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As told to Elle Nash, 3363 words.

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On building slowly

Independent publisher and game designer Seven Dane Asmund discusses running your own business, telling stories in different mediums, and staying focused.

You were working a full-time day job while you were independently publishing projects until COVID lockdowns began, and then you took the leap to being a full-time creator. Can you talk a little bit about how you balanced the 13 years prior to your leap and working on your creative projects?

I have worked very few jobs in my life because I just end up sticking with them. I was working at Hy-Vee in Iowa, which is a grocery store chain. I was there for seven years. It was there that I started to do self-publishing stuff.

Early on, it was easy because I write a lot so it's easy to get the volume. It was figuring out how to actually lay out books and make them look proper for publication and how to make them read well and take the time to edit my work. Because I was doing everything on my own, I had to figure out every single element of it. The art aspect, how to prepare art for printing for the covers, the editing, the layout. A lot of that was really, really rocky and difficult to figure out early on, especially while I was in college because I was working full time at the same time to help pay for it and help pay for where I was living and also squeezing a little money on the side so I could get some copies from Lulu, which is where I started printing at the very beginning.

I slowly built up. It went from some poetry, some short stories, and then about seven years ago is when I launched my first Kickstarter. I started out on Cosmic Mirror Games, where I was doing role-playing games. I had no idea what I was doing. I funded my first campaign for $1,500. That was a 300-plus page role-playing game book, and I thought $1,500 was going to be my art budget. So it was one of those things where, you don't know how you're going to do until you've failed at them enough times to figure out how it actually works.

Much of what I was experiencing as far as growth goes, in the creative aspect, ended up being a lot more about the business of it. I've always been a very prolific maker of things and writer of things, but I have never taken a business course to understand, "Okay, when you make an actual budget for something, you have to account for this, this, this, this." I ended up delivering it anyway, but most of it came out of pocket. A lot of it has been just pushing through until things work. Some of the later projects have been so labor intensive and time intensive, like the Alleyman's Tarot.

You're hitting the ground running and you're learning the business acumen as you go. Then the <u>Alleyman Tarot Kickstarter</u> became the most funded tarot project in Kickstarter history. What do you think that you learned about that launching and marketing the launch process?

It was my fifteenth Kickstarter project. The first 14 projects was me just stumbling and trying to figure it out. Anytime that people come to me, the advice is always the same, and it's all the stuff I've learned over the 20-plus projects that I've run: day one is so important. Make sure that what you're making is something worth making for yourself because there's a high possibility you won't make any money. Budget appropriately. Actually think about what it'll cost to make the things. Add extra in case things go wrong. Make sure you get at least a hundred campaign followers before you go live. Have pictures that show the actual thing in the world on a table or in an alley or wherever it is. And have a month of pre-launch where you are sharing it around and talking to people about it and getting interest.

I had a lot of organic growth leading up to the Alleyman's Tarot. And project to project, it was getting bigger when I started making things that were a little more exciting to look at, I think, is also part of

it.

The Alleyman's Tarot was like weird lightning in a bottle, though. It was not organic growth. The previous biggest project was $150,000. So to go from that to $1.4 million was not normal. But since then, my big projects I'm looking at still have that kind of trajectory of having a normal growth pattern from all the old ones.

Collaboration was really important in this project for you. How was it managing all of that on top of the workload of getting everything ready?

It's one of those things where I tell people, "I do everything in my business. It's just me." And they're like, "Oh, that's cool." And I'm like, "You don't understand what it means." In the end on that project, I had 131 artists other than myself. Keeping all that straight and maintaining contact with all the artists, that already is just a lot of stuff. It seems like a lot of little things, and it is a lot of little things. There's the community management. There's the project running. I didn't have anyone to help me with that. I was doing all of that, and I think it's really easy for people to miss out on what that means. I made connections to the manufacturers. I sourced who's going to make what. Really quickly, there were so many items. There was the coin, the poker chip. There were the decks. There were the booster packs. There was the tarot cloth. There was the cigar box, which I had to make a design for engraving on the top. I made fake branding for the tarot cloth, there was a satin bag, and I had to design all this branding and assets for them. So it's Alleyway Liqueurs; The Gleaming Alley Jewelry; Ally Striker's Matches, which is the box that the deck comes in. I designed fake water damage on that so it looked like the thing was already maimed and wounded before you get it to fit the aesthetic.

I did, for a brief period, have a very sweet friend I was paying to log on once per day for an hour and just try to reply to comments and messages on the Kickstarter because it was a very, very large project for me to try to manage alone. But what I found really quickly is that even though it was sometimes helpful, sometimes because I had my hand in every pot, I was the only one with all the answers. And so sometimes, they would answer wrong. They would reply to someone's question or comment with the wrong answer, and it wasn't their fault. It was because I was the only one who knew everything and I wasn't getting that information out.

Can you talk to me a little bit about your journey to game design?

When I was a wee child, I was so certain I was going to be a video game writer. I took Japanese in high school because I was like, "That's where they make video games." I was so self-certain about that when I was a child, of course, because when you're a child, you have no idea what you're going to do.

While I was getting my degrees, I was playing role-playing games with my friends. We were, of course, playing Dungeons & Dragons. We were playing Pathfinder. We were playing World of Darkness and Vampire and Mage and all of the White Wolf stuff. I realized over time, I have my own stories I want tell through these things. That's always what it ends up being for me, there's stories I want to tell through some kind of medium, so then I move to work in that one. I used to make home brew material for these games to adjust them for the stories I wanted to tell in my own worlds with my own characters . Really quickly, I realized the stories I wanted to tell weren't reflected well in the rules I was trained to play.

For example, with Dungeons & Dragons, of course, the core of the entire game is combat. I wanted there to be more substantial rules about interacting with people in ways that didn't require you to kill them. I didn't make a really cool world just for you to murder your way through it. At first I was like, "Well, I'm going to make a huge adjustment guide or something." And I was like, "What am I doing? I'll just make a different game."

It was an extension of wanting to make games and wanting to tell stories and find that middle ground. Tabletop role-playing games are in that space where I was self-publishing my poetry and my short stories—I could make a book. I could not make a video game. So I stuck to where I felt I could make that happen. At the core, it's always going to be storytelling. I just basically want to write novels, but want to make them interactive for people to play with.

How did you conceive of <u>What We Possess</u>, the new project?

All the games I make are tied to different worlds, tied to a larger story I've been working on for the last decade-plus. The games are reflections of a facet of that space. What We Possess is a ghostly storytelling game which is about setting a scene in a specific location. The game is card run, so you have all these cards that make the game function. There are location cards. You draw one and it's like, "Okay, we're at the pool for this game." Then you set a scene for the living characters that are there. You have cards that tell you what the living vessels are, the people are that are there, and each of the players gets a ghost which tells them how they died, but not necessarily who did it or if it was murder. The goal of the game is to move scenes around, cause the living to keep acting, and there's a central mystery that you, as the ghosts, are trying to determine.

What's really special to me about What We Possess is that there is no storyteller. There's no GM [game master]. Everyone gets to take part in that. You suggest scenes by using what remains of your ghostly energy to suggest how the people act in the space and how they react to things. Everyone gets equal ownership, and it's couched in the idea that you're using your ghostly energy to push the living to act. But when you run out of ghostly energy, you die. The story itself has a finite ending from the beginning, and you're using the last of your living self to make life happen. The ghosts' whole goal, is that they

really would rather not be dead.

I have pitched it as a meditation between the living and the dead. It's a meditation on what it means to be alive and what it means to exist in the space. But then when I play with people, it can also be the game of "I blew up the babysitter with a generator that was fueled by demons." It's very much a whatever-the-players-bring-to-it kind of game. I like to pretend that it has a really high and thoughty and haughty idea behind it, that it's this really wonderful space for you to experience life and death. But half the time we're just doing spooky ghost things and trying to be the scariest person at the table.

Games have to be fun, right? Can you talk a little bit more about the experience of a GM-less game? Is it harder to be creative and make the game mechanics work when you're telling a story?

In What We Possess, once the cards are set up on the table, you don't draw anymore cards. You don't have additional tools. All you have is energy on your ghost, and you are trying to move things to act.

What I've found works differently for this game is that people who don't play games or who don't know how to play games very much, really thrive in this environment because they're just talking to each other about what they would like to see happen. The more gamey people usually end up looking at the cards really closely and reading their texts and try to find the mechanic in it, which still works just fine. But for non-game people who are more interested in just the concept of what we're doing in this space, telling this weird little ghost story together, they get a little more creative, a little more freely because they're not worried about finding those mechanical gears to catch onto. I found that to be a really weird part of it. We're not interacting with game mechanics as much as we are interacting with just, how do we build a story together.

You would consider yourself a business owner?

Yeah, tragically.

What do you think scares you most about being a full-time creative in that space?

It's not the full-time creative that bothers me. That's actually my favorite part, making a new project. I have so many things in the pipeline I want to work on, but I am already working on five or six things at a time, and so I struggle a little bit to line it up. I find that the choke point is usually actually funding, making the thing real from getting the money to manufacturing to shipping. And because of that, I'm always going to be a little behind on my schedule of what I actually would like to be putting out, because I can't make all these things happen at once. Unfortunately, it does take time. So learning to be patient myself is a really big part of that.

The part that I'm most afraid of, I think, is the element of how much I need to rely on other people and how much I need to give space for other people to have their own things. With rare exception, I usually do all my projects alone. Everyone that I work with is always incredible and amazing. I adore them and I always try to make sure that they are paid more than they asked for, but it always means that I'm now beholden to other people's schedule and now beholden to other people's time. I know other people also have other jobs, relationships, pets, travel, family stuff that takes up their time. So I always find that to be one of the hardest parts for me. What you're making with other people's a lot more incredible than what you would've made on your own anyways. So my biggest fear is always figuring out how to work with other people because I don't do that very well.

Now that you are doing this full time, how do you balance that with self-care?

I have a monthly lunch with my friend who also owns her own business. The thing that we always end up saying to each other: when you work for someone else, once your workday is done you go home and work is gone. Then you go live your life. When you work for yourself, or especially if it's the thing that you love and it becomes your job, you never stop thinking about work. I think that's the part that really allows me to say, "You don't have to work eight hours a day." When I do leave my office, it's not like I just go and start living my life normally again. Most of the times, I go sit on the couch for a bit and I can't stop thinking about all the things I have to do. It's really, really hard to escape that. I have been very strict at maintaining the work-life balance physically. I'm in an apartment with my roommates here, where we had this extra nook room and it's my office. So I got to say, "This is office space. If I'm going to work, I go in here. If I'm not going to work, I go out there where I can play."

I've got a really big project going on in the background where I'm paying a lot of people's wages to pay their rent, and there's a lot of mental stress loaded in there, of just feeling like I'm locked in. It used to be a hobby for me to self-publish, but now it's a business. So I feel like I'm now stuck in it. if I wanted to take a sudden big pivot, it's too hard. I'm always making things that feel really meaningful to me, but it does still feel like I'm scraping by and paying my rent when I can get money.

Do you ever get burnt out when you're working on something, or even just having the multiple projects and having to balance everything? How do you bring back that energy?

My biggest issue is usually dealing with my ADHD and staying focused on something. I think that's always going to be the thing that sticks with me, is that I don't know if I can get burnt out by losing interest. If I can sit down and make the time to work on something, I just do get into it. That's the one really cool thing I've got going for me, because I know a lot of people can't do that and I know that that can be a huge struggle for a lot of people. But the downside to that is I don't do a super great job staying on

task for very long before I'm distracted by something else. At any given moment, I am actively putting in some kind of work on four or five different projects. I need that dopamine hit in my brain from being like, "Ooh, I've got a really cool idea for this thing that's two years down the pipeline. I better go write that down real quick." And then it's like, "No, because now you're not working on the thing that's already due." I do find that when I'm getting closer and closer to something being done, I have less and less interest working on it.

My tip is you have to just sit down and do it anyways, which is really tragic, right? People always want the secret of how to make it work, and there's no secret. You just have to do it.

People all the time are like, "Oh, I had this idea for this book I want to write." And I'm like, "Cool, then write it." The only secret here is, the reason you're not a writer is because you haven't sat down and written it. So just go do that part. It's the hard part, but it's what you have to do to make the thing come to life.

<u>Seven Dane Asmund Recommends:</u>

My list of 5 things to be a more rounded creator:

Keep watching, reading, or witnessing art. And not just in your medium. Never stop because you're too embroiled in your own.

Have hobbies and interests beyond your field or work. The most inspiring art views things from new angles, in different ways.

Let yourself think about your work without having to be actively working. Think of it when you go on a walk. Think of it when you work out.

Let yourself take time. Sometimes your work is in its wrong time, you need more life to come back to it. Something else can fill the now.

Make things you're bad at. Have a story idea? Draw scenes from it, even if you don't draw. Create your things in multiple mediums even if only one is 'good.'

<u>Name</u>
Seven Dane Asmund

<u>Vocation</u>
Independent publisher and game designer

<u>Fact</u>

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