

Vancouver Film School  
**PROGRAMMING FOR GAMES, WEB & MOBILE**

**THE NEXT GENERATION OF DEVELOPERS START HERE.**

[LEARN MORE](#)

sign up for the next

## techfest

Startups Mobile Social Gaming Research Funding & Exits | Android Apple BlackBerry Facebook Google Twitter | Techvibes 20

## Failing to Look Before They Leap: Just How Do All These Indie Game Devs Plan to Retire?

Posted by **Ryan Henson Creighton** on Jan 29, 2014

Since the walls of the gatekeepers came crashing down, and digital distribution democratized game development, more and more youngsters have been led from their secure full-time jobs—stable positions at banks, at ad agencies, at Sears—to follow the siren song of creative fulfillment and the promise of unprecedented riches.



Indeed, the earliest pioneers of digital distribution like Jonathan Blow, creator of Braid, made off with astounding windfalls, painting the picture for the rest of us of an industry where a single game could earn millions, and turn a lone wolf developer into an overnight millionaire. (Indeed, that "night" was actually a three year slog filled with self-doubt and tremendous financial risk, but nobody likes to focus on that.)

The indie scene as i see it today is still very young, very impressionable, and very insecure, both financially and emotionally.

With my mortgage and wife and two kids, i'm somewhat of an anomaly in the scene. At the best of times, i feel like a ramshackle husband, barely keeping it together with the life insurance payments, the relentless mortgage schedule, and the pressure to produce perfect children bearing down on me daily. When i had a full-time job with a publicly traded company, money was constantly trickling into a retirement plan. The day i left was the day the already inadequate trickling stopped, and the nagging sensation of an ever-widening sinkhole of a future crept over me. Was i alone in this? Was i the only indie game dev who was worried about this stuff?

i asked a handful of indie game developers spread throughout Canada to answer some lifestyle questions. It was far from a scientific study, and i had a laughably small sample size, but their answers were telling, regardless.

Vancouver-based indie game dev Chevy Ray Johnston, 24, is unmarried and childless, and doesn't plan on having kids for many years, "if at all." When asked how long he expected to be an indie game dev, his answer ploughed past cynical game industry profiteering. "To me that's like asking a painter 'how long do you plan on being a painter?'" he said, "They just are, and always will be."

Johnson adds that he's not currently a full-time indie, and that his prospects hinge on whether his other creative work bears financial fruit. As for retirement, it isn't even on his radar. "I already spend so little of my time doing actual paid work that retirement seems a bit odd."

In downtown Toronto, indie dev Damian Sommer is poised for the kind of success most indies only dream of. His game, The Yawhg, garnered two nominations and two honourable mentions in this year's **Independent Games Festival**, the Oscars of indie (one nod goes to Ryan Roth, a rare indie game music success story in his own right). Sommer skipped after the indie Pied Piper a few years ago, leaving behind a job at a bank. A year younger than Johnson, Sommer similarly is unmarried and has no children, and doesn't think kids would be a good fit for his lifestyle.

"I'd prefer not to have kids," he affirmed. He currently rents, but hopes to own, and plans to continue his full-time indie career for as long as he can support himself. Despite his bright future, when asked about retirement, he wilts. "Oh god, why did you have to ask me this? Now I'm terrified."

37-year-old Miguel Stenberg from Toronto keenly feels the pressure to succeed. His business partner, and the other half of Spooky Squid Software, is married with one child. Seeing how the other half lives, Stenberg sees a real advantage in remaining childless.

64  
[Tweet](#)

72  
[Like](#)

g+  
[Share](#)

### Ryan Henson Creighton

Ryan is an editorial intern with Techvibes. Ryan is a lover of toys, games and gadgets. He's a father of two, and the founder of Untold Entertainment, a boutique game development studio and consulting firm in Toronto. He co-created the viral hit video game Sissy's Magical Ponycorn Adventure with his then-five-year-old daughter Cassandra. He is also the vice president of the International Game... [» more](#)



## X3

CANADA'S LARGEST CONFERENCE AND TRADESHOW DEDICATED TO DIGITAL

# 4000 ATTENDEES 40+ SESSIONS 2 DAYS

[REGISTER NOW](#)

### Who's Hiring

- HootSuite Media, Inc.**  
Vancouver, Canada

83 jobs
- Shopify**  
Ottawa, Canada

32 jobs
- Clio - Legal Practice Management Software**  
Vancouver, Canada

19 jobs
- FreshBooks**  
Toronto, Canada

15 jobs
- TEEMA Solutions Group**  
Vancouver, Canada

12 jobs

"Choosing not to have kids gives me both more time, money and flexibility to work on games and travel ... things that are really important to me," he says. Sternberg plans to keep at it "until I'm too senile to keep making games—assuming I'm not hit by a bus first."

"In terms of financial stuff," continued Sternberg, "you sort of just hope that over the span of your career one or two of your games will be a reasonably successful hit, so you can put some extra money away. It's perhaps a foolishly risky way to plan for your future, but you don't decide to do this sort of work if you're risk averse."

From the house that he owns in Brampton Ontario with his wife of seven years and two children, Matt Rix enjoys the benefits of having launched a "reasonably successful hit." His mobile puzzler Trainyard now supplies most of his family's income, and he just announced a publishing deal for his upcoming game Disco Zoo, with runaway indie success Nimblebit (Tiny Tower, Pocket Planes). Disco Zoo is a product of Rix's new outfit Milkbag Games with his Guelph-based partner Owen Goss, who is also a father.

Echoing Chevy Ray Johnson's sentiments, Rix confirms that game development is in his soul. He plans on staying indie "forever, because even if the money runs out, I'll still do it in my spare time while working a day job." Even with a successful title like Trainyard behind him, Rix can't fully relax. "I haven't made enough money to feel safe for the long term, so I'm still concerned with making financially successful games." Trainyard has taught Rix (and perhaps more importantly, his family), that "making games can be a legitimate source of income."

When asked for any advice he can offer younger or less established indies, Matt offered this pearl: "Save as much money as you can while you have fewer expenses and responsibilities."

Sniping at his creative dreams from the safety of a full-time position at an ad agency, Edmonton-based Aaron Clifford knows all about expenses and responsibilities. Clifford is 40, married, and the father of three children, whom he calls his "energetic little zerglings" in true game nerd fashion.

"I used to be more serious about making money from game development," Clifford admitted, "but since my children were born I do it more as a way to express myself." His heart's secret desire looks a lot like my own. "I still hold in my heart idea that I might create my own studio some day—and that actually might be a fantastic job to retire to. I also secretly hope that all three of my children will develop a love of creating games and we can make it a family business, like the blacksmiths of yore."

It may be disheartening to hear that Canadian indie game devs are flying by the seats of their financial pants throughout the age spectrum, and that their current financial situation and "root depth" seem to have little bearing on their life plans. Fascinatingly, they're not alone: in 2011, **MacLean's magazine reported** that 32% of Canadians polled said that their retirement plans hinge on winning the lottery. For many indie game devs, that's the rough equivalent of launching a hit game like Matt Rix, or featuring prominently in the Independent Games Festival like Damian Sommer.

The sobering truth is that when it comes down to raw odds, Miguel Sternberg's suggestions of going senile or getting hit by a bus are far more likely.

## Similar Posts

**Montreal's Execution Labs Launches New Program to Help Indie Game Developers Acquire Users**  
**Vancouver-made strategy game seeks top prize at indie game expo**  
**Ottawa's Snowed in Studios Wants to Take Indie Game World by Storm with Windforge**  
**Canada's Largest Indie Game Developer is Hiring**  
**Vancouver's East Side Games Wins North American Indie Award**

## India's unique biometrics ID program

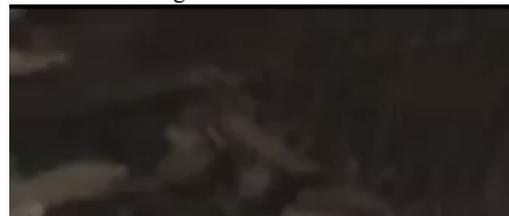
### SPONSORED CONTENT

• <http://bit.ly/1jCA5tu>  
 The world's largest biometric ID program is transforming the economic landscape.

Promoted By HSBC Bank Canada

• [Feedback](#)

Access More Insights



	<b>Payfirma Corporation</b> Vancouver, Canada	12 jobs
	<b>Move Canada</b> Richmond, Canada	10 jobs
	<b>Global Relay Communications Inc.</b> Vancouver, Canada	10 jobs
	<b>Mobify</b> Vancouver, Canada	10 jobs
	<b>A Thinking Ape</b> Vancouver, Canada	10 jobs



## Recent Comments

- Vivek Singh**  
 Now everyone wants such kind of website that is highly compatible on mobile device also.  
**25% of E-Commerce Now Coming from Mobile Devices, Report Shows** · 3 hours ago
- iphone 5s giveawa**  
 To enter this amazing giveaway, just state which iPhone you have or plan to buy—the 5S, the 5C, or a Wind-compatible 5 model—and comment below (using your real email address, which is kept private)...  
**GIVEAWAY: Got an iPhone? Switch to Wind Mobile and Get a Free SIM Card and Data Plan** · 10 hours ago
- teedot**  
 I love hurrier - fast and easy!  
**Breaking the Cycle: Hurrier Throws a Technological Wrench in the Bike Courier Business** · 11 hours ago
- Heri**  
 Good points. Add links Roger ! (would be more useful)  
**Startup Weekend Montreal Entrepreneurs Capitalize on Valentine's Day, Bad Weather** · 16 hours ago

Powered by Disqus

**Eat THIS, Never DIET Again!**

HealthyLifeStyle

**Stop This One "Weird" Trap & Never Diet Again?**

Smart Health Magazine

**25 Of The Hottest Scarlett Johansson GIFs Ever**

The PBH Network

ALSO ON TECHVIBES - TECHNOLOGY NEWS

**Technology Has Redefined the Accounting Firm** 2 comments

**Highly Unscientific Study Concludes iPhone Users Smartest, ...** 2 comments

**Toronto's Best Coworking Space Expands with an OWL** 3 comments

**Turns out We're Not Actually Cord-cutting: Why Canadians are ...** 1 comment

0 Comments

Techvibes - Technology News

 Login ▾

Sort by Best ▾

Share  Favorite 



Start the discussion...

Be the first to comment.

 Subscribe

 Add Disqus to your site

- About Techvibes
- Masthead
- Advertise
- Contact Us
- Help & FAQ
- Feeds
- Techvibes 20

- Tech Fest Events
- Add an Event
- Post a Job
- Add a Company
- Write for Us
- Sign Up
- Log In
- Privacy Policy

- Blog Sitemap
- Events Sitemap
- Jobs Sitemap
- Directory Sitemap

- Startups
- Mobile
- Social
- Gaming
- Research
- Funding & Exits

- Android
- Apple
- BlackBerry
- Facebook
- Google
- Twitter