

GUIDE 01 • START HERE

PICK YOUR FIRST GAME

Choose a game you can actually finish, with a 2-minute quiz and six starter games compared.

PICK YOUR FIRST GAME

The game you choose decides whether you finish. Here's how to pick one you can ship in 30 days, which of six starter games fits you, and the traps that sink most first projects.

15 minute read

2 minute quiz

Updated October 2026

PDF version. The interactive version (with the quiz) is online:
<https://claude.ai/artifact/BiWqUY7eQY9pMchMRxHMto>

IN 60 SECONDS

1. **Pick a game you can finish in 30 days.** A small finished game teaches you more than a big abandoned one.
2. **Start from a kind of game you love,** and pick one whose hardest part is the part you're best at.
3. **Make the smallest version first.** Each starter game below shows you what that looks like.
4. **Get the main action fun before anything else.** Levels, story and polish come after.
5. **Save online multiplayer, open worlds and big stories** for your third game.

01

MOST FIRST GAMES NEVER SHIP

More game jam entries were dropped than finished

Ludum Dare is a popular weekend game-making event (a "game jam"). In October 2025, 2,929 entries were started.



Source: Ludum Dare 58 statistics, pulled 25 Oct 2026.¹

~10 yrs

on a dream RPG before the A Short Hike creator cancelled it. The small game he made “as a break” won the top prize at IGF 2020, the Independent Games Festival. ^{2 3}

<7 days

per game in Carnegie Mellon’s Experimental Gameplay Project. More time didn’t make better games. ⁴

A small game you finish beats a big game you abandon. Every time.

Finishing is a skill. You learn it by finishing small things, and each finished game makes the next one easier.

The people who have shipped the most agree on this. Derek Yu (Spelunky, UFO 50) says to finish a small game “by any means possible”, then make a slightly bigger one. ⁵ The 20 Games Challenge, a free list of games to remake in order, starts beginners on Pong and doesn’t reach Super Mario Bros. until game six. ⁶ Chris Zukowski found that a working game-over screen means you’re only about 10% done, and his own “simple” first game took over a year and a half. ⁷

Many famous games started tiny. Celeste began as a game made in a few days for a tiny retro console. Baba Is You was a game jam entry. Downwell was the 13th of its creator’s quick weekly experiments. ⁸

02

WHICH STARTER GAME FITS YOU?

Five questions. We’ll match you to one of the six starter games below, and the smallest version of it to make first. Your answers stay in this browser.

TAKE THE QUIZ

The five-question quiz runs in the online version of this guide. Or read the six starter games below and pick the one whose hardest part is the part you’re best at.



BY HAND VS WITH THE COACH

This quiz picks a genre. **The Dream Game Coach goes further:** it reads your idea and the games you love, checks the Steam market live, shows you three ways to play it, and builds a playable version on the right starter game. [See Premium](#)

THE SIX STARTER GAMES

Each one is a kind of game beginners can finish, with two versions to choose from. The market line uses live Steam data from October 2026: the top eight smaller games of each kind and how many new ones arrive each month.

The little chart on each card shows **where the work is**, from 1 (light) to 3 (heavy). **Feel:** making moving and hitting feel good. **Content:** levels, words or enemies to make. **Art:** how much art you need. **Code:** how much programming.

The top games are the best case, not the typical one. On Steam, half of all games get 11 reviews or fewer, and only 4.2% reach 1,000.⁹ Treat a first game as practice that might also find players.

ESTIMATE What a review count means: a common rule of thumb is roughly 30 to 50 buyers for every Steam review. So 1,200 reviews suggests something like 36,000 to 60,000 sales.



ARCADE

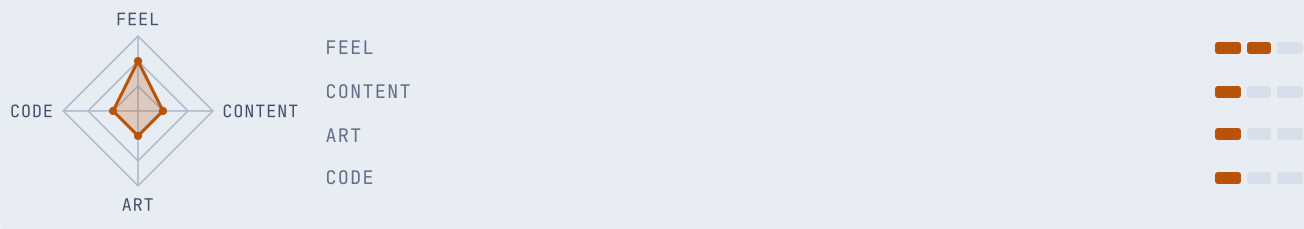
SINGLE-SCREEN · ENDLESS RUNNER · 14 DAYS

EASIEST START

Short, fast games where you chase a high score.

Dodge or collect, die, and retry at once. No levels to build.

WHERE THE WORK IS



TWO VERSIONS

SINGLE-SCREEN

The whole game fits on one screen, in the classic Asteroids style.

MAKE FIRST Hazards fly in from the edges and speed up. Survive; time is the score.

ENDLESS RUNNER

Your character keeps running on their own and you dodge, like Jetpack Joyride.

MAKE FIRST The ground scrolls, one button jumps, distance is the score.

PROOF IT CAN START SMALL

- Flappy Bird was made in a few days.
- The 20 Games Challenge's first four games are all arcade games.

BEGINNER TRAPS

- Adding levels or a story before the basic action is fun
- Shake and flash on everything
- Online leaderboards

Single-screen: about 72 new games a month on Steam (crowded). Top small games have about 1,200 reviews. **Runners** do best on phones and in the browser.



TOP-DOWN ACTION

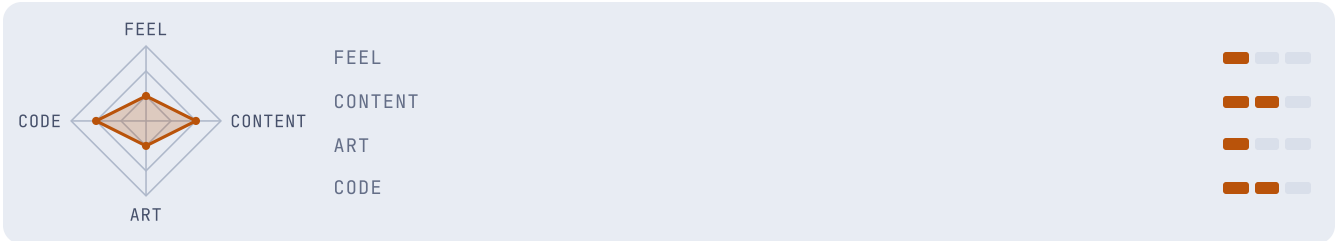
TWIN-STICK · ARENA SURVIVOR · 14 DAYS

GREAT FIRST PICK

Seen from above: you move, fight waves of enemies and grow stronger.

Survive bigger and bigger waves and pick upgrades. No jumps to fine-tune.

WHERE THE WORK IS



TWO VERSIONS

TWIN-STICK

A shooter seen from above: one stick moves, the other aims. Like Enter the Gungeon or Nuclear Throne.

MAKE FIRST Move and aim in one arena, survive growing waves.

ARENA SURVIVOR

You dodge swarms while your weapons fire by themselves, like Vampire Survivors.

MAKE FIRST You only move. Survive the timer and pick upgrades.

PROOF IT CAN START SMALL

- Derek Yu names survivor games as a good kind to learn with.
- Vampire Survivors started as one person's project; Brotato is a one-person studio.

BEGINNER TRAPS

- Every weapon or enemy with its own code
- Every upgrade just a +10% number
- A shop between runs before one run is fun

Arena survivor: about 66 new games a month (crowded), and the hits are huge. **Twin-stick:** about 36 a month (busy). A clear twist matters.



PUZZLE

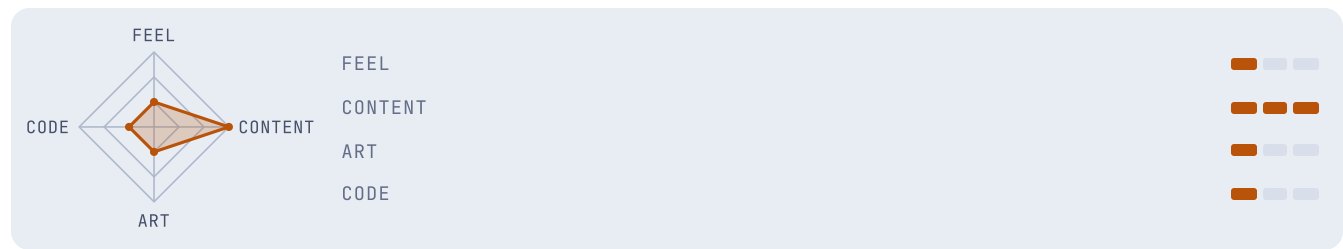
PUSH-BLOCK · MATCH-3 · 14 DAYS

GOOD IF YOU LOVE LEVELS

Small levels you solve by thinking, not fast fingers.

Read a level, plan, act, undo, solve, meet a new rule. Nothing to fine-tune about movement; the levels are the game.

WHERE THE WORK IS



TWO VERSIONS

PUSH-BLOCK

Push boxes around a grid to solve each level, like Sokoban.

MAKE FIRST Grid levels with one rule: push boxes onto goals. Undo and restart.

MATCH-3

Swap pieces to line up three of a kind, like Candy Crush.

MAKE FIRST Swap gems, clear lines, hit the target score before moves run out.

PROOF IT CAN START SMALL

- Sokoban began as one person's hobby game with five levels.
- Baba Is You started as a game jam entry.

BEGINNER TRAPS

- Many rules before one has 10 good levels
- More than 10 to 15 levels in two weeks
- Keeping the plain tutorial levels

Push-block: about 19 new games a month (open), and all of the top eight are rated 85%+ positive. **Match-3:** phones belong to huge studios; aim for the browser.



STORY

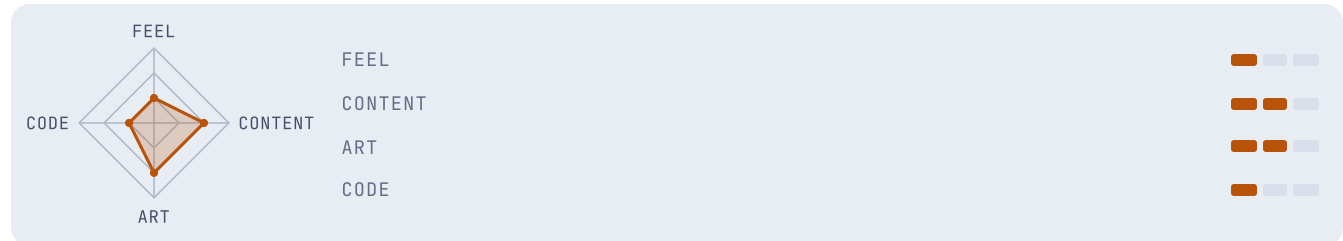
VISUAL NOVEL • POINT-AND-CLICK • 14 DAYS

GOOD IF YOU LOVE WRITING

Games about reading, making choices and seeing what happens.

Choose, see the results, reach one of several endings. Its size depends on how many words and choices you write.

WHERE THE WORK IS



TWO VERSIONS

VISUAL NOVEL

An illustrated story you read and steer with choices, like Doki Doki Literature Club.

MAKE FIRST Three scenes, one early choice that changes a later line and the ending.

POINT-AND-CLICK

Click around a scene to find items and solve puzzles, like Monkey Island, but one room.

MAKE FIRST A few things to click, an item that opens the door, two endings.

PROOF IT CAN START SMALL

- Slay the Princess was made by a two-person team and passed one million sales.
- A month-long visual novel jam (NaNoRenO) runs every March.

BEGINNER TRAPS

- More than 300 to 1,500 words in two weeks
- Branches that never come back together
- Choices that never pay off

Visual novels: about 145 new games a month (crowded), but they find a small audience more often than average.⁹ Art is front and centre.



2D PLATFORMER

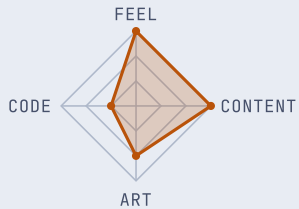
PRECISION · METROIDVANIA-LITE · 14 TO 30 DAYS

HARDER THAN IT LOOKS

Seen from the side: run and jump from platform to platform.

Get past hazards to the exit; each level adds one new idea. Everyone gets it, and it's all about how the jump feels and the levels.

WHERE THE WORK IS



FEEL
CONTENT
ART
CODE



TWO VERSIONS

PRECISION

Short, tricky jumping challenges where timing matters, like Celeste.

MAKE FIRST One level: run and jump past a pit and spikes, a checkpoint, the exit.

METROIDVANIA-LITE

Explore linked rooms and unlock new moves to reach new places. Like Hollow Knight, but tiny.

MAKE FIRST Three rooms and one wall too high: find the double jump, come back.

PROOF IT CAN START SMALL

- Celeste began as a game made in a few days.
- Downwell was a weekly experiment rebuilt around one idea.

BEGINNER TRAPS

- A second special move before the first is fun
- Slopes and moving platforms
- Changing the jump after levels are built

Precision: about 72 new games a month (crowded); only 1.4% reach 1,000 reviews.⁹ Platformers that mix in another kind of game sell better.



3D ADVENTURE

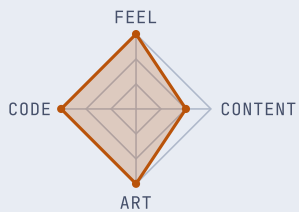
THIRD-PERSON • 3D PLATFORMER • 30 DAYS

GIVE IT 30 DAYS

Explore a 3D world, with the camera behind your character.

Explore a compact level, get past hazards, collect keys, open the next area. A camera, 3D models and animated characters make it the biggest job.

WHERE THE WORK IS



FEEL
CONTENT
ART
CODE



TWO VERSIONS

THIRD-PERSON

You see your character from behind as you explore, like A Short Hike.

MAKE FIRST Two islands, a camera that follows you, three keys, sliding spike blocks.

3D PLATFORMER

Run and jump through 3D levels, like Super Mario 64.

MAKE FIRST A short climb with coins, a falling platform, a double jump, a flag.

PROOF IT CAN START SMALL

- A Short Hike went from start to release in months, with a chunky low-detail look.
- Pseudoregalia began at a game jam.

BEGINNER TRAPS

- Animated 3D characters before moving around is fun
- A camera players spin freely in tight spaces
- An open world: one compact level is the game

3D action adventures: about 32 new games a month (busy). **3D platformers:** about 89 (crowded). Players love them; the build cost is high.

04

SAVE THESE FOR GAME THREE

These sink more first projects than anything else. Each one is a great game idea. None of them is a great *first* game.



Online multiplayer

Getting players connected online can eat months before you reach any gameplay.⁷



Open world or a big role-playing game

Every area, quest, item and line needs making, testing and balancing.



Levels the computer makes

You build a level maker, then rules to stop it making broken levels, then test hundreds of them.



A big branching story

Every choice splits the story, and the splits multiply. Split it, then bring the paths back together.



A full metroidvania

A big connected world, a map and lots of going back. Start with one blocked path and one new move that opens it.



3D in two weeks

The makers of Godot, a free game engine, say 3D is harder: more maths, a camera, and 3D models to animate.¹⁰ Give it 30 days.

05

HOW TO CHOOSE, IN FOUR STEPS

STEP 1



A game you love

You'll judge it better and keep going.

STEP 2



Your strengths

The hardest part should be your best part.

STEP 3



Hook and anchor

What's new, and what feels familiar.

STEP 4



Fun as a toy

Play the main action before adding goals.

1. Start from a game you love

Make the kind of game you'd play. You'll judge it better, and you'll want to keep going on the hard days.

2. Match it to your strengths

One game jam team ran every idea through three questions: can we build enough to playtest it (watch someone else play it), is there time to make all its art, and is it fun to play?¹¹ A Short Hike used a chunky low-detail look partly because its creator wasn't a strong 3D artist.³ Pick a game whose hardest part is the part you're best at.

3. Write a hook and an anchor

The **hook** is what makes your game different. The **anchor** is what feels familiar. The hook gets people curious; the anchor tells them what they're getting.¹²

In [game name], you play as [who] in [where],
trying to [goal] by [the one thing you do].
It's like [a game people know], but [your twist].

4. Find the fun in a toy first

Build your main action and play with it, with no goals, no score and no levels. That's your **toy**. If it isn't fun as a toy, it won't be fun as a game.⁴ Downwell started as an ordinary platformer and was rebuilt around one idea: shooting downward with gun boots.⁸ Keep a version that runs every day, and cut polish before you cut the finish.¹¹



FIRST BUILD Plain bars to jump on and one small character.



NOW The same world, with finished art.

Real captures from DeepSol, our own game in progress. It started as plain shapes and grew from there.

06

WHERE TO RELEASE IT

WHERE	COST	WHY, AND WHAT TO KNOW
itch.io, in the browser	Free	Best for a first game: people play instantly from a link, so it's easy to get feedback. Godot can export a version people play in their browser. It just needs the browser-friendly settings, and the Dream Game Coach sets those up for you.
Steam	\$100 per game	You get it back once the game earns \$1,000. ¹⁴ Being seen depends on wishlists (players clicking a button to follow your game), built over months. That makes it a better home for game two or three. ¹⁵
Google Play	One-time fee	New personal accounts must run a test with at least 12 testers for 14 days before going live. ¹⁶ Plan for that lead time.

▼ For the curious: Godot's browser settings

Godot 4 browser builds need WebGL 2 and the Compatibility renderer, not Forward+. Projects written in C# can't export to the web in Godot 4, so use GDScript.¹³

The single-threaded web export, the default since Godot 4.3, works best on itch.io and other browser game sites.¹³

07

THREE MYTHS



~~“I need to learn to code first.”~~

In a 2023 study, beginners aged 10 to 17 who learned with an AI code helper wrote much better code (about 80% vs 44% on writing tasks) and remembered as much a week later as those without it. ¹⁷

You don't need to write everything from scratch. You do need to read, run and test what the AI writes, and you learn that by making a game.



~~“My first game should be my dream game.”~~

Mark Brown, who has studied game design for years on Game Maker's Toolkit, his popular YouTube channel, spent about three years on his first game. ¹⁸ The A Short Hike creator's dream RPG ran nearly ten years before he cancelled it. ²

Make a small game that holds one piece of the dream: its feel, its mood, or its main move. Your dream game gets built on what you learn.



~~“AI can make the whole game.”~~

The loudest “100% AI” game on Steam was slammed for muddy, generic visuals. ¹⁹ AI can write most of the code and draft the art. You still pick the idea, judge the fun, direct the look, test every version and make the cuts.

08

WORDS YOU'LL SEE

Anchor

The familiar part that tells players what they're getting.

Game engine

The software you build a game in, like Godot.

Game jam

An event where people make a game in a few days.

Hook

The one thing that makes your game different.

Metroidvania

An explore-and-unlock game, like Hollow Knight.

Playtest

Watching someone else play your game.

Steam review

A thumbs up or down from a player who owns the game.

Toy

Your main action, playable, with no goal yet.

Wishlist

A Steam button players click to follow a game.

GO FROM GUIDE TO FINISHED GAME

This guide helps you choose. Premium helps you finish: from your idea to a game anyone can play.

 The Dream Game Sprint video masterclass COMING SOON

Step-by-step video lessons from first idea to launch day.

 The full Dream Game Coach for Claude Code

It guides your game every day: research, design, levels, art, sound, playtests and launch, with automatic checks.

 A personal gameplay review from John

Honest notes on your game from someone who ships them.

Join Premium

89

SOURCES

Outside sources were checked in October 2026. The starter games, their traps and the market lines come from our own coach and its Steam market check (25 October 2026); sales figures from reviews are estimates.

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