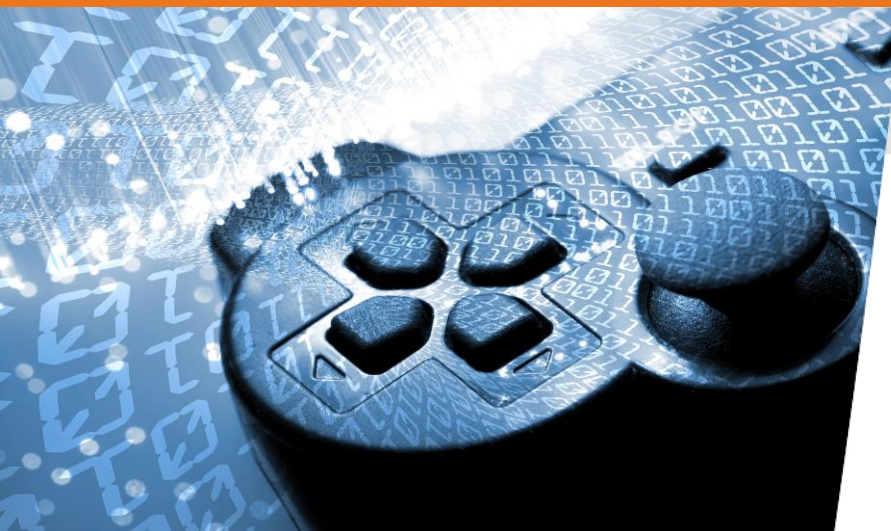




Guideline for Set-Up and Maintenance of a Mentoring System for Game Business Incubation

Output 3.4 of the BGI project



The guideline provides hands-on support regarding the whole process of set-up and maintenance of a mentor system (search for mentors, get in contact, motivate them to get engaged, integrate them in the programme, monitor their work and give feedback, promote their engagement, keep them on board, support further development, etc.).

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Executive Summary

The game industry is an extremely competitive, complex, and constantly changing area of business with huge revenue potential. It's also relatively young, and there are still several areas with no or little game industry - and many of those are interested in supporting its development due to its potential.

This document collects the practical learnings of the incubation pilot of the Baltic Game Industry (BGI) project¹. This understanding is gathered by three very different game incubation programs - Farm League in Helsinki², Sting in Stockholm³ and VHTP GameDev Incubator in Ventspils⁴.

An incubator should be built on a solid foundation of knowledge of the local game industry ecosystem. A young industry will be in different stages in different areas, and some areas have a heavy emphasis on a specific corner of the industry. Clear understanding of the situation in an area is needed to make good strategic decisions and service design for an incubator.

Things to be considered when designing a game incubator include:

- choosing startups and understanding their needs,
- choosing staff and defining their role,
- finding and engaging industry mentors,
- selecting types of support, and
- measuring results and iteration of services.

All of these subjects have some game industry specific features, and they are discussed more in depth in this document.

¹ Baltic Game Industry (BGI): <http://baltic-games.eu>.

² Farm League: <https://medium.com/@gamesfactory/farm-league-aba6e0b9e24>.

³ Sting: <https://sting.co/en/>.

⁴ VHTP GameDev Incubator: <https://www.vatp.lv/en/business-support>.

Introduction

Global game industry revenues are more than three times those of the movie industry. Billions of people around the world play video games, and hundreds, even thousands of games are published every single day. Needless to say, the industry is extremely competitive, and success doesn't come easy - but potential rewards are sky high.

The game industry is relatively young, and constantly changing. Platforms, player trends, monetisation models and regulations change rapidly, and are quite different from general startup trends. This is why a generic tech incubator can rarely offer much help to game startups. The complex web of strategic decisions between game design, monetisation, target audience, player motivations, live ops content, art, user acquisition and more is unique to games.

This document collects together the practical learnings of three very different game incubation programs, gathered during the incubation capacity building⁵ pilot of the Baltic Game Industry project. It can be used as a handbook when you go through the planning process of a game incubator, or as a foundation for a deeper understanding of the needs of game startups.

The incubators included in the pilot are introduced below. Their specific experiences and solutions are sprinkled throughout the document as case boxes; additionally, they've all participated in building this high-level understanding through testing and iteration. Discussions between the incubators have helped us see how varied the needs of the same industry can be in different locations, and how many different approaches can be taken to meet them.

⁵ Baltic Game Industry "Incubation Capacity Building": <http://baltic-games.eu/171/activities/incubation-capacity-building/>.

Farm League in Helsinki, Finland is a game specific incubator concentrating on early stage companies. It's a community centered incubator with a heavy emphasis on mentoring and peer support, with an offering of regular workshops, team coaching and networking events. It was originally run as a collaboration between Metropolia University of Applied Sciences and Games Factory business hub as a part of the BGI project. At the time of writing, it's in the process of being reorganised and rebranded as the **Living Game Intelligence Network, LGIN** - a more open-ended mentoring and support network for game startups⁶.

Sting Game in Stockholm, Sweden is the games division of the Stockholm Innovation and Growth incubator (see Annex I). Sting started in 2002 and has supported over 300 startups. The games chapter started in 2017. In the fall of 2016, Sting completed a pre-incubator program Sting Test Drive Game, where 10 projects and startups participated. Based on the positive experience and feedback, Sting will now start a full-scale incubator. Sting game works with personal coaches who have backgrounds as entrepreneurs in games. The chapter has a focus on both entertainment games and professional applications of games, as well as technologies and tools for game development.

VHTP GameDev Incubator has been operating as part of the Ventspils High Technology Park Business Support Centre since 2018. Designed to promote and develop high-potential ICT and game development startups, the GameDev Incubator provides various free-of-charge support tools, like co-working spaces, on-demand coaching, workshops, meetups, events, as well as opportunities to receive money grants to support the realisation of business ideas. Through the cooperation with Ventspils University of Applied Sciences the incubator received its first inflow of student game development teams in 2020, while its ties with the Latvian Game Developers Association (LGDA)⁷ allow the incubator to operate both in Ventspils and Riga, thus increasing its coverage and improving recognition of the game development industry in Latvia.

⁶ Living Game Intelligence Network (LGIN): <https://lgin.fi/>

⁷ Latvian Game Developers Association (LGDA): <https://www.gamedev.lv/>.

1. Knowing Your Game Development Ecosystem

Knowledge sharing structures, like incubators, accelerators and mentoring networks, are an important part of a business ecosystem. They fill a gap between formal education, traditional work experience and the skill set needed to successfully run a company. These support structures make it possible for the whole ecosystem to benefit from practical experience collected by industry seniors and entrepreneurs, while also training companies with a set curriculum and helping them to network with valuable partners.

Business ecosystems in different countries, cities and industries differ from each other vastly, and even though some needs are similar across the board, copying a readymade incubation solution isn't necessarily the best option. Even when a solution in itself is great, it might be rendered largely useless by local circumstances - type and amount of companies, challenges they face, support they already have, and type of outside support and collaborations an incubator can realistically expect to have, for example. It makes sense to get to know your target ecosystem properly, and tailor your incubation to its needs, strengths and weaknesses.

1.1 Strengths, Weaknesses and Needs

The core of a business ecosystem are companies all along the age and size range. They are supported and sometimes restricted by education, government and other public actors, service providers, subcontractors, event organisers, NGO's, incubators, accelerators and funding organisations. All of these depend on talent available in and around the area.

A healthy, mature ecosystem has a balanced mix of these. A young industry ecosystem might not have mature companies at all, or very little of them, whereas an older ecosystem might lack young, innovative companies. Game development is a relatively young industry, and there are still many areas with no game industry at all. On the other hand, games are by nature a digital industry, and both supporting networks and customer base can be online and global - lack of a local industry or even local customer base doesn't necessarily stop a company from succeeding. In any case, it is an advantage to have local support and collaboration.

Industry ecosystems have their own culture, which can either support or hinder development of business in the area. Sometimes the culture is closed, and there is very little sharing and communication between ecosystem actors, especially companies; sometimes knowledge and talent flow across the industry relatively freely, which allows for a more collaborative and innovative development.

Ecosystems sometimes tend to concentrate on specific types of companies within the industry. A game ecosystem might, for example, mainly develop for mobile or consoles, or be very innovative and rapidly move from one trend to another. In some areas, game development is mainly AAA⁸ projects with huge budgets, while in others, talent moves around between small indie projects. An area might have a surplus of game artists, and thus become an important hub for game art subcontracting businesses.

Before choosing a strategy for an incubation program, it is wise to get to know the target ecosystem properly. Core question is to understand what kind of an ecosystem there is, where are its weaknesses and strengths, and what needs to be added to achieve a more balanced, healthy ecosystem over time.

1.2 Target Company Type

The most important reason for an incubator to get to know the target ecosystem properly is to figure out which companies are the most important ones to support to build a healthier ecosystem. It will also give pointers to the type of support they need, and possibly some opportunities in building that support.

If an ecosystem is lacking young game companies, or game companies at all, it needs to take action towards getting more promising young companies in its area. Not having a game industry means there will likely be a lack of talent, and when talent leaves a company, they are unlikely to stay in the area, if there are no other companies to hire them. A lack of companies emphasises the need to encourage entrepreneurship, collaborate with relevant education and find ways to attract talent and bring in companies from other areas.

Some areas have game companies, but mostly small indie studios and outsourcing companies. They might struggle or be somewhat sustainable, but there's little hope for them to grow and become

⁸ AAA (pronounced Triple-A) is an informal classification used for video games produced and distributed by a mid-sized or major publisher, typically having higher development and marketing budgets (find out [more](#)).

successful without support and role models. The key ingredient to add to an ecosystem like this could be a spoonful of ambition, and an incubator that will help these companies crystallise their strategy, network, share knowledge with each other and benefit from cooperation.

Spotting the challenges and strengths of the target ecosystem enables an incubator to effectively use the strengths to win the challenges. Even cultural weaknesses, like a closed culture where knowledge doesn't get shared, can be countered by promoting new habits in and through an incubation program - a culture is constantly changing and defined by its members.

1.3 Strategy

When an incubator has picked the challenges it will address, it can move on to defining its goals and strategy. Supporting startups is an obvious goal, but does that also mean encouraging entrepreneurship in students, or collaboration with public authorities to build a relocation program for talent or startups? What would be the most valuable support for a typical game startup in the area - hands-on support with making games, game business training, networking and internationalisation support, funding contacts and pitching experience ...? Some issues can be addressed by lectures and workshops, while others will benefit more from building a community or taking the companies on conference trips. When the resources most likely are heavily limited, where are they best spent?

Collaboration partners can be chosen in line with the goals; certain public authorities might be willing to offer relocation services or talent attraction support, while an NGO could join forces in lobbying the industry or doing research. Other technology incubators are sometimes able to offer infrastructure, and some of the more general education and contacts needed. Funding organisations are valuable for companies, and for investors, an incubator can be a deal flow platform, if its companies are in the right phase. Universities can be sources of young companies and research partners, among other things.

Case Study: Game Industry Ecosystem - Finland

Finland is lucky enough to have 13 years' worth of reports of the local game industry and its development, thanks to Neogames Finland⁹. So, we had plenty of information to dig through.

Finland has one of the most successful game industries in the world. It has a good reputation and steady government support. Games are seen as an attractive career opportunity by many, and several schools and universities around the country offer game related education. Thanks to certain historical factors, the industry also has a somewhat unique, open and caring culture, and knowledge sharing between companies is not rare. Plenty of companies are founded yearly, even though the biggest boom, caused by the initial success of Supercell¹⁰ and Rovio¹¹, seems to have passed.

However, we have three main issues. A lack of senior talent is slowing down the growth of successful companies. At the same time, fresh graduates find it hard to find their first trainee and junior positions in the industry. Some entrepreneur-spirited people solve this issue by founding their own companies, and we also have a vibrant indie- and jam scene that regularly spawns new studios, but companies founded by non-senior developers often struggle.

Of these three challenges, the last one is most relevant for an incubator. A closer look at those studios reveals that most of them are professionals in game development, but few know enough about games as a business, running a company, defining a target audience and branding a game, and other subjects essential specifically for an entrepreneur.

Knowing the industry also led us to a unique opportunity: our game industry is very open and ready to share. Thus, a game incubation program in Helsinki can more than most rely on the support of the community, volunteer work and mentoring relationships.

⁹ Neogames Finland: <https://www.neogames.fi/en/>.

¹⁰ Supercell: <https://supercell.com/en/>.

¹¹ Rovio: <https://www.rovio.com/>.

Case Study: Game Industry Ecosystem - Sweden

Since the mid-90s Sweden has developed one of the strongest game industries in Europe. The Association of Swedish Game Developers (Spelplan-ASGD)¹² has conducted reports on the Swedish games industry since 2006 and shows stunning development.

Just as Finland, Sweden is famous for its game development scene ranging from indie games like Minecraft¹³ or Goat Simulator¹⁴, to mobile games like Candy Crush¹⁵, and AAA games like Battlefield¹⁶. A strong startup scene can be found in the bigger cities like Stockholm and Malmö, but also smaller cities like Skövde, Boden, Skellefteå and more.

The biggest obstacles for Sweden's game industry growth is the supply of talent from outside its borders and the looming threat of regulation, both from national and cross-national governance.

Case Study: Game Industry Ecosystem - Latvia

With a total of roughly 61 game companies (2018), the Latvian game industry belongs to the young and emerging game industry within the Baltic Sea region. Nevertheless, in the last 4 years there has been a slow but steady rise in both turnover and profit of game development companies registered and operating in Latvia, mainly thanks to the input of smartphone game developers.

The survey conducted at the end of 2018 by the Latvian Game Developers Association concluded that there are about 450 game developers in Latvia, 80 % of whom are based in the Latvian capital – Riga, while the remaining 20 % work in regional cities. Due to this fact the main support channels available to the game development community are located in and around the capital, e.g. educational institutions, events, etc. Hence the first challenge was to “disseminate” the knowledge to the regional centres by involving existing gaming studios to act as mentors and coaches, organising game industry-related events and meetups outside Riga.

The second challenge, as with all young industries, was the inclusion and acknowledgement on the highest governmental levels. With an average of 5 employees per company, the Latvian game industry is dominated by small firms. In contrast to these figures, Latvia has the largest number of technical incubators (15) that can also cater to game startups if provided sufficient funding – thus a policy framework and implementation strategy for game incubators is being developed and presented to the governmental institutions in 2020.

¹² Dataspelesbranschen – Swedish Games Industry: <https://dataspelesbranschen.se/english>.

¹³ Minecraft: <https://www.minecraft.net/>.

¹⁴ Goat Simulator: <http://goat-simulator.com/>.

¹⁵ Candy Crush: <https://king.com/de/game/candycrush>.

¹⁶ Battlefield: <https://www.ea.com/games/battlefield>.

2. Startups

Designing an incubator is designing a service; the better you know your target customer, the more likely you are to get the offering right. Knowing the target customer will guide curriculum planning, finding the right mentors, choosing a location, marketing and communications, hiring staff, acquiring possible hardware and software, selecting the right partners, etc. Choosing the target startup according to strategy and needs of the ecosystem is the first step; the second is understanding them by getting to know their background, environment and needs more deeply.

2.1 Challenges

Tech incubators are fairly common globally, but game incubators less so. While tech and game startups definitely have many things in common and collaboration with a tech startup can be a great strategic choice, there are some important differences, which cause general tech incubators to be less useful for game companies. Many of the topics in a game incubation curriculum might look familiar to a tech incubator, but the highly competitive game industry poses its own specific challenges that can rarely be answered through general tech startup knowledge.

Game teams are multidisciplinary by nature. They need to have a wide range of very specific, highly specialised skills from sound design and 3D animation to monetisation strategies and effective real time server communication. Their needs are also constantly changing, due to technical development and trends in gaming. Gaining deep enough understanding in all areas can be overwhelming for a small company without a network of other game developers.

The game industry is extremely competitive, with hundreds of games published every day, and user expectations are high. A game rarely solves a specific problem no other application can solve; users can easily move on whenever their high expectations are not met. A near endless amount of other games are in reach on any platform, and users know it. While testing products with real customers early on is a good practice, games often need a relatively long period of development to keep them in the game more than mere seconds. Thus, getting feedback early from other game professionals is crucial for an inexperienced game team.

Traditional startups are typically success driven and aim to reach and please the paying customer from day one. Games are closer to art than most tech companies' products, and game developers are more passion driven, building ambitious projects they themselves would love to play. This means

there is often a significant cultural gap between traditional tech startups and game startups. While questioning the typical attitude towards game development can be useful for some teams, it can be hard to develop your company in an environment that constantly debates its base beliefs.

Game industry business models, specifically monetisation models, are quite different from other tech companies. The most crucial element of any business - how to bring in money - is something a general tech incubator can rarely help with, when it comes to games. It is a complex, ever changing network of strategic decisions, in which most companies need industry specific support. This also applies to publishing platforms and visibility on them.

2.2. Background and Environment

In an area with a prominent game development school or university, a significant portion of startups might come directly from the education pipeline. In this case, their curriculum and teachers are likely a good source of insight into their strengths and weaknesses. Are there plenty of high-quality game design studies, but no business or project management courses? Is there a surplus of programmers and lack of 3D artists, or the other way around? Are the founders typically very young, with little experience of teamwork, working life and entrepreneurship? Knowing the education environment should give you a fairly clear picture of the needs of local startups, if their founders are mostly fresh graduates.

If many of the startups in the area are founded by industry veterans, their needs will be quite different. They are likely to be effective in developing, evaluating and testing games, especially if they had a lot of responsibility in their earlier careers. However, they might not know much about leadership, collaboration deals, business strategy and raising funding, for example.

In an area with a strong community of hobby development, an incubator might get a lot of applications from “basement indies” - solo developers or small teams that have been making games for fun or as a side job, but need help turning them into a business. In this case, your most important workshops could be about market research, branding, user testing, monetisation and analytics.

One of the most important success factors for startups are their networks. Some areas have the privilege of active game developer communities or have regular events where developers can meet. On the other hand, in some areas, an incubator might be the first professional community for game developers. Thus, in some areas company founders are likely to be well networked before even joining the incubator, while in others, networking opportunities and even networking coaching are among the most important things an incubator can offer.

In some areas the game startup scene has a clear tendency towards a certain genre or platform - for example casual mobile games. There could also be some interesting upcoming local trends, like VR (Virtual Reality) horror or education games. An incubator can choose to support these trends by taking in certain types of teams and organising subject specific education, if it makes sense for their strategy. Subjects like monetisation, optimisation and analytics will be more important for mobile game companies than for PC developers, which in turn have their own specific needs.

2.3 Selecting Teams

Selecting which types of teams to support is a strategic decision for an incubator. Does the incubator take in student teams that are yet to establish a company, early-stage companies with a demo or young startups that have published a game or two but aren't profitable yet? Are only traditional game startups included, or also outsourcing companies and game technology developers? How about serious gaming, like education and health games, and app gamification? Which game platforms are supported - mobile, PC, consoles, XR (X Reality/Cross Reality), chat games? All of these require some specific knowledge, and with limited resources, it's not always possible to support every type of company.

After the strategic decision of choosing which types of teams to support, an incubator will face the challenge of selecting the individual teams. Counterintuitively, the best basis for this decision is usually not the game they are making. It is very rare for a game company to break through with their first product; more likely, they'll need to try out several game ideas and pivot before they become sustainable.

What to look for in a game company is a balanced, realistic and ambitious team. If the founding team doesn't have all the skills needed for making a game, do they have a plan for filling up the gaps? Have they worked together before, and shipped at least a demo? Do team dynamics work? Are they ready to listen to advice and learn? A fresh game startup is unlikely to get any income in months or even years, so they need to have a realistic plan for financing their business. Building a successful game company is a lot of hard work, and takes an ambitious, determined team - do they seem like one? Have they made the effort of gathering at least a basic understanding of the game business, its challenges and future prospects, and do they understand where their game fits in this environment? Educating a good team in game development and business skills and supporting them through possible pivots is entirely possible; fixing a dysfunctional team is something else completely. While

any team can certainly fall apart later on, selecting the ones with most potential will make an incubator's job a lot easier, and is likely to raise their success rate significantly.

Case Study: Sting Game (Stockholm)

Stockholm has several times been awarded as one of the most important European game development cities, together with Helsinki and London, and has many successful new companies, ranging from senior AAA players to small straight from school indie studios. Sting Game has chosen to focus on "splinters" i.e. senior developers leaving to start new companies, companies like Warpzone Games¹⁷, Valiant Studios¹⁸ and Kavalri Games¹⁹.

Sting Game is still only a few years young, so most companies have not yet released their big titles. Pitching sessions are organised together with different partners throughout Sweden, for example The Game Incubator²⁰, Sweden Game Arena²¹, East Sweden Game²², Dataspelsbranschen and more.

¹⁷ Warpzone: <https://warpzonestudios.com/>.

¹⁸ Valiant: <http://valiant.se/>.

¹⁹ Kavalri: <https://www.kavalrigames.com/>.

²⁰ The Game Incubator: <https://www.thegameincubator.se/>.

²¹ Sweden Game Arena: <http://swedengamearena.com/>.

²² East Sweden Game: <http://eastswedengame.se/>.

Case Study: Farm League (Helsinki)

In Helsinki, Finland, the game business ecosystem is relatively mature, and startups come from many different walks of life. Every year, we get some superstar startups by industry veterans, but there's also a strong undercurrent of student, junior and hobbyist teams. Farm League concentrates on the latter; thanks to our strong culture of giving back to the community, most veteran startups are already well networked and can easily find the support they need.

A couple of years back, after Rovio and Supercell's initial success, most all new teams were mobile developers, but that has changed; in 2018-2019, new projects were born on every imaginable platform from PC to chat games. Serious games projects (education, healthcare, impact, etc.) are getting more common, albeit they're still a small minority.

All in all, we have a very colourful startup scene and a strong community to support it, but one of the problems we've identified is that while the seniors are genuinely willing to help, startups can't necessarily find the right people, don't dare to ask, or can't recognise their own needs well enough to get the right support. At the same time, seniors don't necessarily know what kind of support to offer and to whom.

We see diversity amongst teams as a positive factor. Choosing only one type of junior companies (e.g. mobile developers) would have made planning a curriculum a lot easier, but on the other hand, we believe inclusivity and diversity lead to more creativity. Thus, we decided to target all kinds of junior teams, and to relay to them the support of the community, even when a common curriculum couldn't fill all of their diverse needs. During the pilot batches we also noticed it was important to coach the teams to understand their own needs better.

Farm League evolved into our latest iteration of incubation for young game companies, LGIN (Living Game Intelligence Network), which is more open ended and can support any kind of a game company from student teams to more advanced growth phase startups. It concentrates more on connecting startups with individual mentors and helping them understand their own situation better. Thus, its application form²³ is not about selecting teams, since virtually any local team is allowed in the network; it concentrates on collecting basic data to enable the staff better guide a deeper starting discussion with the team.

²³ Living Game Intelligence Network Team Questionnaire:
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1m09iame_OyENMSgBtnGc5qKkuxun-No5/view.

Case Study: VHTP GameDev Incubator (Ventspils)

In 2018 Latvian game development companies have developed around 40 games, of which almost half have been published by the developers themselves. Approximately 80 % of games developed were digital games and 10 % were board games.

In the first years of operation the GameDev Incubator focused on providing general knowledge to more mature startups (at the time PC and mobile game teams), taking into account their level and requirements. Despite their experience with game development and even having several published games, the biggest gap was still the business sense – as the small teams consisted mainly of tech-savvy people the incubator had to double down on marketing and PR strategies, monetisation of games, current market analysis and pitching activities.

As most of the startups are located in Riga, in order to join the incubator support programme the teams needed to be performers of economic activity, have an MVP (minimum viable product), a demo or a commercially successful project and of course commercial potential and balance, as most of the workshops were carried out in Riga (as part of the on-demand mentoring sessions) by associates of the incubator.

Later on, as new teams joined the flow, the team community varied and matured, and former incubator graduates transitioned themselves into the roles of mentors for newly selected student teams, making it possible for the GameDev Incubator to increase its coverage both in terms of applicants (PC, mobile, console and VR/AR [Augmented Reality] platform developers) and locations (workshops and events are now carried out both in Riga and Ventspils, online and face-to-face, via the cooperation with the Latvian Game Development Association, Estoty²⁴, Brain Games²⁵, SoapHog²⁶, etc.).

²⁴ Estoty: <https://estoty.com/>.

²⁵ Brain Games: <https://www.brain-games.lv/>.

²⁶ SoapHog: <https://soaphog.com/>.

3. Staff and Mentors

People who support the startups in an incubator are in this document divided into two categories: in-house staff and external mentors. These categories are used for clarity's sake, and they don't always reflect the tasks assigned to a specific person. In-house staff can mentor startups, if they have the skills and knowledge needed. Mentors can also be used for workshops, lectures and ad-hoc help. Different forms of support, tasks and who to assign them to will be discussed more closely in chapter 4 "[Support](#)".

3.1 In-House Staff

No matter how an incubator is built, it will need some in-house staff. Staff will, at a minimum, organise mentoring, workshops and other education, develop the curriculum, be responsible for communications and marketing, select the teams, address everyday issues at the office, and often also work on funding for the incubator. Many of these tasks can be outsourced, but even then, a member of the staff needs to coordinate that.

Since the members of staff will be present at the incubator a lot, it is easy for them to build a personal relationship with the teams. Since early stage teams are likely to need support often, it is beneficial to hire a person with game industry experience for this role. No one can be an expert in every aspect of the game industry, but for example a former game entrepreneur or other generalist has a wide understanding of many topics and can often help teams better understand their own needs. Sometimes the support of a generalist is enough; other times, they know someone in their networks who knows more about the subject or can at least point the team in the right direction.

Case Study: Sting Game (Stockholm)

The coaches work closely with companies and teams every week, and are always involved in important activities such as marketing, development, finance, recruitment, etc. The coaches have all built successful game companies, raised venture capital, and sold companies. In addition, several of the coaches are themselves active investors. The main coach and mentor for game teams at Sting is Jonas Lindqvist. Jonas coaches game companies in Sting's game incubator at Medborgarplatsen in Södermalm, Stockholm. Previously, he was the programme manager for the Sting Test Drive Game with Jana Palm. He has previously founded and developed companies in industries of games, drones, 3D technology, visualisation and Internet of things.

The coaching philosophy of Sting is based on “pull” rather than “push”, i.e. it's the coach's task to help companies find and decide what is the right way forward/focus/priorities etc., rather than telling them what s/he thinks they should do.

In addition to the dedicated business coaches at Sting, companies also get access to other experts and advisers who help teams in several niche areas such as digital marketing, game design, coaching for pitching, specifics in development, etc. Mentoring has been done in collaboration with The Swedish Games Industry Association and its members, network and partners, such as Grant Thornton²⁷, Bird & Bird²⁸ and other game incubators in Sweden.

²⁷ Grant Thornton: <https://www.grantthornton.se/>.

²⁸ Bird & Bird: <https://www.twobirds.com/>.

Case Study: Farm League (Helsinki)

Farm League has one full time employee, Suvi Kiviniemi, who has an industry background as an entrepreneur. She has the expertise needed to support the teams in day by day practicalities of leading a game company, can run some of the workshops herself, and also coaches teams to better understand their own needs. For deeper knowledge in specific subjects, we can tap into the culture of giving back of the industry in Helsinki; our volunteer mentor pool has more than 30 industry experts and counting.

Our mentor pool is used both for traditional mentoring and for running workshops. New and less active mentors have an opportunity to get to know the teams during speed date nights. Many of the mentors have been available for specific ad hoc needs, or simply visited our offices to chat with the teams and play their games.

Farm League teams are a varied bunch, and while some are very young, many members of the teams have background in things completely other than games - arts and art funding, marketing and press, and high-level tech, among others. We have built a community to tap into these skills; Farm League teams are expected to support each other (to a reasonable degree), and they have found it very beneficial. We've organised community discussions about marketing and shared conference experiences, playtested each others' games, helped others sort out lag issues in Unity, The list is long. This has also been beneficial in building a warm, welcoming and helpful culture inside and around the incubation programme.

3.2 External Mentors

Many incubators have a pool of external mentors, either hired consultants or volunteers. In this context, mentors are defined as game professionals assigned to guide and support startups during their time in the incubator. This professional relationship can be relatively short term for a specific need, or last for the whole incubation period and even beyond. Sometimes these mentors are the key offering of an incubator, sometimes an additional support network outside the official curriculum. In any case, picking the brain of an experienced industry expert and building professional relationships with them is often hugely beneficial for a startup.

3.2.1 Finding Mentors

Access to mentors will vary greatly depending on the size and type of the ecosystem in the area. Finding mentors in a healthy, mature ecosystem with a culture of knowledge sharing can be fairly easy, whereas in a very young ecosystem or a closed culture you might struggle to even identify the right people. Some incubators need to reach outside their own ecosystem and hire mentors from

elsewhere to get started with building a culture and a community. Of course, this can be a wise option for any incubator for internationalisation and expanding their access to specialists.

A good starting point for finding local mentors is to contact organisations related to game development, if the area has any. Some organisations to consider are a local chapter of the International Game Developers Association (IGDA)²⁹, universities and other education for game development, industry hubs, game development clubs and game jam organisations. Some areas even have an umbrella organisation for the industry (e.g. Neogames Finland). Any of these can help point you in the right direction to find local experts, and they might become great collaboration partners.

Recruiting experts from outside the area will likely be harder and more expensive, and not only because of travel expenses. Many industry seniors find it interesting to get to know new local teams, which are likely to be their future colleagues or collaboration partners and possibly come from the same schools they graduated from; teams from a different area do not carry the same personal connection, and motivation needs to come from something else.

One important thing to consider is how to make it as easy as possible for the mentors to find you, especially if you're aiming to build a bigger pool of personally involved, volunteering mentors. Current mentors are likely to discuss the programme with their industry friends, and it makes sense to encourage them to do that. They'll need something to refer to - a clear source for information and contact details, for example a web page with a description of the mentoring possibilities. Once the incubator has been running for some time, its own alumni can also make great mentors - they should be kept in the loop with regular updates, for example a newsletter and occasional events.

²⁹ International Game Developers Association (IGDA): <https://igda.org/>.

Case Study: VHTP GameDev Incubator (Ventspils)

The idea of entrepreneurship mentoring in Latvia is just as “young” as the game development industry and began to actively develop in 2003, with the first mentoring programs for entrepreneurs and startups launched in 2005. Since then, targeted and systematic mentoring has become a powerful tool for supporting young startups and has gained wide acceptance. More and more experienced companies and executives are agreeing to become mentors and coaches.

Taking into account the fact that the majority of game development companies and potential lecturers are located outside Ventspils (Riga, Valmiera, Liepaja, etc.) the GameDev Incubator operates both on-site in Ventspils and remotely (online workshops, meetups), hence the need for in-house staff has not been significant throughout its operation. Therefore, VHTP deals mainly with external experts when it comes to coaching and conducting workshops with the startups.

Since the Latvian game development industry is slowly but steadily gaining momentum, the current number of professional mentors and coaches is limited, however there are a few “home-made” Latvian game development experts and companies, who are willing to share their knowledge as well as shortcomings despite being in the development stage themselves. These pioneers of the industry are the main source of the newly established pool of experts that VHTP began using in its incubation pilot.

3.2.2 Selecting Mentors

When an incubator has defined their target customer and researched their background well, it should be fairly clear which types of professional skills their mentors should have. Typical weaknesses and education needs combined with the strategy dictate mentoring needs. Is the core of incubation about game design and art, or more about business, team building and leadership? Which subjects can be covered by in-house staff or traditional lectures and workshops, and which will be left to a mentor-mentee relationship? Will the mentor pool also be used for lectures and workshops?

For a long-term mentoring relationship, the most relevant person is a generalist; a former entrepreneur or a veteran who’s had many roles in the industry, or has been in a leadership role, responsible for a wide range of subjects. The ideal person has a solid understanding of game design, getting funding, marketing and distribution channels, production processes and leading a team, to name a few. Specialists can also be very valuable to have in a mentor pool, but they’re more playing on their strengths when having lectures or workshops or answering to ad hoc needs.

Long term mentoring is a close and personal relationship, and professional skills aren’t the only important factor. Soft skills, like listening, communication and empathy matter a lot. These are hard to measure, and even when incubation staff finds a mentor very pleasant, their personality might conflict with a team, making the relationship less useful than it could be. This can be avoided to some

extent by giving the companies and mentors some autonomy in selecting each other, or having a test period, if the relationship is meant to be a long-term one.

Both mentoring and being mentored are skills and can be trained. Mentoring takes a lot of understanding and patience, and good communication tools; one is often required to question another person's passionate work, which can easily lead to conflict. Being mentored effectively requires trust and willingness to be open to someone else's ideas and expertise, all while still keeping your own values and most important goals clear. Offering training to both mentors and mentees, or at least discussing these subjects with them, can be very beneficial in building good mentoring relationships.

Case Study: Farm League (Helsinki)

When asking our teams to define a great mentor, we got an interesting list:

- will to commit
- listening skills, empathy
- excitement, realism
- professional skills
- down-to-earth attitude

While teams of course appreciated industry experience and expertise, they found certain features related to communication skills, trustworthiness and supportiveness even more important. Some people have these features naturally, but they're skills you can train. They are also likely to be useful in your personal life and career, so offering this training to your mentors would give them clear value. At Farm League, this is one of the future developments we're looking into.

3.2.3 Mentor Motivation

Many incubators use at least partly volunteering mentors. Especially when this is the case, finding out their motivations is central. It will help the incubator hold on to them, and to find new mentors. Understanding mentors' motivation requires open discussion with them, repeatedly; the importance of different motivators often changes when they've been mentoring teams for some time.

Sometimes mentors' motivations can be altruistic - they like to feel they're making a difference. It also gives them a feeling of being appreciated as a professional and highlights their hard-earned expert status. Mentoring can also offer meaningful social interaction, both with mentored teams and with other mentors.

For some, motivations are more straightforward. A consultant might view mentoring as a job and needs to be paid. Someone with a leadership position can hope to find future recruits or

collaboration partners. Some even have investment opportunities or acquisitions in mind - which is very valuable for the startups.

Service providers, like consultants, game engine representatives, analytics companies, etc. might give high-quality mentoring in exchange for getting a hold on future clients early. For them, it can be valuable to get some visibility through the incubator's channels or be listed as a sponsor on its website. In these cases, it's important to discuss rules openly - incubator staff have authority over teams and letting service providers in will be read as a recommendation.

Encouraging startups to speak publicly about the help they have gotten is a great way to keep mentor motivation high. It makes the results of their work more concrete for themselves, while also highlighting their expertise to other members of the community. It can attract new mentors and new teams alike, and also helps to build a culture of sharing in the ecosystem.

3.2.4 Keeping Mentors on Board

No matter mentors' motivators, mentoring is hard work, and a typical mentor is a busy professional. An incubator should use some time to plan their processes so that effective routines make things effortless for mentors; otherwise they're at a risk of losing them.

Mentors need a lot of information to do their work effectively; how do the mentoring processes work, what are the goals and rules for their work, which teams does the incubator have in and for how long, when are they supposed to meet the teams, where to find companies' basic information, how to contact them All of this information should be easily available for all the mentors.

Many of the skills needed in mentoring are useful in both professional and private life; typically, people in leadership roles in game companies get some mentor training. Offering training in mentoring can be very valuable to keep the mentors on board. It is a clear benefit they are getting in return for the time they spend mentoring teams. Giving feedback also has an important role in educating the mentors, and it can make them feel their work matters.

Sometimes, despite everyone's best intentions, a mentor doesn't get along with certain founders or team members. If a situation like this continues for too long, it will almost certainly destroy the mentor's motivation and the team's trust. In these cases, it is important to intervene - try to solve the issues by discussion, and if needed, assign new partners to both the team and the mentor.

Case Study: VHTP GameDev Incubator (Ventspils)

Mutual feedback is a good way of monitoring the satisfaction rates between a coach and a team. The feedback is gathered via interviews and written questions to both sides prior to the start and at the end of the programme.

GameDev Incubator teams have mentioned a number of benefits from participating in the support and coaching program so far, e.g.:

- improved business experience;
- assistance in identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the teams;
- assistance in making informed decisions about issues that the team has doubts about;
- opportunity to discuss strategic issues & receive advice from an experienced specialist;
- increase of contacts;
- new ideas, knowledge;
- moral support and encouragement;
- cooperation with the coach will continue after the end of the program.

The teams recognise that the key to a successful outcome is how active they are in the coaching process, how well they have set goals, how well they are pursuing them, and how open they are with the coach. Meanwhile the coach listens, asks, challenges the team's goals, researches, gives advice, shares his/her insights and contacts.

Coaches also mention several benefits of working with the startups:

- testing of their own professional skills and experience;
- helping a new startup grow & avoid painful mistakes, which the coach once made;
- new experience, new insights into another business;
- developing leadership skills;
- self-fulfillment and self-development;
- new contacts;
- emerging of new ideas;
- a way to battle daily routine.

4. Support

There are plenty of different options for supporting game startups; these are kind of a “mix and match” selection from which you can choose what fits your needs and resources best. An incubator designing their support selection should go back to their strategy and all the information they have on their target startups. Which forms of support will be the most effective to reach the incubator’s goals in the current environment?

4.1 Length of Programme

One of the core choices to be made is the length of the incubation programme - for how long can a team get your support. Incubation programmes in general are longer and more loosely scheduled than acceleration programmes; one of their key points is to give young companies time to develop their business and products in a safe environment, when they’re not yet in a fast growth phase.

Games are often complex and somewhat slow to develop. Big projects take years of development before they reach the customer. For a startup, this isn’t often possible or wise, but even a smaller indie project will typically take several months. If an incubator takes on companies in the programme very early in their development, it will take some time for them to reach a phase where they start marketing and getting sales and feedback from real customers. However, this might be when they need incubation the most - at this point, the learning curve is typically very steep, and a lot of information specific to the game industry is needed.

One solution to this is to take teams in only when they’re already close to publishing, and build a refined programme to support them through publication, initial marketing efforts, getting feedback from customers, iterating product and handling live operations, running a funding round and finding a publisher, for example. In this case, the programme can be relatively short - although a funding round will likely take several months to close. The flip side of this is that early stage companies will be left without support, unless some other organisation takes care of them.

Another option is having a longer incubation period with different training phases for companies in different stages. Batches of companies taken into the incubator can overlap, so that new companies are taken in before earlier ones graduate. This has the benefit of new companies learning from the older ones, especially if the incubator has an office for all teams, or otherwise aims to build a community. Training can be designed so that development phases with a steep learning curve have

more active education, workshops and lectures, while at other times incubation is more about a safe environment, peer pressure and personal support for founders, and thus takes up less resources.

4.2 Training Topics

The game industry is constantly on the move as gaming trends shift, technology develops and gamer habits change. The details of an incubation curriculum built today might be obsolete in a year or two. It's crucial that the staff responsible for the curriculum stays updated on the latest global trends, data and news, and keeps up an active discussion with the industry. Any specific topic mentioned in this document can be outdated by the time you read it – high-level topics are likely to stay relevant longer.

The importance of training topics differs somewhat depending on the type of startups in the incubator, especially their maturity level and high-level business model. Lessons are best learned when they are timely. I.e. a pitch workshop shortly before a funding round is hugely beneficial and takes practical work forward by leaps. Realising the same workshop when the company is only building their first demo feels more abstract and is quickly forgotten, and probably needs to be done again when the company is closer to the right maturity for a successful round. For an early stage team, company development and game development topics are essential for building a solid foundation. When the company is more mature, business development topics become more important to enable growth.

The high-level business model of a company - e.g. mobile, PC or console, premium or free to play, entertainment or serious games, developing your own games or selling outsourcing etc. - will define their needs especially in monetisation training and sales platform specific subjects. Game- and UI (User Interface)/UX (User Experience) development, visibility and marketing, analytics and publishing deals are at least partly platform specific, among some other subjects.

The list of possible training topics below is by no means final or comprehensive; it can, however, serve as a starting point for finding out which topics are the most important ones for your startups and strategy:

- Company development
 - Business idea and strategy
 - Team building
 - Company culture
 - HR and recruitment

- Game development
 - Game design
 - Prototyping
 - UI/UX design
 - Workflow, production planning
 - Analytics, feedback and iteration
 - Monetisation
- Business development
 - Branding
 - Budgeting, cash flow
 - Market research
 - Sales platforms, requirements and visibility
 - Launch plan
 - Marketing, incl. metrics and iteration
 - Community building and management
 - Funding - public and private
 - Publisher deals
 - Pitching to investors and publishers
 - Legal: contracts
 - Legal: IP protection

This list is built assuming all incubated companies are already fluent in the basics of game development, i.e. programming, art and sound design, and developing those skills via feedback and iteration will be enough. However, game design is still included on the list, as experience has shown that a more user centric approach to game design is an important topic to discuss when teams have learned to better understand business strategies, monetisation, branding and market research.

4.3 Lectures and Workshops

For topics that are common to all or most companies in the incubator, traditional forms of training are a good option. Sometimes this will mean a lecture, where an expert shares theoretical knowledge spiced with examples. Even when education itself is fairly theoretical, it adds a lot of value to encourage teams to discuss the topic openly. Sharing opinions, thoughts and experiences builds a community, and forces people to think about the topic from different points of view.

When possible, it is advisable to organise training in the form of workshops. They are even better for building a community than interactive lectures, and when companies participate as teams, it can also help to build their company culture. Workshops take practical work forward, which is great for busy entrepreneurs. The practical application of theoretical knowledge will be clear to everyone who learns it at a workshop, and so hands-on learning is likely to stick.

4.4 Setting Goals

Starting a company is overwhelming, and many entrepreneurs struggle to establish a clear roadmap for the company. Setting measurable, customised goals for each startup can be immensely helpful to keep them concentrated on the right things and recognise progress when it happens.

The founders should always be the ones responsible for their company's goals; incubation staff and mentors only have an advisory role. Accountability is at the core of entrepreneurship and leading teams and giving the founders the illusion that they could share it and blame someone outside the company would do them a disservice. Additionally, clear responsibility for the goals increases commitment to them. However, an in-depth discussion with an experienced industry professional is likely to help the founders set more realistic goals.

The goals to be set depend entirely on the situation of the company. Normally at least some of the goals are about game development; to have a proof of concept, a vertical slice, or a published product by a certain date. Reaching these goals will often require some restructuring of production and/or refining of scope. If the company already has published games, goals should include user acquisition, visibility, and revenue. Some of the goals can be more abstract - changes in the company culture, for example.

Setting goals is important, but it's also crucial to remember that running a company can be unpredictable and situations change. Even if production goals seem perfect when they're set, it's quite possible that the test users dislike the vertical slice, and the whole project goes back to the

drawing board. Keeping an open mind and being able to change the goals is just as important as setting goals is.

4.5 Mentoring

Mentoring is here defined as a continuing, supportive relationship between a company or its founder and a more experienced industry professional. Ideally, it is based on a long-term development plan, which is made in collaboration with the company. The plan can be flexible, but it gives tools for both parties to prepare for mentoring meetings. This way, they are likely to get more out of the relationship and be more committed to it.

Game companies are, as mentioned before, multidisciplinary by nature. Additionally, challenges vary a lot depending on business model and platform. Thus, every mentor is likely to support teams through situations where they've never been themselves. Much of mentoring is about asking educated and intelligent questions, which requires an understanding of the industry and its unique challenges, but also good communication and listening skills, and flexibility to understand the uniqueness of each situation. Having previous experience or education in mentoring is a big benefit for a mentor.

While finding a mentor with experience and expertise that matches the company's challenges is useful, it's not enough for an optimal relationship. Mentoring requires a lot of openness and trust, and not every team will get along with every mentor well enough to get the full benefit of mentoring. Especially in the beginning of a mentoring relationship, it's important to stay updated on its development, and discuss possible issues - even finding a new mentor is sometimes needed, if personalities don't match. Mismatch in expertise can somewhat be patched by introducing other specialists to the team for an occasional discussion.

Even though mentoring has its challenges, it is a great, resource efficient way to tailor professional support to the needs of each team. It can answer ad hoc questions and adapt fast while still being structured and goal oriented. It builds professional networks around the company and founders, but also encourages independence, since it's more about asking questions than giving answers.

4.6 “Hand-Holding” by In-House Staff

While mentorship is great support for a young team, external mentors are rarely available for the team continuously; typically, they’ll schedule a meeting every couple of weeks. Running a company is often mentally and emotionally very heavy and a need for support can arise unexpectedly. If an incubator has the resources, offering continuous access to support can make all the difference.

In a best-case scenario, at least one member of the in-house staff would have experience as a game entrepreneur and have a significant portion of their time assigned for supporting the companies. However, if such a person is not available, a staff member who is informed in both games and entrepreneurship and willing to learn more is also a good choice. Much of ad hoc support needs are in their core mainly emotional, and a discussion with an informed outsider can be very helpful.

4.7 Community Support

Peer support and peer pressure are easily available for a company in an incubator. Other companies in the same batch are usually in roughly the same situation, and if there is overlap between batches, there will also be a bit more advanced companies to discuss with. Getting alumni companies to visit the incubator can give achievable goals and role models to founders. If an area has a hub for game companies, an incubator in or near it can also take steps to build a community with both mature and young companies.

When an area has little or no game industry community outside of the incubator, building one inside it is even more important. It can become the foundation for a supportive and open culture in the industry ecosystem. Once incubated companies have seen the benefits of sharing, and are used to it, they are likely to keep up an open discussion with their peers even when they are no longer in the incubator.

One good way to build community is to facilitate learning from peers. The incubator could for example have regular retrospectives for all teams, ask companies to tell others about their experiences and learnings after significant events, facilitate discussions around specific subjects, etc. This is likely to encourage companies to network and start supporting each other organically outside of facilitated events.

4.8 Other Forms of Support

Depending on the situation in the area, needs of target companies and incubator's strategy, other forms of support might be essential. Some options are described below.

Offering an affordable office for incubated companies is beneficial for most. In a shared office building, peer support and pressure happen organically and daily. It will also make community building more convenient and offer an easy way for incubator staff to keep an eye on the companies.

Building a network of possible collaboration partners, clients and service providers, supporters and friends is often crucial for the success of a game company. An incubator can offer a shortcut to efficient networking, since it will already have a lot of contacts. Network building can be done by organising facilitated or casual networking events, and by introducing companies to certain partners directly.

Financial support is rarely possible for an incubator, although it would be almost certain to attract higher quality companies and help them develop faster. Some incubators, and especially accelerators, regularly raise a fund to be able to invest in companies. Financial support can happen in the form of investment, when the incubator would either receive shares of the company or make a profit-sharing deal, or as a grant. Other ways to support companies financially are to collaborate with private or public funding organisations, and to educate teams about funding options.

Conferences and other professional game industry events are essential for finding private funding, publishers and collaboration partners. Many incubators organise conference trips for their companies. Sharing a booth with other companies can lower expenses significantly, and some incubators are even able to give out travel grants for their companies. If the incubator is well known, participating under its brand can make a company more interesting for potential partners. It is also very helpful to have both peer and staff support available at the conference, since they can be very overwhelming.

Game jams are very popular in the global game development community. A game jam is roughly comparable to a hackathon; a short period of time, typically 48 or 72 hours, during which small teams create a themed game from scratch. Jams are considered to be great for team spirit and creativity, and companies established around jam games are not unheard of. Organising game jams or participating as a location for a global game jam, can be an inspiring offering. It can also be used as a gateway for young teams to get to know the incubator.

Case Study: Farm League (Helsinki)

The length of one batch at Farm League is 6 months, but companies can and often will stay for more than one period. Half a year is a fairly short time for a fresh game company - not nearly all companies are ready to publish during their first Farm League period. We also wanted to give companies more freedom to maneuver - an early stage company can face a situation where they need to trash a project or pivot their strategy, and having a tight time limit for support will raise the bar to do that.

During the first three batches, we did a lot of iteration.

For our first batch, we had a fairly detailed, pre-planned curriculum³⁰, and the training was mostly done by an in-house staff member with game entrepreneurship experience. This approach worked fairly well but didn't benefit from the greatest strength of our ecosystem - an open culture of sharing.

For the second batch, we decided to lean more heavily on volunteer mentors and follow the curriculum more loosely. In-house staff mostly took the role of an organiser and a supporting shoulder for the teams. While this strategy was more tailored to our ecosystem, it ended up being a little chaotic - organising events on the fly was more time consuming than expected, and without a formal structure and timetable, not all the teams got the support they needed.

For the third batch we combined the best of both worlds - most of the events were planned with volunteering mentors months before they happened, according to a loose curriculum. Monthly speed dates between mentors and teams were introduced to make networking easier. Additionally, we added a clear timetable for customised support: every team met with a staff member monthly to have a structured discussion about their situation, progress and needs.

Farm League has been community centered from day one, and teams are encouraged to support each other. Weekly retrospective meetings and occasional, casual networking events are an essential part of our operations. We've also organised curated discussions between teams about specific topics.

Now that Farm League is evolving into LGIN (Living Game Intelligence Network), we have also started assigning personal mentors to teams. Since our mentor pool has tens of mentors, we made a form³¹ to make it easier to collect their information in an orderly manner.

On top of our amazing pool of volunteer mentors, we're lucky to have other organisations do a part of the support work. For example, Neogames Finland organises trips to the most important conferences, and the City of Helsinki³² offers a travel grant for internationalisation.

³⁰ Baltic Game Incubator – Overview:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1xlqXYnvrHMwo8H_b_AOYlx4g0hzJa0C/view.

³¹ Living Game Intelligence Network Mentor Questionnaire:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/159i_mqy0Lg100Eey9Q1hTsDBQzINOK0/view.

³² City of Helsinki: <https://www.hel.fi/helsinki/en>.

Case Study: VHTP GameDev Incubator (Ventspils)

Operating both on-site and remotely, the GameDev Incubator has developed a national support network with various associations and institutions, e.g.:

If teams need working space (temporary, or on a daily basis for a longer period of time), VHTP can provide them with free coworking space at the VHTP Business Support Centre in Ventspils, or facilities at the Ventspils University of Applied Sciences. Given that VHTP does not have its own facilities in Riga, meetings may be hosted free of charge in agreement with the following organisations in their facilities:

- Baltic-German Chamber of Commerce³³ – BGI project partner;
- Creative Industries Incubator operated by “Magnetic Latvia”³⁴;
- Options provided by members of the Latvian Game Developers Association (LGDA).

In order to ensure that startups comply with the laws and regulations during the development of their business ideas, they will have free legal and accounting advice available to them during the incubation period, as well as consultations on the optimisation of business processes to improve their current internal business environment.

In order to further motivate the startups, the Incubator in cooperation with LGDA provides opportunities to attend conferences, exhibitions and meetups in Latvia free of charge, as well as helps the local startups arrange booths during events to present their games, thus providing an exchange of experience, motivation for learning from game developers and networking with industry representatives.

³³ Baltic German Chamber of Commerce (AHK Service SIA): www.ahk-balt.org.

³⁴ Magnetic Latvia – Creative Industries Incubator: <https://inkubatori.magneticlatvia.lv/en/katalogs/creative-industries-incubator/>.

Case Study: Sting Game (Stockholm)

Business Plan - Goals for 2019:

- 2-3 new gaming companies adopted in the “Sting Incubate” program
 - Establish co-working space and offer with partner (Embassy / The Park)
 - 1-2 new additional partners + retain current partners
 - Continued increased awareness of operations in the industry
 - In-depth cooperation with one or more gaming incubators
1. Measures to increase and secure a qualified inflow 2019 *
 - 3-4 meetups (together with local partners, focus on diversity)
 - 4 Sting Open Coaching opportunities (increase from 15 to 30 minutes per case)
 - Ongoing reconciliation with our partners on deal flow
 - Two Game Investor Sessions (with Skövde - April, Invest in Games - September)
 - Continued work to increase the number of followers on social media
 2. Measures to make our value proposition even more attractive for the best game developers and entrepreneurs in the gaming industry *
 - Ongoing coaching with current gaming companies in the incubator
 - Continued collaboration with Sweden Game Arena + computer games industry
 - Experience sharing hits (GameHabitat, GSP, Gameport, Arctic Game, ESG)
 - Participate in indie gaming events in the Stockholm region
 - Attend relevant gaming events and conferences (e.g. NGC, SGC, LiU GC)
 - Study visits to foreign gaming operations (eg Interactive Denmark, Games Factory)
 - Seek the opportunity to conduct game jam with another player
 3. Marketing, communication *
 - Social media presence is based on the Facebook group Sting Game & other channels
 - Live streaming in Facebook during events where appropriate (Switcher app)
 - Meetup.com and simplyevents.com where we announce Meetups during the year
 - Find contact surfaces for game influencers

Preliminary Timeline for 2019

February	Meetup, Campaign Application to GIS
March	Game Investor Session (w/ Skövde), Open coaching
April	Jonas becomes a dad :)
May	Open coaching
June	Meetup?
August	Promotion application to GIS
September	Game Investor Session, Open coaching
October	Meetup
November	Open coaching, Meetup

* Implementation is based on extra support from the team for events, social media, PR and Media

5. Measuring Results

Running an incubator is rarely profitable in itself; more likely, you'll be raising outside funding regularly, year after year. This puts a strong emphasis on measuring results, however abstract and slow to reach they may seem. Convincing funding organisations on the usefulness of an incubator will be a lot easier, when they see clear statistics of the results the incubator has already reached.

Another reason to measure results carefully is, of course, to be able to iterate on the incubator's program and activities. An incubator exists for a reason and has goals, and if it isn't reaching those goals, something in its strategy or operations should be changed.

5.1 Goals

Since incubators typically support early stage companies, seeing them reach financial results can take years. This is especially true for the game industry, where products take a long time to develop, and success very rarely comes from the first launch. In mobile platforms, it isn't unheard of to have a game in the live operations phase (= published but in active development) for months or even years before it becomes profitable via continuous development and user acquisition work. Thus, measuring the success of a game incubator is likely to take a lot of patience. Companies' success should be regularly measured long after they've graduated from the incubator.

Even when getting financial results is slow, all incubators should have goals related to its alumni companies' business success. How high the goals should be and how soon they can be reached are largely strategic questions and related to the development stage of accepted companies.

However, the specific, measurable goals of an incubator are not limited to the financial success of its alumni. They should have a direct relationship with its high-level goals, strategy, and the ecosystem challenges it aims to address.

If an incubator has other high-level goals outside of alumni companies' success, e.g. talent attraction, encouraging entrepreneurship or supporting a culture of sharing, some of the things to measure should be about them. Additionally, an incubator is likely to have goals related to customer satisfaction, stakeholder commitment and empowering team founders. While many things can be measured in objective numbers - revenue, years of operations, number of companies established, etc. - some of these goals are more subjective and better measured by interviews and feedback.

5.2 Hard Measures

Measuring numerical and yes/no data will give an incubator tools to show its value in a way that's hard to deny. Most of it will also be roughly comparable year after year and can help to understand the development of the industry over time.

Relevant things to measure could be, for example:

- percentage of companies becoming profitable during a set amount of time
- funding collected by companies
- progression in possible public funding pipeline
- company longevity - percentage of companies still active after a set amount of time
- company networking - size of active professional network around a company after they graduate
- learning goals - team members reach the learning goals of a workshop
- when a company fails, team members get employed in the industry

If there is some organisation collecting information about all game companies in the area, or if the incubator has resources to collect it, comparing incubated companies to non-incubated ones can give you valuable insight.

5.3 Collecting Feedback

Collecting feedback from incubated companies and other stakeholders, e.g. mentors, has several functions. The most obvious one is to measure their satisfaction with the offering. Questions around this subject can include:

- if they find the offering valuable,
- which parts of it are valued most and least,
- what should be changed, from their point of view,
- is there something missing,
- do they understand and use all of the services and
- if they have ideas for development.

Surveys, discussions and interviews around these subjects will give valuable insight, which will help you iterate on your offering. At the same time, it works as a tool to show the founders and mentors their views and opinions matter, which helps them stay committed.

Additionally, open-ended questions and interviews can give very valuable content for incubator's marketing and communications. Success stories and testimonials on funding decks and social media channels can make the value of an incubator's offering very concrete and interesting.

Case Study: Farm League (Helsinki)

Farm League has been heavily iterating our offering during the pilot batches, and one important tool in this has been regular collection of feedback³⁵, supported by interviews, community discussions and taking note on comments during meetings and casual discussions. Feedback from both teams and mentors has guided us in restructuring our support into LGIN, Living Game Intelligence Network.

Case Study: Sting Game (Sweden)

Sting Game has the goal to create profitable successful growth companies. They measure results by looking at how successful companies are in terms of growing their player base and if the companies are growing their business into something sustainable. As of 2020 they have 10 alumni companies, Snow³⁶, Valiant Game Studio, Warpzone Studios, Gro Play³⁷, Kavalri Games among others. The earliest success was Hatrabbitt³⁸ who builds inclusive, mid-core, action and adventure games. The three founders had up to 20 years of experience each in key roles at some of the games industry's most respected game studios. Hatrabbitt was acquired by King³⁹ in 2019. A future success story might be Kavalri Games who currently has over 54k followers on Instagram⁴⁰ with very strong community engagement.

³⁵ Baltic Game Incubator – Client Happiness Questionnaire:
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1qWHP06nko03fS3w3fllDh_5SuDr0PSNk/view.

³⁶ Snow: <http://www.snowthegame.com/>.

³⁷ Gro Play: <https://www.groplay.com/>.

³⁸ Hatrabbitt: <https://www.hatrabbitt.se/>.

³⁹ King: <https://king.com/>.

⁴⁰ Kalvari Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/equestrianthegame/>.

6. Closing

Helping startups to succeed in the immensely competitive game industry is definitely no walk in the park. It requires thorough background work and a carefully crafted strategic plan. The incubation team needs to find the right teams, and have a clear picture of their background, challenges and goals. They require an up to date understanding of the industry, and a network of seasoned industry professionals to help them connect with it. The forms of support they offer need to be picked carefully, and their effectiveness should be measured regularly to allow for iteration.

However, game startup support is a worthy and interesting challenge. It can lead to huge gains, and not only financial ones. Working with creative, ambitious people in a multidisciplinary, complex industry is rewarding, will teach you a lot, and can give you unexpected outcomes. When done well, it can help build a sustainable business ecosystem culture that will help support the industry for years and decades to come.

7. References

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https://drive.google.com/file/d/1qWHP06nko03fS3w3fllDh_5SuDr0PSNk/view

Baltic Game Incubator – Overview:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1xlqXYnvrHMwo8H_b_AOYlx4g0hzJa0C/view

Baltic Game Industry (BGI): <http://baltic-games.eu>

Baltic Game Industry “Incubation Capacity Building”: <http://baltic-games.eu/171/activities/incubation-capacity-building/>

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Bird & Bird: <https://www.twobirds.com/>

Brain Games: <https://www.brain-games.lv/>

Candy Crush: <https://king.com/de/game/candycrush>

Dataspelsbranschen – Swedish Games Industry: <https://dataspelsbranschen.se/english>

East Sweden Game: <http://eastswedengame.se/>

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Farm League: <https://medium.com/@gamesfactory/farm-league-aba6e0b9e24>

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Living Game Intelligence Network (LGIN): <https://lgin.fi/>

Living Game Intelligence Network Mentor Questionnaire:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/159i_mqy0Lg100Eey9Q1IhTsDBQzIN0K0/view

Living Game Intelligence Network Team Questionnaire:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1m09iame_OyENMSgBtnGc5qKkuxun-No5/view

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<https://inkubatori.magneticlatvia.lv/en/katalogs/creative-industries-incubator/>.

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Snow: <http://www.snowthegame.com/>

Sting: <https://sting.co/en/>

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Supercell: <https://supercell.com/en/>

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Warpzone: <https://warpzonestudios.com/>

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8. Annexes



Sting Game

Jana Palm

- General Manager Stugan
- Sting Game Hub Manager
- Project Consultant at Invest Stockholm
- Board member at Resolution Games
- Advisor at Antler Interactive
- Member of juries like SGA, IMGGA, Indie Prize etc



Jonas Lindqvist

- Business coach, Sting Incubate Game
- Serial entrepreneur, board member, consultant
- Led exits, angel- and VC funding rounds, IPO
- Focus on Media- and Emerging technologies
- Passion for creative industries, teamwork, startups



Sting's programs

Sting Test Drive

4 evening workshops

Sting Incubate

6-12 months
15-20 startups/year
First 5 months @ A house
Can get up to 50,000 EUR

Sting Accelerate

4 months
16 startups/year
Program runs @ A house
30,000 EUR



Sting in numbers

(as of 31 Dec 2017)

- Projects/companies evaluated: 3000
- Startups accepted since 2002: 240
- Active and developing: 168
- Acc. private capital invested: 436 MEUR
- Persons employed: 1 819
- Revenue 2017: 219 MEUR (71% from export)
- Variety of verticals including Game, Sustainability, DeepTech, EdTech, FinTech, etc.



Sting Incubate Game

- For game related startup teams
- Part of Sting Incubate program
- Customized to games startups, since 2017
- Two startups in the process, 5 alumni

In the program:



Alumni:



Partners:



Sting

A Sting company: Description of the incubate process

- 12 months (2 x 6 months)
- Workshops on different topics
- 4 hours/week with a coach
- Access to expert coaches, industry experts national and international
- Propel Capital, 500 000 SEK investment opportunity
- Free office space during the first 5 months
- Other perks, see www.sting.co



What does it take to become a Sting game company?

- **Team** (creative, tech and biz)
- Intentions to build a **growth company**, not one project
- **An ambition** to have a turn over of 20M SEK within 5 years
- “Investable” company – **shareholders are active** in the team
- **Validation** - Prototype / Concept / Vertical Slice

Sting Game team

Jana Palm: jana.palm@sting.co

Jonas Lindqvist: jonas.lindqvist@sting.co

Facebook group: Sting Game



Sting Game - Partnership Offering

Marketing

Partner's logo shows in connection with Sting Game's activities

Partner's logo shows in all marketing material

Logo in Stings newsletter, annual report and website

Advisory Board

Seat at the Sting Game advisory board

2-3 meetings annually

Key topics:

- Startup-events
- Operations
- Dealflow
- Overall strategy

Network & Events

Dealflow exchange between Sting Game and Partner

Invitations to Sting Game meetups, fireside chats, workshops etc

Opportunity to arrange events together with Sting

Partners are selected by Sting based on mutual engagement and common interests. No fees apply in connection to the partnership agreement.



BACKUP SLIDES

Why do you need support from an incubator?

Funding
Marketing & PR
Aktiebolag
Publisher
Budget
Business model
Aktiebolagslagen
Minimum Viable Product
Network
Recruitment
Freemium model
Valuation
Shareholders Agreement
Industry experts
ALMI
Vinnova
Business Plan
Premium model
Sting

Tech startup vs game startup

Painkiller

Pleasure provider

Entrepreneur

Creator

Change the world

X

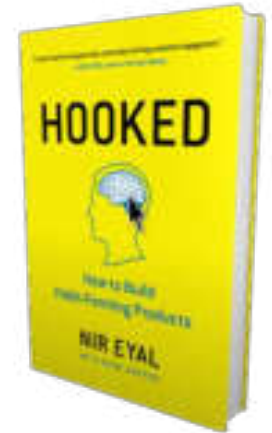
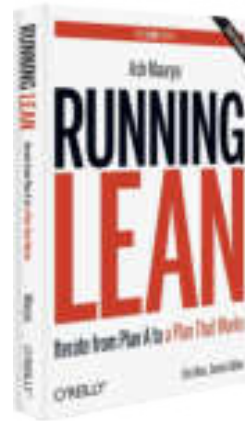
Entertain the world

Customer focused

Community focused

Startup tools

- Lean canvas + Hook model
- Minimum Viable Product (MVP)
- Pitch model (NABC)
- Value Creation Forum
- Startupdocs.se, almi.se



Lean Canvas

1. PROBLEM

- Buyer's definition
- \$\$\$
- Insight
- One owner

1

SOLUTION

- What brings UVP to the product
- How it solves customer's need

KEY METRICS

- What success factors
- How can you measure them

UNIQUE VALUE PROPOSITION

3

- Take away the pain!
- What's in it for me +++
- Kill your competition
- Time to sell your VP
- Magic question
 - Secrets
 - How

UNFAIR ADVANTAGE

- How is your product unique
- Why is it hard to copy

CHANNELS

- How to choose
- Buying pattern
- Help buying
- Entrance product,
- upsales,
- aftersales

CUSTOMER SEGMENTS

- Company name
- Step into your buyer's shoes
- Customer pain ---
- Customer experience

2

COST STRUCTURE

- Fixed costs
- Variable costs
- Cost of marketing and sales (User Acquisition)

REVENUE STREAMS

- How does the product generate revenue
- Premium, Free to Play...

PRODUCT

MARKET

GAMIFICATION MODEL CANVAS









Project name:

Design for:

On:

Design by:

Iteration:

<p>PLATFORMS </p> <p>Describe the platform or device(s) required to play the game.</p> <p>What platforms are available for developing the game? What platform are you using for development? What platform will the game run on?</p>	<p>MECHANICS </p> <p>Describe the rules of the game and components for creating game mechanics.</p> <p>What rules will you use to control the components? How will you explain the mechanics to the player? How will you control the difficulty of the mechanics?</p> <p>Examples of mechanics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Watch the video and get 10 pointsAnswer the questions and get expert levelComplete this level and spend my budgetBuy something to complete this missionRead a book (level 1) missionUse an advanced tool (level 2) to get the prize	<p>DYNAMICS </p> <p>Describe the business objectives of the mechanics using the following questions:</p> <p>What objectives will we use to control the mechanics of the game? What dynamics will we use to control the game? How will these dynamics work in our game?</p> <p>Game dynamics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">AlignmentBalanceProgressionFlowEngageExcitementFeedbackComplexityWin state	<p>AESTHETICS </p> <p>Describe the aesthetic experience of the game using the following questions:</p> <p>What aesthetic will you use to attract the player? Why should they play? How will the player experience it?</p> <p>Game aesthetics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">VisualsChallengeFeedbackComplexityEngagementExcitementFlowProgressionBalance	<p>PLAYERS </p> <p>Describe who will play the game and how to attract the player using the following questions:</p> <p>Who are the players? What are your players like? How will you attract them?</p>																						
<p>COMPONENTS </p> <p>Describe the elements or components of the game to create mechanics to get feedback to the player.</p> <p>What components will we use to create the game? What components will we use to create the game? What components will be used to create the game?</p> <p>Game components:</p> <table border="0"><tr><td>Rules</td><td>Progression</td></tr><tr><td>Balance</td><td>Flow</td></tr><tr><td>Engagement</td><td>Excitement</td></tr><tr><td>Complexity</td><td>Feedback</td></tr><tr><td>Flow</td><td>Engage</td></tr><tr><td>Excitement</td><td>Flow</td></tr><tr><td>Feedback</td><td>Complexity</td></tr><tr><td>Complexity</td><td>Flow</td></tr><tr><td>Flow</td><td>Excitement</td></tr><tr><td>Excitement</td><td>Flow</td></tr><tr><td>Flow</td><td>Excitement</td></tr></table>	Rules	Progression	Balance	Flow	Engagement	Excitement	Complexity	Feedback	Flow	Engage	Excitement	Flow	Feedback	Complexity	Complexity	Flow	Flow	Excitement	Excitement	Flow	Flow	Excitement			<p>BEHAVIORS </p> <p>Describe the behaviors or activities necessary to create the game to get feedback from the player.</p> <p>What behaviors do we need to improve the experience of the game? What behaviors do we need to improve the experience of the game? What behaviors do we need to improve the experience of the game?</p> <p>Examples of behaviors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Watch videoAnswer questionComplete levelBuy somethingRead a bookUse an advanced toolUse an advanced toolUse an advanced tool	
Rules	Progression																									
Balance	Flow																									
Engagement	Excitement																									
Complexity	Feedback																									
Flow	Engage																									
Excitement	Flow																									
Feedback	Complexity																									
Complexity	Flow																									
Flow	Excitement																									
Excitement	Flow																									
Flow	Excitement																									
<p>COSTS </p> <p>Describe the main costs of development of the game.</p> <p>What are the main costs of the game? What are the main costs of the game? What are the main costs of the game?</p>		<p>REVENUES </p> <p>Describe the revenue or value of the game using the following questions:</p> <p>What revenue or value do we need to create the game? How will we measure the success of the game? What revenue or value do we need to create the game?</p>																								

WWW.GAMEONLAB.COM

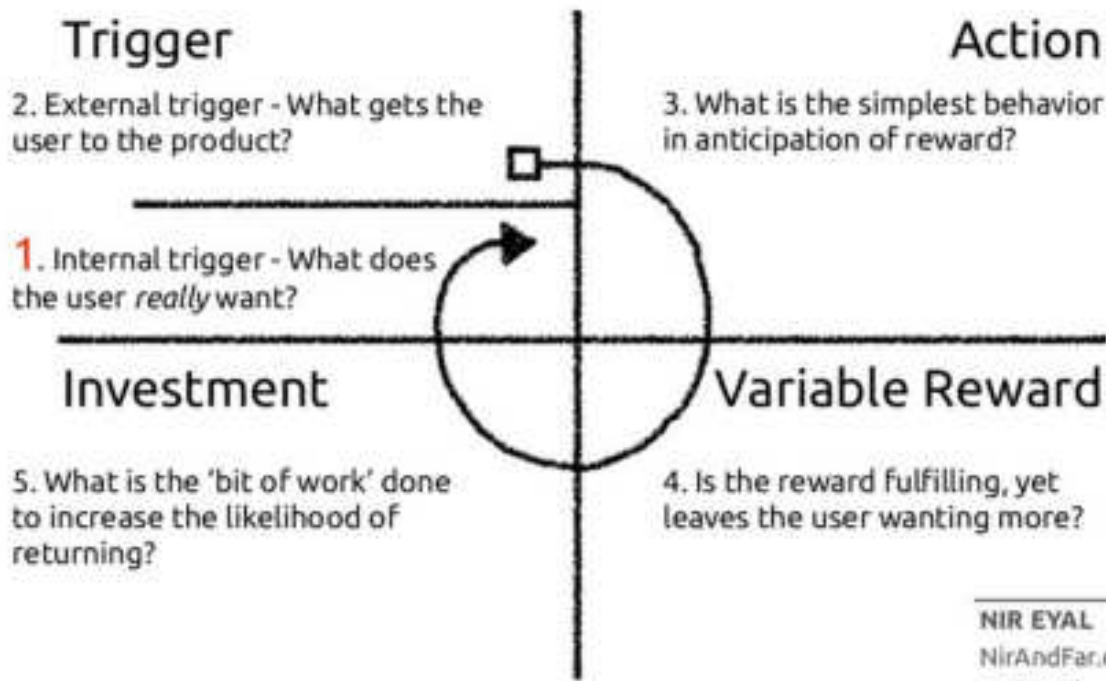
Please send us your valuable feedback: canvas@gameonlab.com

Gameification Model Canvas is based on the Business Model Canvas <http://www.businessmodelgeneration.com> and is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported License.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.



The hook canvas

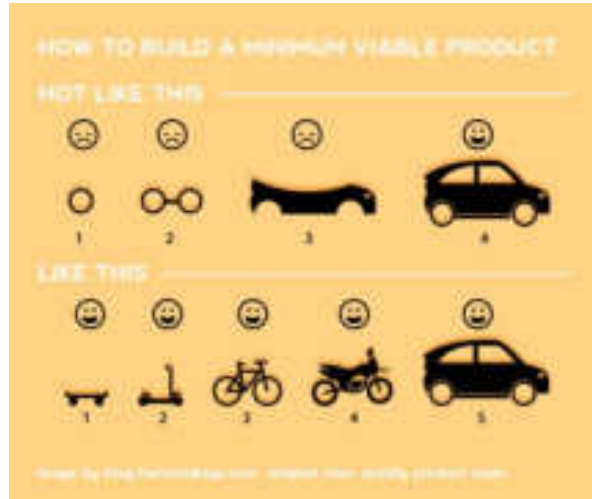


NIR EYAL
NirAndFar.com
@nireyal

Minimum Viable Product (MVP)

- The smallest thing you can build that **delivers customer value**.
- MVP helps start the process of learning as quickly as possible - achieving **maximum amount of learning** with the minimum amount of effort.
- When building your MVP, **remove any feature**, process or effort **that does not contribute directly to the learning** you seek.
- Its goal is to **test fundamental business hypotheses**.
- **Seek constant feedback**: Continuously bring in people to react to mockups, prototypes and simulations.
- **Before new products** can be sold successfully to the mass market, they have to be sold to **early adopters**.

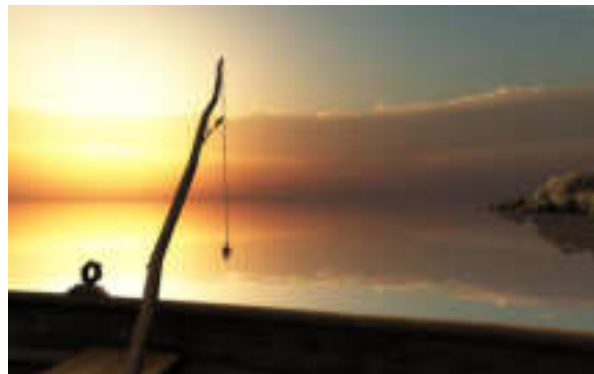
Minimum Viable Product (MVP)



Validating of a game

Bare minimum game experience

- Existing code
- Basic art and sound
- Only the necessary features
- Prototype, vertical slice



the Lean Startup..

Minimum Viable Product (MVP)

Minimum Viable Game (MVG)

..is about reaching the market at lowest possible cost!



RESOURCE SLIDES

Notes on this presentation template

- For our presentations we use Century Gothic, not Poppins, to have a high likelihood of the computer you are presenting on has the font included
- Use flat colors, not gradients if not absolutely necessary
- Add the title of the presentation to “Header and Footer” and apply to all or leave it blank (the text at the top next to the yellow angled area)

Accelerating the most promising startups



Our PowerPoint Template

Vision, goal and owner

- Vision: to be the best accelerator and incubator in the world by attracting the best innovators and entrepreneurs, and by contributing clear value to successfully build and develop the high-growth companies of the future.
- Goal: Turn out 20-25 new international growth companies per year.
- Owned by the Electrum Foundation
- Backed by the City of Stockholm, Royal Institute of Technology, Vinnova and Ericsson, among others
- Private backing via corporate partners and service providers
- Locations:
 - Main location: A house, Östermalmsgatan, Stockholm
 - Location partners: THINGS (KTH), SUP46, H2 Health Hub, Embassy House, Norrskan House

A strong team with operational background as entrepreneurs and VCs



Selection criteria

Requirements

- Business idea based on an innovation
- Verified customer needs/issues
- Large and growing international market
- Scalability
- Star-quality team

Selection process

- Evaluates 400-600 projects/year
- Below 10 percent are accepted
- Extensive evaluation process
- Strictly confidential



Sting's business development support

- Individual coaching by experienced entrepreneurs and venture capitalists
 - Focus on pace and reaching milestones
 - "Pull" rather than "push" – Sting coach never in the driver's seat
 - Important areas: sales, marketing, financing, recruitment
- Weekly coach meetings
- Lean canvas methodology
- Pool of expert coaches for e.g. SEO, tech roadmapping, Facebook marketing etc.

Sting's funding support

- Prepare a financing plan
- Manage the whole financing process
- Apply for “soft money”
- Pitch training
- Prepare for meetings with investors
- Gain access to Sting's in- house as well as external network of investors



Sting's funding sources

Sting Business Angels

- 35 carefully selected business angels, all with entrepreneurial background
- Contribute both capital and extensive experience
- Usually investing together (2-6 persons), and 30,000–100,000 EUR each

Propel Capital

- Provides companies admitted to STING Accelerate an investment of 30,000 EUR
- 50+ reputable business angels have invested in Propel Capital I, II, III and IV

Sting's in-house talent management support

Support to build a winning team

- Understanding the profile you need
- Defining requirements
- Reaching the right talent networks and channels
- Accessing recruitment tools
- Screening, selection and hiring
- Team development
- Conflict handling



Sweden's most active recruitment service focussed on startups

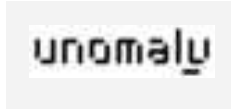
128
recruitments
(2017)

346
recruitments
(acc.)

+2000
candidates
in
database

A selection of Sting companies

ICT



Internet/Media/Game



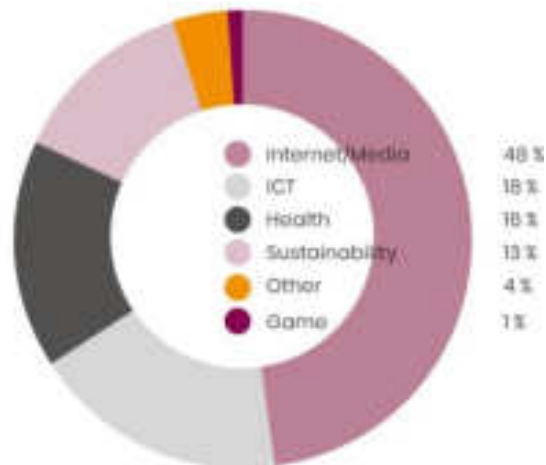
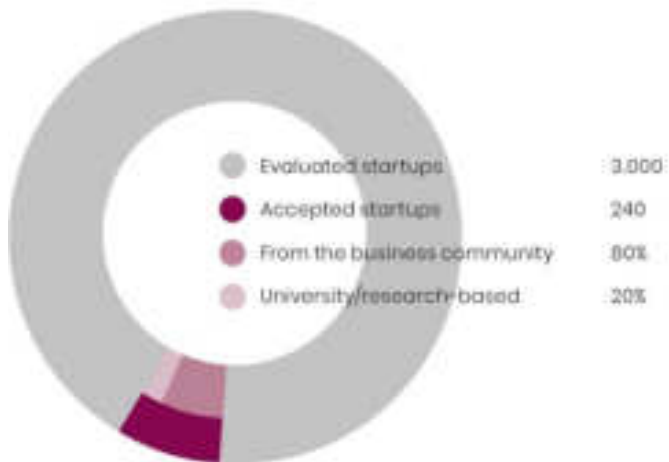
Sustainability



Health



Deal flow



Sting's partner network

Main partners



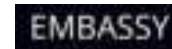
Resource Partners



Industry, research & Perks partners

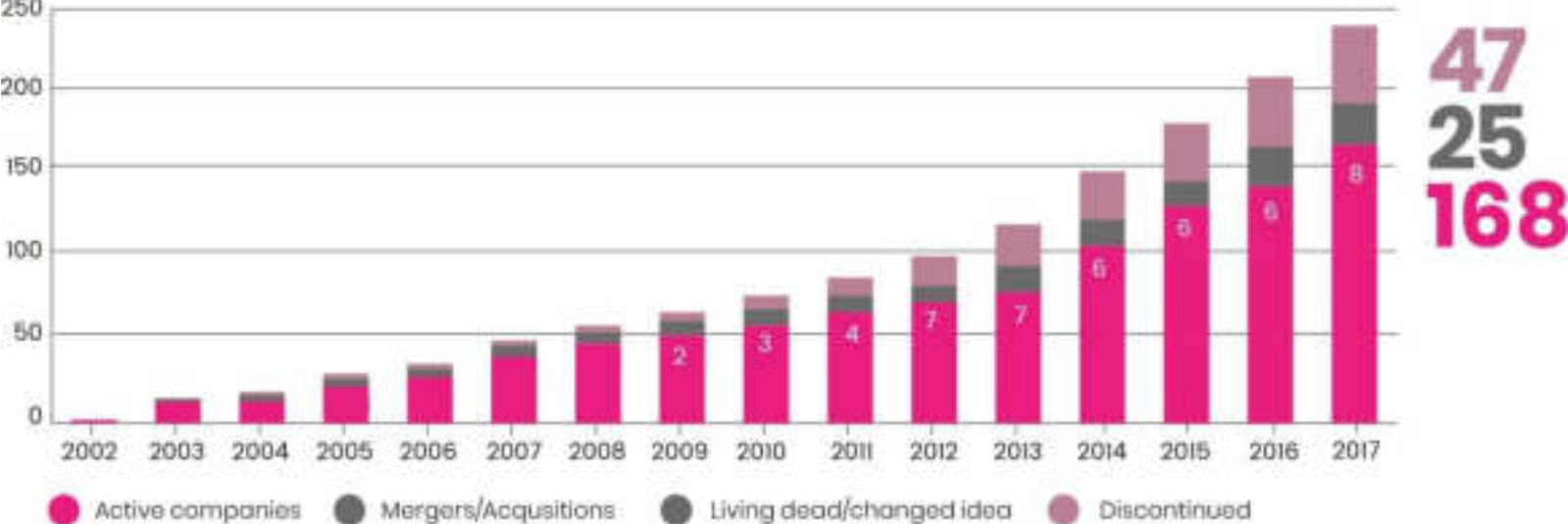


Entrepreneurial partners

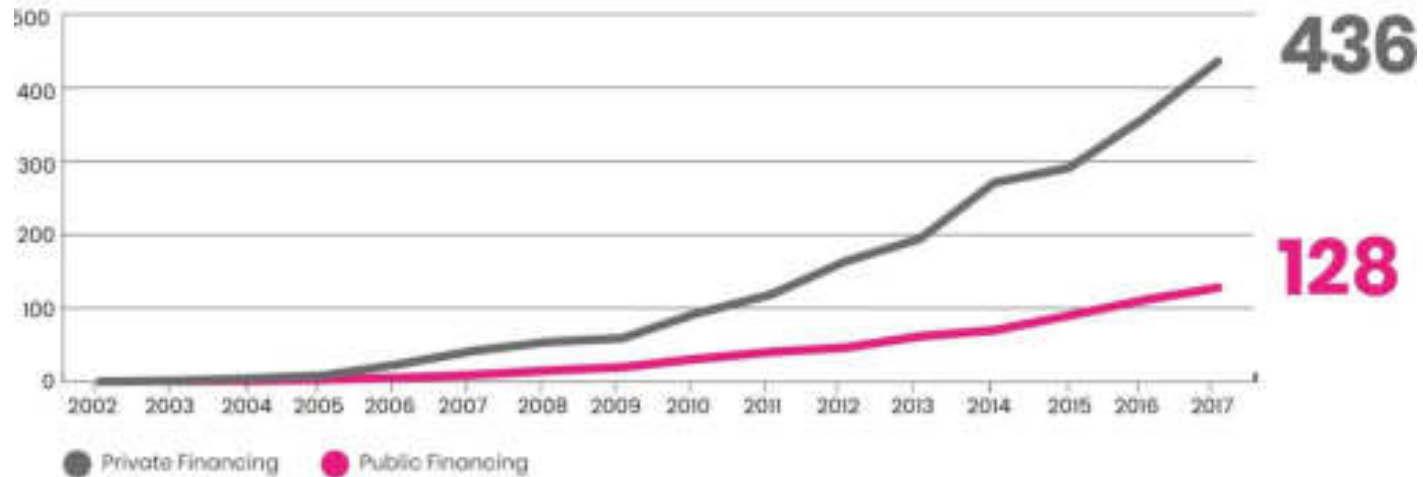


Sting

Overall development



Acc. public & private financing (MEUR)



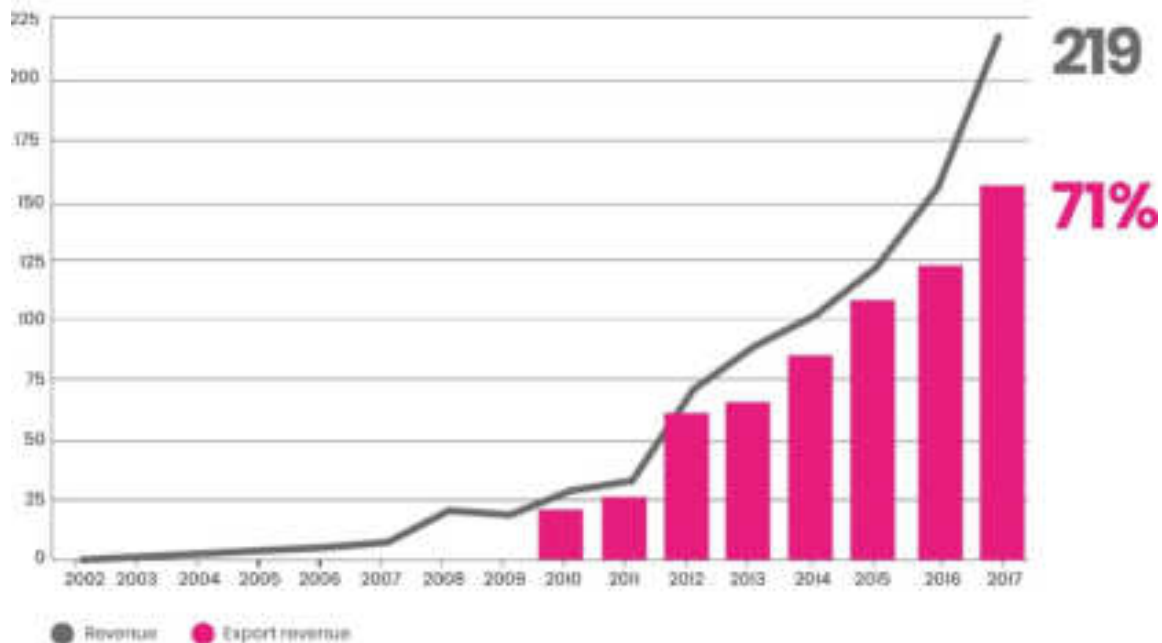
Capital raised

78
MEUR
(2017)

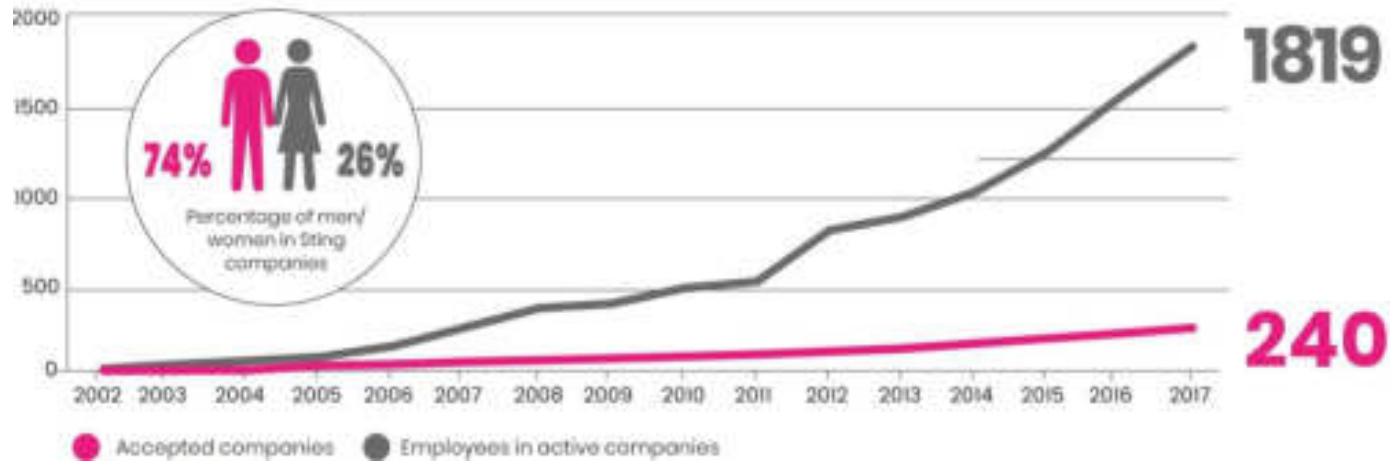
436
MEUR
Acc.
private

128
MEUR
Acc. public

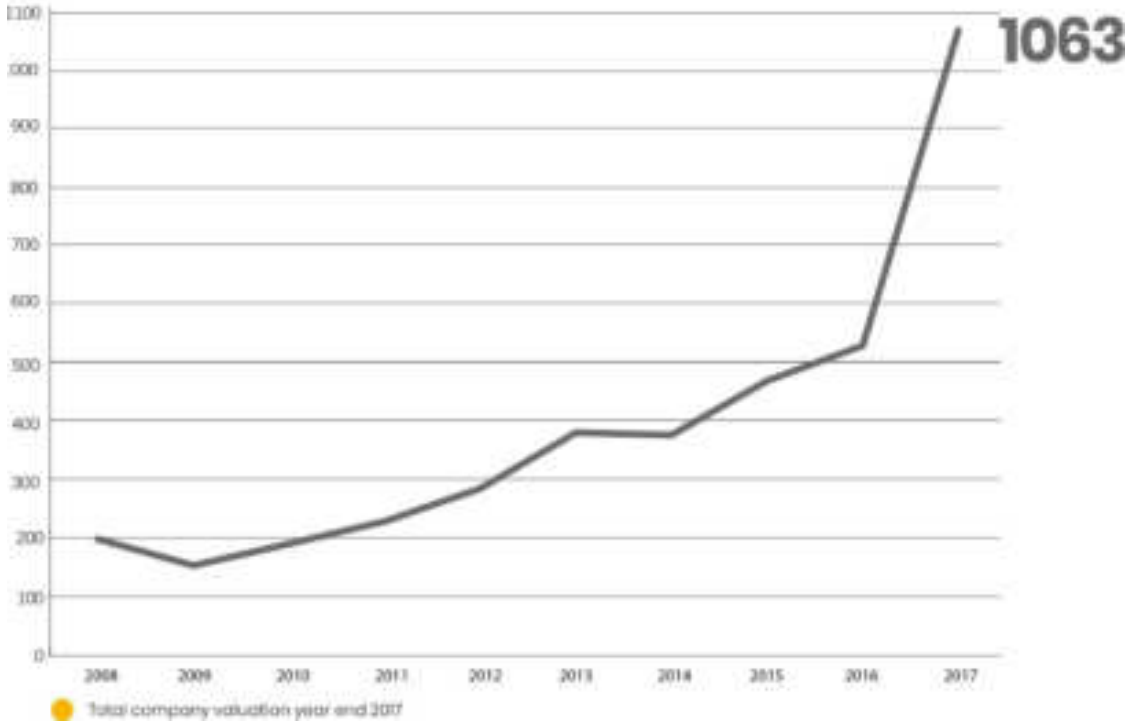
40 % sales increase 2017 (MEUR)



20 % increase in number of employees 2017



Doubled company valuation 2017 (MEUR)



THE PROJECT

The project 'Baltic Game Industry' (BGI) aims to foster the game industry in the Baltic Sea region - turning an ambitious game developer scene into a competitive and attractive business sector with sound innovation potential and thus making the region a game hotspot with worldwide competitiveness.

The partnership works together on framework condition improvements, on making business support services fit for the special needs of game startups and finally on new business opportunities for game developers in other industry sectors, such as health care. The core element is the installation of durable game incubators, programmes and schemes for game startups across the region.

BGI effectively combines policy and business development. Tailor-made game business support fosters a durable economic growth of this innovative industry in the whole region. The introduction of VR technologies in non-game industries contributes to boosting innovation beyond games. The common branding of the Baltic Sea region as game innovation hotspot will attract international clients, investors, creative entrepreneurs and qualified workforce.

Read more at www.baltic-games.eu

PROJECT LEAD

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Chairman of the Supervisory Board: Jürgen Wittke

Shareholders: State of Berlin, Berlin Chamber of Skilled Crafts

Register court & number: Amtsgericht Berlin, AG Charlottenburg, HRB 21 292

PROJECT PARTNERS

- Denmark: Dania University of Applied Sciences, Norddjurs Municipality, University of Southern Denmark
- Estonia: Tartu Science Park Foundation, Tartu City Government
- Finland: Neogames Finland, Metropolia University of Applied Sciences, City of Helsinki
- Germany: Hamburg Institute of International Economics, HTW Berlin University of Applied Sciences, State of Berlin, University Medical Center Hamburg-Eppendorf
- Latvia: Foundation "Ventspils High Technology Park", AHK Service SIA, Ventspils City Municipal
- Lithuania: Kaunas Science and Technology Park, Lithuanian Innovation Centre
- Poland: Krakow Technology Park LLC, Institute of Psychiatry and Neurology
- Sweden: Swedish Games Industry Association, Invest Stockholm

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