

CHRIS'LL DEAL WITH IT

episode
notes



EP 4 - Workshop w/Lauren Bilanko: Taking Aim To Publish My Game

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About Today's Workshop Guest



Lauren Bilanko

Co-founder and owner of Twenty Sided Store, is a natural born storyteller. She didn't know Dungeons & Dragons was a game until she was in her 20s, but she has been roleplaying her whole life. She has lived in the same building on the same block in Williamsburg since 1999. When she isn't creating unique experiences, she is catching up with friends, reading sci-fi books, and making art.

- [Twenty Sided Store](#)
- [Studio Bilanko](#)

Today's Workshop Question:

I've built the fictional World of Mira over many projects stretching beyond the past decade. I've bootstrapped many experiences in this world, all of which required learning as I go. But I struggle with where to start with all my plans to expand the World. Being on the

retailer side of things I have a lot of experience with what a game needs to have in order to sell... but I do not have any experience with working with publishers, distributors, printers, or manufacturers.

First, some context:

Both individually & through her work founding the Twenty Sided Store, Lauren has:

- Built a large, diverse, and inclusive community of gamers & creatives
- Has over a decade of on-the-ground retailer experience with hobby board, card, and role-playing games
- Supported local game designers, artists & storytellers, helping them gain networks & confidence in the value of their work
- Diversified the Twenty Sided Store so that it could survive the COVID-19 pandemic while further expanding their capabilities
- Through her World of Mira she's run D&D campaigns, organized live experiences like mystery parties, LARPs & scavenger hunts.
- A photographer who's shot photos & film projects both professionally and within The World of Mira.
- Developed a **Reverie Deck**, a tarot system based on the unique astrology and seasons of the world of Mira.
- Seeking to develop larger scale interactive experiences (think Sleep No More) as well as TV, Novels, etc. set in the World of Mira.

Lauren's Concerns & Key Elements of our Discussion:

1. **Where do I get games & books printed?**
2. **Legalities of naming, copyrighting, licensing & commissioning art**
3. **Navigating the industry shifts of the past few years & impacts on overseas production**
4. **Honing in ideas & thinking strategically**

5. Financial concerns for producing creative work

1. Where do I get games & books printed?

- There are times where constraints may help drive some creativity, or require some changes to the product. Example: # of cards you can put into a deck cost-effectively. Costs associated with form factors that you think will sell (book size/binding for example)
- Understand economies of scale - consider two extremes:
 - QTY 1 (print on demand)
 - Pros: No overhead + storage costs
 - Cons: Very high cost per unit = low profit margin
 - *great for prototyping, getting copies for marketing videos, rulebook photos, etc...*
 - QTY of thousands (bulk printing)
 - Pros: Lowest possible cost = higher profit margins
 - This is possible because all of the one-time setup fees for a printer are amortized across all copies printed when the production line is run.
 - These fees can include: Art layout, printer programming/upload, cutting dies, adhesive machines, shrink-wrapping, folding machines, and much more.
 - Cons: Storage & distribution costs, inventory risk, cash flow
- **Chris' Rule: Always get a pre-production copy made up before committing to a larger run, ESPECIALLY when you're self-publishing.**
 - Even if you're planning on using a professional printer - reworking the graphic files for a print-on-demand copy can be a useful tool for your how-to-play & marketing videos. Or they can be used during the crowdsourcing campaign to help raise the funds for the larger print run.
 - You never want to playtest with production-quality things. Avoid the expense & time it takes to produce!

- Be wary of large orders from massive retailers (for example: Walmart, Target, Barnes & Noble) - if they place a big order they're going to sign up for as little risk as possible. If your product doesn't sell - there are usually clauses in their contracts that they can return all unsold inventory at your cost.
- Be mindful of opportunities to leverage your content & licensed art in multiple ways
 - Example: [Intergalactic Hockey Showdown](#)
- Understand the risks borne by those who are shipping, warehousing, distributing & retailing your work
 - If there's a fire or other natural disaster that affects your games - your distributor will likely carry insurance that protects your product. Your homeowner's policy would need to include your company AND its inventory as a co-insured to be likewise protected. Don't assume you'll be okay!
- You don't need to print it yourself: If you want your work to be all about the writing/art/games - then go the traditional publishing route.
 - It will take longer to get agents, pitch publishers, and network.
 - You're settling for royalties & a long production process - but you have minimal risks & workload.
- **ISBN = International Standard Book Number** - [Learn More](#)
 - Remember: An ISBN is attached to one published item, in perpetuity, for THAT revision & format.
 - ISBN #'s must be different for a printed book, eBook & audiobook versions of the same book!
- **UPC = Universal Product Code** - [Learn More](#)
- **QR Code = Quick Response Code** - [Learn More](#)

2. Legalities of naming, copyrighting, licensing & commissioning art

- The legal structure of the company you use to publish your work, and the ownership of the intellectual property (IP) itself are important

- The website home of the IP, or how it's produced can be separate from the legal entities that control it.
- Typical business structures for creative work include:
 - LLC: Limited Liability Company
 - S-Corp: [DEFINE]
 - C-Corp: [DEFINE]
 - Each have different requirements depending on state, number of partners, and scope of business
- Contracts aren't just there for when things go bad: They're also there for when things go right
- Artist contracts can vary wildly
 - Refer to **THE GRAPHIC ARTISTS GUILD HANDBOOK: PRICING & ETHICAL GUIDELINES**
- Using stock graphics, photos, video, music, sounds, fonts: Be careful with which license you're buying. Read the fine print - make sure you understand the rights specific to your use case
 - Rights will likely vary between printed/physical work & performance vs digital distribution/streaming!
 - Rights may not extend in perpetuity: Check for term/time limits on usage of the work
 - Not mentioned in the podcast: But don't spend money on prototype art! As long as you don't sell or distribute, use what you can find to make sure you have the right feel for your project. You may realize the art needs to change.
- Using Creative Commons licensed work - make sure to follow ALL of the licensing guidelines!
- If you're creating add-on content or worlds using another publisher's gaming system - validate their usage permissions & licenses. Without following those guidelines, retailers cannot sell the work legally, since they then would become party to copyright infringement.

3. Navigating the industry shifts of the past few years & impacts on overseas production

- We've never been in a more challenging environment: Can't get both raw materials & finished products reliable and/or cost effectively
- The dangers of freight:
 - Be careful of product dimensions: Larger products will take up more space. Every pallet comes SIGNIFICANT increases in shipping & storage costs.
 - CHRIS: CAN I FIND PHOTOS OF EPIGO STORAGE!!?
- Find & participate in industry groups - can be great resources for advice & connections. There's a list below.
- Review Trade Shows - Most of the big players in industry will have booths at trade shows: GenCon, Origins, Spiel in Germany.
 - You don't have to go to the shows! Check exhibitor lists & sponsors on their websites.
 - That being said, making personal connections for major purchases is advisable if you have the opportunity & means.

4. Honing in ideas & thinking strategically

- It's an issue when you have multiple ideas competing for "Work On Me Next"
 - Keep in mind: No product will be perfect - don't let this desire get in the way of producing content. Embrace the flaws of shipping your work - as long as it meets a certain threshold of quality that you understand beforehand.
- Self-publishing is just as valid as professional publishing: But involves doing all aspects of the job. Increase in difficulty & learning curve, but you get to learn & control all steps of the process.
- There are lots of elements involved to professionally producing creative work:
 - Artwork
 - Licensing rights
 - Software / Services

- In the case of books, rulebooks & RPGs: Editing & layout
- Printing
- Do you need to setup a business for the project, such as an LLC or partnership agreement
- Website domain & hosting
- Marketing
- Promo materials (stickers/bookmarks/flyers)
- Storefront: Online like Shopify or Amazon, and/or brick & mortar/trade shows
- For live performances: Location, A/V techs, actors, costumes, etc... very challenging to bootstrap without strong support from a community.
- Talk to your FLGS (Friendly Local Game Store) - Ask questions like:
 - What distributors do they buy from? Why do they prefer some over others?
 - Which companies produce games/RPG/content that sell well?
 - Which have good cost-to-quality ratios?
 - Are there trends to what people are buying?
- You're going to want to adopt a project management mindset for the production phase.
 - Keep all stakeholders working to same vision & schedule
 - What's your target release date/plan? Work backwards from that.
 - Be mindful of the important stuff in the process. Easy to get bogged down in smaller items & decisions, at the cost of the important
 - Deadlines & accountability can help push your work to completion & even spur creativity!
 - Use your audience & support team to help with areas you're struggling in
- When you're playtesting your game, you might have an idea of who will be attracted to your game. But the more you play it, or it gets out there in the world, you might realize you're going to reach a totally different segment of the market
 - You'll want to make sure your art matches the expectations of *that* audience

- Lots of people judge a game by its cover
- Look for opportunities to leverage IP to sell Merch! Lots of POD opportunities for this as well - refer to links at bottom.
- Besides shelf space, recognize how much retailers do to promote, advertise, and matching with your target audience.
 - Aid them with a Sell Sheet! Typically 1 page letter (8.5" x 11") that tells retailers & distributors what your product is, how it works, who its targeted to, the pricing, ISBN/UPC codes, etc...
 - Two real-world examples in the links at bottom.
 - Explore How To Play and/or How To Teach videos
 - Distribute it! Website, YouTube, Vimeo, Social Media, Link/QR Code on Sell Sheet

"Marketing is the final extension of your art" - From [Your Music And People](#) by Derek Sivers

5. Financial concerns for producing creative work

- Pricing your product - Who gets a piece of your work?
 - Retailer: 50-60%
 - Distributor: 10-15%
 - Manufacturing costs: 5-20+% of total MSRP
 - Note: This can vary wildly depending on complexity & type of product. For Chris' books this cost is currently ~40% MSRP!
 - Royalties to artists/partners
 - **Then You** - for every dollar of a sale you make, you're likely only seeing a dime or two!

"If you want this to actually become a business, then think about the top. The furthest that you think you could go with it, and then work

your way back. Don't think about where you're at right now." -
Lauren Bilanko

- Selling a product yourself does leave lots of additional margin for you (no distributors or retailers getting their cut). But you're selling one at a time.
 - But through distributors, you're selling to many stores at same time. They do provide value!
 - Note: You can also get smaller runs via print-on-demand, to sell at shows, on consignment, or through local retailers in your area - which can increase your profitability.
 - Another advantage of print-on-demand: It's far easier to pivot & revise if it's not selling, there's an issue that needs to be fixed, or there's a new edition.
- Be careful about selling on your website, online marketplaces, or Kickstarter: If you're undercutting retailers, or they perceive they won't be able to sell through the product: They're not going to take on the inventory risk
- Be aware of MAP Pricing (Minimum Advertised Pricing)
- **DO NOT INCUR ANY KIND OF COMMERCIAL DEBT TO FUND YOUR GAMES!
No Credit Cards - No Bank Loans!**
- Printing costs:
 - Where are you doing your printing? Consider not just quality & cost - but location!
 - Freight for large orders means amortizing over many copies, but beware of:
 - Freight costs (Consider impact package size/weights have on this cost - example: Epigo)
 - Customers paperwork & processes
 - Port & delivery logistics
 - Current freight environment is very challenging
 - You'll also have a hassle to figure out release dates that have lots of uncertainty baked in: You must stay flexible - which can be tough if your marketing strategy is banking on a big trade show/event.

- And that's just revenue: Remember you have business expenses, fixed costs from producing the work, payment processing transactions, crowdsourcing fees, shipping,
 - This isn't meant to discourage: Just to help give an initial understanding of the need to balance finances of a project against what people will be willing to spend for your work.
 - You have the benefit of an audience and as a retailer: What would they be willing to pay (or are paying) for similar projects?
- Also consider: eBooks & digital-first technology. Physical product concerns fall away and you can put more cash into content & marketing.
 - But these also have costs you may not account for: Hosting fees, content moderation rules, platform constraints, findability.
 - Much harder to drive revenue in some cases. Only a small % at top make the big bucks, it's peanuts for most people.
- Now it's possible to bootstrap much of this - but you should have some idea of the real costs that can't be avoided, and have a plan for the cash and time to fund all that:
 - Self Funding
 - Investors: Profit sharing
 - Crowd Sourcing: Kickstarter, etc... You need a strong network, you're effectively pre-selling. Managing a campaign is like its own extra job & needs a ton of pre-planning to work

Links & Resources

Lauren's Projects & Partners

- [Twenty Sided Store](#)
- [Studio Bilanko](#)
- [World of Mira](#)

- [Kyp Malone](#): Artist for Lauren's upcoming Reverie Deck for World of Mira)
- [Pete's Print Shop](#): Brooklyn-based silk screener

Chris's Projects & Partners

- [Jack Parra](#): Artist for The Rainy River Bees trilogy & Iceless Earth: Episode 1)
- [Remove This Cup From Me](#): Chris' first short story published on the Twenty-Sided Website
- [Masquerade Games](#)
- [Adobe Creative Cloud](#)
- [Intergalactic Hockey Showdown](#)

Reference Tools

- **[THE GRAPHIC ARTISTS GUILD HANDBOOK: PRICING & ETHICAL GUIDELINES](#)**
- [Dungeons & Dragons 5th Edition - Open Gaming License](#)
- [MAP Pricing](#)
- Chris' Example Sell Sheets
 - [Epigo](#) - Copyright 2011, Masquerade Games LLC
 - [The Rainy River Bees Trilogy](#) - Copyrights 2017-2021, Kreuter Studios LLC
- The best web-based gaming sell-sheet I've ever seen: [Starship Captains by Czech Games Edition](#)
- Project Management Tools
 - [Notion](#)
 - [Trello](#)
 - [Monday.com](#)
 - [Airtable](#)
 - [Slack](#)
 - [Discord](#)

Industry Groups:

- [Indie Game Alliance](#)
- [Board Game Geek](#)

Stock Art Sites

- [Shutterstock](#)
- [Adobe Stock](#)
- [Pond5](#)
- [Google Fonts](#)
- [Adobe Fonts](#)
- [Creative Commons](#)

Publication & Marketing Services

- [Kickstarter](#)
- [Indie Go Go](#)
- [Shopify](#)
- [UPrinting](#)
- [Etsy](#)
- [CarStickers.com](#)
- [BoardGameGeek.com](#)
- ISBN - [Buy Individually](#). (For reference - very unlikely you'll want to do this)
- [QR Code Generator](#)

Print-On-Demand Partners:

- [Lulu](#)
- [The Game Crafter](#)
- [Drive Thru RPG](#)
- [Drive Thru Cards](#)
- [Smashwords](#)

- [Shopify POD Options](#)

Professional Board Game Printers:

- [Ludo Fact](#)
- [Cartamundi](#)
- [Panda Game Manufacturing](#)
- [Print Ninja](#)
- [Make Playing Cards](#)
- [The Ace Card Company](#)

Board Game & RPG Distributors:

- [Ingram](#)
- [ACD Distribution](#)
- [Alliance Game Distributors](#)
- [Southern Hobby Distribution](#)

Merch Partners:

- [RedBubble](#)
- [CustomInk](#)
- [Shutterfly](#)
- [Printify](#)
- [Teespring](#)