

2011-2012 Survey of 150 RPG Related Crowdfunding Projects

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Part 3: Miscellanea

This survey looks at 150 crowdfunding projects from websites such as Kickstarter and Indiegogo that focus on role playing game related material. The bulk of the projects were found through a [forum thread on RPG.net](#), though a few came from other sources on the internet. They cover a time period from April 2011 to April 2012.

Beginning with Caveats

Part [one](#) and part [two](#) of this report were presenting the findings derived from the data of the survey and providing some analysis. These two parts were primarily bound by the numerical data gathered.

Part three focuses on subjective impressions that this author has observed over the course of the survey. In the set of crowdfunding projects there were many other factors that could have been collected, however time and endurance have their limits. Each pass through the survey set took approximately eight hours and this author did four sweeps to collect data as this survey evolved.

However, through those sweeps a separate set of notes was being generated of random elements or patterns that were being observed and so part three will primarily be focusing on these observations. They are far more subjective and the only authority this author can claim in these observations are simply having methodically looked at all 150 crowdfunding projects four times over.

General Observations

Jump from \$1 to \$10: There were many projects, both successful and unsuccessful, which offered reward levels between \$2 and \$9. It's the opinion of this author that in most circumstances there is no need to make rewards at these levels for RPGs. This only amounted to 5% of total backings in the survey, and only generated 0.5% of the total money raised. Backings explode at \$10 and continue to be healthy through the early \$100s, which each step up easily surpassing all the money that is raised collectively at this sub-\$10 level.

Why not just start at \$10? Typically \$10 provided the backer some material (or at least PDF) copy of the end product. Having a \$1 reward level that just gives thanks and patronage credit will allow relatives, friends or the odd stranger who do not desire the RPG material to help out.

Credit on the website rather than in the book: This crossed both successful and unsuccessful projects and usually was just at the \$1 level so it is easy to overlook or ignored. However the entire option for just a "website thanks" was not given much attention to backers. It's the opinion of this author to skip website thanks and go directly to in-the-book thanks. Website thanks is simply not a compelling reward bracket on its own.

Pre-Order vs. Patronage

There is a discussion on various gaming forums on the nature of crowdfunding and how it should be viewed by the backers. One side promotes the pre-order idea, where a product is essentially finished by the time the crowdfunding campaign begins, and funds are raised to get the product mass produced and distributed. The other side sees crowdfunding as a form of patronage, such as in the fine arts where people fund a project so that it can be developed and then published.

No data was recorded to look at this issue, but there did not seem to be any one view of this debate dominating in the survey. If a project did have an extensive amount of material prepared at the launch of the campaign then this did seem to translate into a much greater chance of reaching the funding goal and moving beyond, however there seemed to be an abundance of projects that did not detail the current state of the projects development and yet succeeded.

There seems to be room for both philosophies within the RPG marketplace. Leveraging sweat equity in a project does help towards success, but so far does not seem to be a necessary condition.

Rewards of Capturing the Pulse of the Marketplace

One successful approach was to offer products that tapped into the demand for emulation of various popular brands or trends in the wider market. Sometimes the influence of the popular brand was very apparent, but other times was a more diffused mash up of several different trends. The gaming market wants to see products come out that help support roleplaying in specific popular genres and for those who can identify the zeitgeist of the gaming community can tap into that enthusiasm and be rewarded.

Unsuccessful Projects Observations

When this author looked exclusively at unsuccessful project's reward offerings there were several challenges that were observed:

Lack of low price funding options: A few projects started their PDF pricing at levels that were much higher than the \$5 to \$20 range, or did not offer anything reward level below a “mid level” amount of perhaps \$30. This presents a huge challenge in funding from the RPG market. While many backers are willing to pay retail prices or higher to back a project, many more would be willing to contribute at a low level. Cutting out these less expensive levels cuts out a large part of the audience and subsequently the network of relations these people have in their communities.

Not offering print versions of the product: As a counterpoint to above, some projects only offered a PDF version of their product and likely suffered as a result. The RPG market, as the rest of the publishing world, is in transition at the moment to a much more highly digital ecosystem. In Part Two of this report though it was clear that backers are more than willing to pay for printed material. Because the margin on printed material can be higher than PDF if done correctly, it is important to offer this as an option to reach funding goals.

Overvaluation of soft rewards: What is meant by soft rewards are things such as patronage credit, giving thanks, signing copies, email thank yous, design note access and naming rights. They are “soft” because they do not really cost the creator anything to provide to the backers. Many unsuccessful projects were built their reward scale around these soft rewards. An example might be getting a printed

book at one funding level, but then offering up a higher funding level with the only difference being an author's signature.

These elements do have value, but the general impression between the successful and unsuccessful projects is that these soft rewards were woven into the makeup of the rewards with successful projects, whereas for some unsuccessful projects these were the only distinguishing factors between funding levels.

Naming Rights, where a player's name is incorporated into the RPG material, or allows the backer to name a character, was fairly common for both successful and unsuccessful projects. However once again the unsuccessful projects seemed to put too much importance on this perk.

There were a couple of unsuccessful projects that charged up to \$20 and backer would only receive thanks from the creator and credit. It was an unfortunate and unreasonable expectation on the backer's part and was not supported well.

A few unsuccessful projects did not even providing patronage credit at the opening tier, but instead just getting a thank you by email. These were not supported well. It could be presumed that if a backer is providing funding for a project then they would expect to be credited on the website, if not in the book itself.

The variety of overvaluations was a problem. The soft rewards might in theory be worth something a decade or more from now, but they are not compelling elements on their own. When these soft rewards were just assumed as part of participation in the crowdfunding then they helped to support the campaign as a whole.

Only Providing a Discount from the Final Product: In one or two instances, backers were only being given a discount on the future product. This was not a popular option.

Overcommitment to Future Products: One theme that occurred over the survey were projects that promise future products from the creator. This occurred in both in the successful and unsuccessful pools. The major difference is that in the successful pool this would often involve stretch goals or providing existing products in the company's catalog. With the unsuccessful pool this was more often a promise to future products that would be created above and beyond what the project is campaigning for and which did not currently exist. Further, with unsuccessful projects this future promise was built in as a high reward tier.

Not compounding rewards: A small number of unsuccessful projects made the mistake of not compounding rewards, instead listing rewards in complete isolation from one another. As an example, a backer might get a soft cover, but not a PDF. This might not have been the intention of the creator, but this approach makes for at best a confusing backing experience, and likely turned people away.

General communication and editing of the crowdfunding page: A few unsuccessful projects did not have adequate proofreading, editing or just lacked much detail about the project. Without these very basic thresholds of clear communication, they did not generate confidence in the market to draw investors to the project.

Backer being brought onto the team as a developer: This option was being offered both for

successful and unsuccessful projects, but in general the trend for successful projects was to offer very specific backer input within one aspect of the project. This got a fair bit of support, likely because backers could focus on one narrow creative idea. For unsuccessful projects there was a trend towards a very open ended role, essentially asking the backer to pay to become a partner in the game company. This was not supported well and it came off, to this author at least, as a very unfocused and unsound business plan for the project and future products. For the successful projects though the narrow focus brought in additional funding without causing a large drop in quality if the backer's input was not very compelling or was misaligned with the vision of the creators.

Swag Rewards

Swag is meant here to be extra rewards beyond the focus on the project. These rewards were not numerically tracked, but just noted by this author as the survey was conducted. The viability of including certain swag would need more data, as the specific funding level these elements appeared at was wide ranging, so this listing is really meant to just give ideas on what could be used in future crowdfunding projects. While many are unique to specific projects, it was clear that t-shirts were a rather common item to include with projects, both in the successful and unsuccessful pools.

Game Accessories

Character Counters
 Custom dice
 Custom tokens, coin and bag
 Dice bag
 Dice bag, chain mail
 Dice bag, leather
 Fantasy Grounds II rulesets and license
 GM Screen
 Herolab dataset
 Laser cut playing pieces
 Map of setting
 Props
 Vinyl GM Mat

Involvement in the Project

Annotated version by users – collected and then published
 Art process and commentary
 Beta reader
 Character is used as an example in the rules
 Create a class
 Creative description of backer in credits
 Design pre-gen character
 Named NPC
 Playtest
 Vote on game features or title subtitle

Extra Game Content

Bonus traits only available to kickstarter backers
 Custom flash drive with extras
 Gain additional existing RPG products in company's line
 Thank you card with little extra game content
 Unique project development notebook

Pure Swag

Back-to-School kit, including a backpack, lunchbox, gold stars, notebooks, binders, pencils
 Coffee Mug
 Custom flash drive
 Deck of cards with art from game
 Engraved aluminum plaque
 Hoodie
 Leather Armband
 Lunch Box
 Patch
 Postcard
 Shot Glass
 T-shirt

Artistic Extras

Audio fiction
 Earrings
 Jewelry
 Mix CD
 Origami dinosaur
 PDF of art
 Postcard art
 Poster
 Prints of artwork
 Short stories
 Sound track
 Unique hand-made zine
 Wire sculpture

Deluxe Items

Boxed Set of game
Hand bound copy
Leather book jacket
Leatherbound book

Commercial Content

Ad space in book
Multiple copies of book
Retailer package of trade dress
Retailer Poster

Can Amateurs Succeed with Crowdfunding?

As the first two parts of this report were posted, several conversations were generated at various forums on the web. One theme that emerged a few times was the concern over established professionals dominating RPG crowdfunding. Let us look at a breakdown of four groups: Successful projects with established industry credentials, successful projects without industry credentials, unsuccessful projects with industry credentials, and unsuccessful projects without industry credentials.

	Successful Industry	Successful Non-Industry	Unsuccessful Industry	Unsuccessful Non-Industry
Total of 150	64 (42.6%)	30 (20%)	14 (9%)	42 (28%)
Total Backers	11,560 (69%)	4,211 (25%)	580 (3%)	421 (3%)
Total Goal	\$252,825 (39%)	\$74,650 (12%)	\$86,000 (13%)	\$233,237 (36%)
Total Raised	\$598,451 (72%)	\$177,172 (21%)	\$38,008 (5%)	\$21,289 (3%)
Average Backers	180.63	140.37	41.43	9.8
Average Goal	\$3,950.39	\$2,488.33	\$6,142.86	\$5,553.26
Average Raised	\$9,350.80	\$5,905.73	\$2,714.86	\$506.88
Average Percent Raised	+210.42%	+272.96%	-65.03%	-84.16%
Average \$ per Backer	\$46.75	\$43.28	\$43.27	\$48.23
Median Backers	128	93	18.5	5
Median Goal	\$3,000	\$1,350	\$3,300	\$3,250
Median Raised	\$5,443	\$3,925.5	\$777.5	\$227.5
Median Percent Raised	+99.87%	+123.6%	-63.89%	-90.64%
Median \$ per Backer	\$43.26	\$34.83	\$38.93	\$37.06

It is indicated that having industry credentials does dominate the RPG crowdfunding market, as they raised 72% of the money in the last year. This author, who is considered an amateur within the industry, is not concerned with this figure though. Here are several reasons why:

The definition of “industry credentials” in this survey is very liberal in its application. It focuses on having any previous publishing experience within the industry. This could be a lone freelancing credit, or even just having the author claim to sell other small PDF RPG products at RPGNow. While not tracked, it is the impression from this author that those creators which truly make a significant portion of their income from publishing RPGs is only 10-20% of the survey. For most the general impression is what has been repeated for decades, that creating RPGs is more of a labor of love, rather than a profitable business to pursue.

Second, when an amateur succeeds, they generally succeed very well. Successful amateurs show a greater percent raised over their original goal than those with industry credentials. Successful amateurs have a median goal that is more than two times smaller than any of the other categories. By having a modest goal the project is much more likely to succeed, and if the goal is reached early in the funding campaign then this tends to attract further backing. Backers are more inclined to back a project that is already guaranteed to succeed, and this in turn encourages further marketing of the project through word of mouth and even the creator simply having a positive message to broadcast through social networks and forum postings.

This author performed the survey to learn how best to go about conducting a crowdfunding project and is very encouraged by the insights derived from the data. Amateurs can succeed. Hard work and homework are required, but it can be done.

1. Develop a compelling product
2. Develop a compelling presentation for that product
3. Aim for a modest goal
4. Avoid the mistakes detailed in these three reports
5. Aggressively market the campaign before launch
6. Aggressively market the campaign through its entire length
7. Follow up afterward with your backers

Success attracts further success. Once you have a track record at being able to deliver a quality product then the next crowdfunding campaign can capitalize on an existing audience and your growing credentials. An amateur may have to begin aiming for only \$1000 as the funding goal, but within a few more projects could command \$3000 or more with anticipated success.

Another Set of Eyes

Early in the data analysis Brian Leet was able to look at the data in other ways and found these observations:

- Popularity counts. Only four projects acquired 35 or more backers and still failed. In other words, 95% of projects that got at least 35 people to give them money went on to succeed.
- Patronage counts. Over 25% of money raised on successful projects was from offerings over the \$100 mark. Presumably folks who want to see the project succeed and get some personalized bonus.
- PDFs don't make it go (alone). Only about 7.5% of total money raised on successful projects were for offerings up to \$24. However, 30% of total backers were within this range. See popularity counts.
- A rather silly one, that maybe should remind use correlation does not equal causation, but dividing number of backers by number of updates shows that you shouldn't send an update until you've had at least eight new backers since the last one. Anything more probably looks desperate.
- Even more silly: One update fails. Not a single project that issued exactly one update succeeded.

Top 20 Lists

This report is intended to aid others in making sound decisions on how to run a crowdfunding campaign. One of the best things to do as you plan a campaign is to just look at specific successful projects and take notes. Here are four Top 20 lists derived from the survey, covering the successful projects with the highest number of backers, money raised, dollars per backer, and the percent difference between a project funding goal and what eventually was raised.

#	Project	Backers
1	V20 Companion Deluxe Edition	1134
2	Far West	717
3	Technoir	622
4	Quantum Roleplaying Game	580
5	Bhaloidam	578
6	Storyforge Cards	561
7	Do: Pilgrims of the Flying Temple	552
8	Dungeonmorph Dice	379
9	Tephra: the Steampunk RPG	374
10	Illustrating Legend	360
11	Monsterhearts	346
12	Bulldogs	295
13	Journey's to the West	286
14	They Became Flesh	276
15	Always/Never/Now	266
16	Streets of Bedlam	262
17	Void Vultures	258
18	Adventurer Conquerer King	246
19	Stealing Cthulhu	243
20	Mystic Empyream	233

#	Project	Raised
1	V20 Companion Deluxe Edition	\$96,326
2	Far West	\$49,324
3	Quantum Roleplaying Game	\$42,747
4	Bhaloidam	\$31,346
5	Do: Pilgrims of the Flying Temple	\$24,383
6	Technoir	\$24,255
7	Tephra: the Steampunk RPG	\$22,821
8	Storyforge Cards	\$21,736
9	Dungeonmorph Dice	\$20,620
10	Book of the Empress	\$15,660
11	Journey's to the West	\$15,425
12	Chronicles of the Void	\$15,100
13	Bulldogs	\$14,430
14	Astonishing Swordsmen & Sorcerers of Hyperborea	\$13,216
15	Stealing Cthulhu	\$13,001
16	Shadowlands	\$11,772
17	Monsterhearts	\$11,715
18	Adventurer Conquerer King	\$11,648
19	Illustrating Legend	\$11,197
20	Wreak Age	\$10,674

#	Project	\$ per Back
1	Caladon Falls	\$124.05
2	Lux Aeternum	\$111.11
3	Wreak Age	\$107.82
4	Shadowlands	\$98.1
5	The Wilderness of A---	\$91.36
6	V20 Companion Deluxe Edition	\$84.94
7	Reclamation: Post Apocalyptic Horror	\$79.08
8	Quantum Roleplaying Game	\$73.7
9	Book of the Empress	\$72.17
10	Astonishing Swordsmen & Sorcerers of Hyperborea	\$71.83
11	Legends & Labyrinths	\$70.21
12	Rogue Mage Roleplaying	\$69.91
13	Far West	\$68.79
14	Chronicles of the Void	\$68.33
15	Amaranthine	\$68.27
16	The Dance and the Dawn	\$67.05
17	Ellis: Kingdom in Turmoil	\$66.31
18	Sailing the Starlit Sea	\$65.18
19	Sordid Dystopia - A Victorian Post-Apocalyptic RPG	\$61.86
20	Tephra: the Steampunk RPG	\$61.02

#	Project	Percent
1	Tephra: the Steampunk RPG	2182.10%
2	Stealing Cthulhu	1200.10%
3	The Play's the Thing	1038.40%
4	RISUS Free Adventure Project 2012	1007.00%
5	Animal Crime	983.33%
6	Far West	886.48%
7	Technoir	870.20%
8	Don't Walk in Winter Wood	712.00%
9	Flatpack: Fix the Future! Optimistic Apocalyptic RPG	685.40%
10	Ellis: Kingdom in Turmoil	546.50%
11	Monster of the Week	522.00%
12	Do: Pilgrims of the Flying Temple	509.58%
13	Always/Never/Now	457.53%
14	Lost Reich	445.60%
15	Void Vultures	443.60%
16	They Became Flesh	395.60%
17	Bulldogs	381.00%
18	Children of Fire	372.64%
19	Monsterhearts	368.60%
20	Be Ashamed Young Prince	356.00%

Final Thoughts

It is hoped that these three reports, along with the raw data, will be helpful to anyone considering using crowdfunding to fund and market their RPG projects. Our society is undergoing many systemic changes right now and crowdfunding is among the more radical changes. Rather than the traditional established institutions as the gatekeepers to the marketplace, we are now entering a period where the marketplace itself is the gatekeeper. Some might bemoan a glut of inferior material on the horizon, however the world is different from even a decade ago. The marketplace over time will ensure that weak ideas do not get published, meanwhile rewarding creativity and provocative ideas. Enjoy!

- Neil Carr