

GUIDE 02 • THE PLAN

YOUR FIRST GAME IN 30 DAYS

The day-by-day roadmap: the 5 P's, six milestones, weekly checklists and launch lead times.

YOUR FIRST GAME IN 30 DAYS

The roadmap we use: five stages (the 5 P's) day by day, what “done” looks like each week, and the rules that keep a small game small enough to finish. Set your start date and it becomes your calendar.

15 minute read

About 1.5 hours a day

Updated October 2026

PDF version. The interactive version (with the planner) is online:

<https://claude.ai/artifact/ScAi2SBYZRXEVbxHcZQ8PL>

🕒 IN 60 SECONDS

-  **Five stages, in order:** Pitch (the idea), Play (your main action), Places (the levels), People (hero, art and sound) and Polish (testing, finishing, launch).
-  **The ship date is fixed. What fits before it is flexible.** When you fall behind, cut features, never the finish.
-  **Playtest five times.** Watch someone else play your game, stay quiet, and note where they get stuck.
-  **Tell someone every week.** One short clip and two lines: what you built and what's next.
-  **Launch on itch.io first.** It's free and you can go live the same day. Steam can be your second release.

01

YOUR 30 DAYS AT A GLANCE

Pick your Day 1. The track shows the five stages, the five playtests (sessions where you watch someone play) and the dates that matter. Everything saves in this browser.

Set your own Day 1 in the online planner.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30

PITCH

PLAY · DAYS 3 TO 10

PLACES · DAYS 11 TO 21

PEOPLE · DAYS 11 TO 27

POLISH · DAYS 22 TO 30

 **Pitch** the idea  **Play** the main action  **Places** the levels  **People** hero, art, sound
 **Polish** test, finish, launch
 Playtest  Milestone

DAY 6

Last pivot (last big change)
after Playtest 1

DAY 14

Feature freeze (no new
features)
art style locked

DAY 22

Content lock (everything is
in)
only fixes after

DAY 28

Release candidate (ready
to ship)
the build you'd ship

DAY 30

Ship (it's live)
then look back



BY HAND VS WITH THE COACH

This calendar works on paper. **The Dream Game Coach turns it into your one next step every day:** it runs your playtests and checks, keeps your dates, and warns you when your scope starts to slip. [See Premium](#)

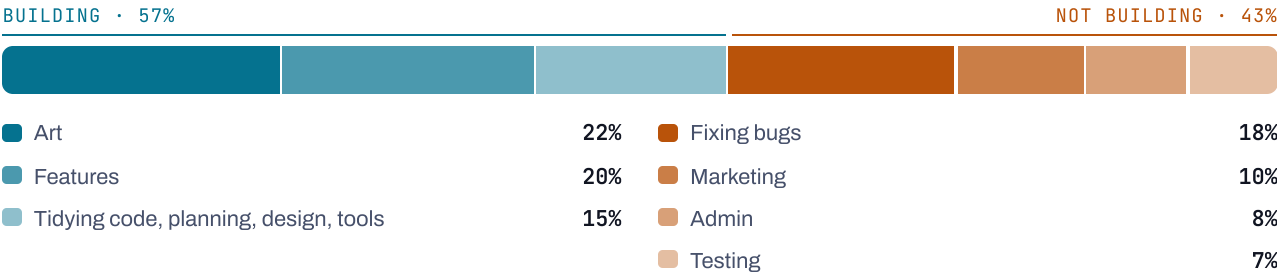
02

THE PACE

The plan assumes about **1.5 hours a day, around 45 hours in total**. That fits people with a full-time job. Hobbyists who finish games usually manage 10 to 20 hours a week, often in short sessions: one developer made 12 games in a year working 30 to 45 minutes before bed plus weekend mornings.¹²

Expect a big share of that time to go to things that aren't building. One first-time solo developer logged their hours: about 43% went to fixing bugs, testing, admin and marketing.³ The plan leaves room for that.

Where one beginner's time went



One example, not a rule: a first-time solo developer's first couple of months, from their own time log (Three Raccoons, itch.io, 2025).³
Your split will differ.

Behind schedule? Cut scope (how much you're making). Never cut playtests, and never cut sleep.

03

SIX MILESTONES, SIX YES-OR-NO TESTS

Studios use these words loosely. Use them strictly: each one has a test you can answer with yes or no.⁴⁵

MILESTONE	DAY	WHAT IT MEANS	THE TEST
Toy (main action, no goal)	3 to 5	A rough version of your one main action, built from plain grey blocks. No goal yet.	Can a stranger play it for a minute and want another go?
Last pivot (last big change)	6	Playtest 1. Keep the idea, twist it, or change it. After today, new ideas go on a list for the next game.	Did someone who isn't you enjoy the main action?
Feature freeze (no new features)	14	Every feature exists and the game plays start to finish, even if rough. Nothing new gets added after this. Your art style is locked too.	Is everything on your Must list in the game? Then stop adding.
Content lock (everything is in)	22	All levels, art, text and sound are in. Stand-in art and sound are gone. From here you only tune, fix and polish.	Is there any grey box, "TODO" or stand-in left?
Release candidate (ready to ship)	28	A build you'd be happy to ship today, with no known bugs that break the game.	Would you upload this exact file if launch were in an hour?
Ship (it's live)	30	The public release, then a short post-mortem (a look back).	Page live, game playable from a link, first post sent?

WEEK BY WEEK

Tick things off as you go. The dates follow your Day 1.

WEEK 1 • DAYS 1 TO 7

FIND THE FUN

 PITCH

 PLAY

Write the idea on one page, build your main action from grey blocks, and get someone to play it.

- ☐ Day 1 Write your one-page plan: the idea, its twist, a Must list and a Not list
- ☐ Day 2 Start the slow store sign-ups if you want Steam or Google Play later
- ☐ Day 3 Build your main action with simple grey blocks
- ☐ Day 4 Tune it until it feels good (try double, then half)
- ☐ Day 5 Add a goal and a way to lose; run a crash test (try to break it)
- ☐ Day 6 Playtest 1 with 1 or 2 people: keep, twist or change the idea
- ☐ Day 7 Post your first progress GIF (a short looping clip)

DONE WHEN A stranger played your toy and wanted another go.

WEEK 2 • DAYS 8 TO 14

THE WHOLE LOOP

 PLAY

 PLACES

 PEOPLE

Make the game playable start to finish, then build one short part at near-final quality.

- ☐ Day 8 Add win, lose, restart, and a score or progress
- ☐ Day 9 Make it feel good: small helps (like a jump that still works just after leaving a ledge), hit effects, simple sounds
- ☐ Day 11 Vertical slice (one part, near-final): finish level 1
- ☐ Day 12 Playtest 2 with 3 to 5 people, plus a level review (replay each level, note fixes)
- ☐ Day 13 Lock the art style: your hero, your colours, one sample screen
- ☐ Day 14 Feature freeze (no new features) from today

DONE WHEN Everything on your Must list is in, and a screenshot of level 1 could go on a store page.

WEEK 3 • DAYS 15 TO 21

FILL IT WITH CONTENT

 PLACES

 PEOPLE

Build the levels, art and sound. Test each new batch, and make the three edits that lift the whole game.

- ☐ Day 15 Build the remaining levels, one new idea each
- ☐ Day 17 Playtest 3 with new testers: fix two problems, boost one highlight
- ☐ Day 18 Add music and sound effects
- ☐ Day 20 Three edits that lift the whole game: the first 30 seconds, the ending, the feedback
- ☐ Day 21 Playtest 4; put your itch.io page and weekly progress post live

DONE WHEN Every level, piece of art and sound exists, even if some still need polish.

WEEK 4 • DAYS 22 TO 30

POLISH AND SHIP

 PEOPLE

 POLISH

No new content. Polish, test with strangers, build the release, and press publish.

- ☐ Day 22 Content lock (everything is in): no stand-ins left
- ☐ Day 23 Menus, settings, pause, volume, onboarding (teaching new players)
- ☐ Day 25 Playtest 5 with strangers
- ☐ Day 27 Accessibility basics (so more people can play), bug hunt, record a GIF and trailer
- ☐ Day 28 Release candidate (ready to ship): the build you'd ship today
- ☐ Day 30 Ship it, share it, write your post-mortem (a look back)

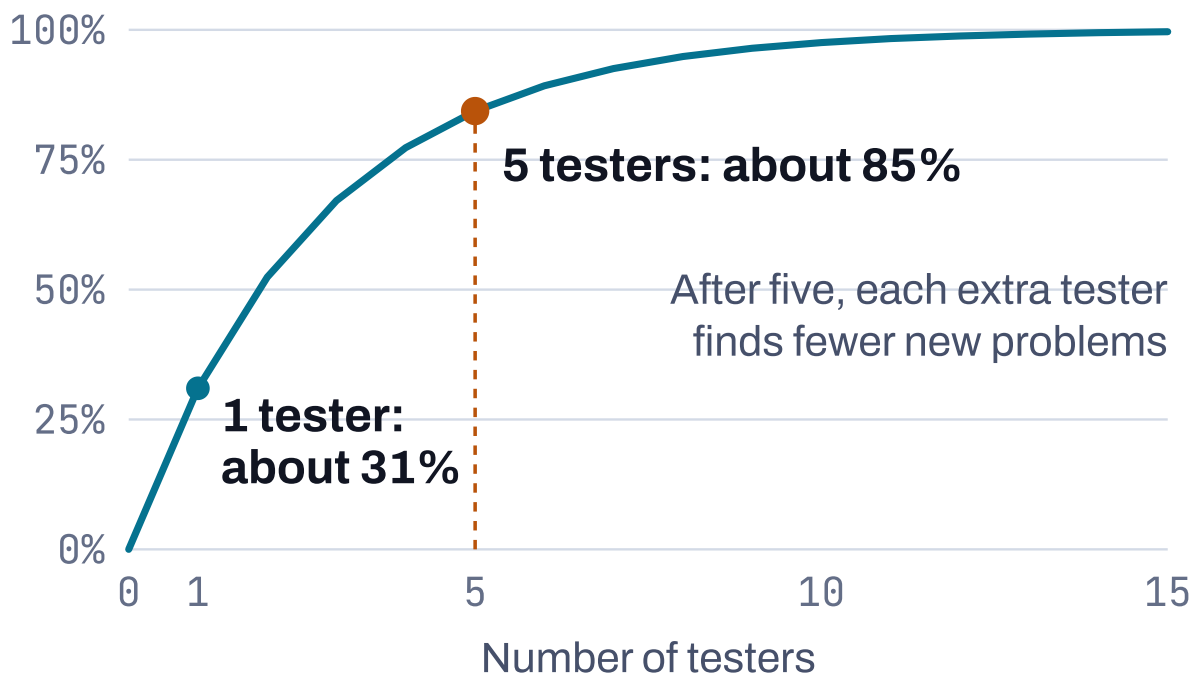
DONE WHEN Anyone can play your game from a link.

05

PLAYTEST EARLY, SMALL AND OFTEN

A playtest means watching someone else play your game. You don't need many people per round. In Nielsen's model, one tester finds about 31% of the problems and five find about 85%. After that, each extra tester finds less and less, so three small rounds beat one big one.⁶

Problems found, by number of testers



Drawn to scale from Nielsen's model, where each tester finds about 31% of the problems.⁶ It was built for websites and apps, but the lesson holds for games: test small and often.

Weekly

Valve tested Portal every week

With people who had never played it, watching from start to finish. Testing began with one half-finished room.⁷

2 + 1

Fix two, boost one

After each round, group notes by pattern. Fix what two or more testers hit, and make one moment they loved even better. Park the rest.

How to run one

- **Don't explain the game first.** Let them play as they would at home.⁷
- **Watch what they do more than what they say.** Ask them to think out loud, stay quiet, and note where they get stuck.⁸
- **Trust the problem, not the suggested fix.** When testers say something doesn't work, they're almost always right. When they say exactly how to fix it, they're often wrong.

Six questions to ask afterwards

F

What was the most frustrating moment?

F

What was your favourite moment?

W

What did you want to do but couldn't?

W

With a magic wand, what would you change?

D

What were you doing, in your own words?

D

How would you describe it to a friend?

Adapted from Schell Games' "ffwdd" playtest questions. ⁹

06

KEEP IT SMALL ENOUGH TO SHIP

A game that keeps growing ("scope creep") is one of the problems that comes up again and again when researchers read hundreds of game post-mortems. ¹⁰ These rules keep a 30-day game a 30-day game.

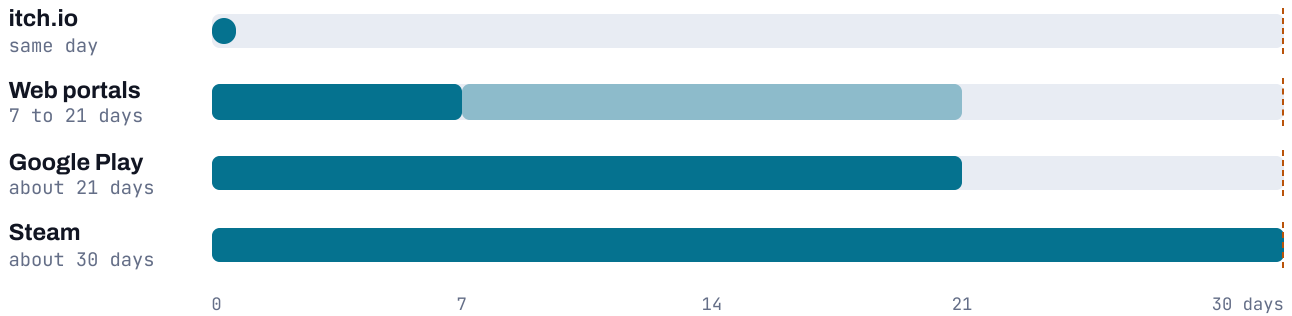
- **Fixed time, flexible scope.** The ship date doesn't move. What fits before it does.
- **Must, Should, Could, Won't.** Sort every idea into one of these four lists. Keep the Must list to about 60% of your hours, so there's room for surprises. ¹¹
- **Write a "Not" list.** Everything you've decided this game won't have. New ideas go on it, or on a list for your next game.
- **A playable version every day.** If you stopped today, you'd still have a game.
- **Cut features before you cut the finish.** A small, polished game beats a big, broken one.
- **Polish in moderation.** In player studies, some "juice" (screen shake, sparks, sound) beat none, and too much was no better. ¹² Save it for the moments that matter.

07

LAUNCH LEAD TIMES

Stores take longer to let you in than your game takes to build. Start the slow ones on Day 1, or plan them for your second release.

Days from signing up to your first release



The dashed line is day 30, the end of your sprint. Steam only fits if you sign up and pay on Day 1. For web portals, the faded part is the range.

WHERE

WHAT TO KNOW

itch.io	Free, and you can go live today. Keep the page private until it's ready: a new page only gets one turn on the "Most Recent" list. ¹³
Steam	\$100 per game, and about 30 days from paying to your first release. Best as your second release. ¹⁴
Google Play	New personal accounts must run a private test with real people for two weeks before release. ¹⁵
Web portals	CrazyGames and Poki put your game in front of their players for a short test first. Poki asks for web exclusivity: your game can't be on other websites. ¹⁶

- FOR THE CURIOUS: THE EXACT STORE RULES

- **itch.io:** pages start private. Add a cover image, 3 to 5 screenshots and up to 10 tags, and tick the AI disclosure box if you used AI.¹³
- **Steam:** Valve's pages say 21 or 30 days between paying and your first release, so plan for 30. A Coming Soon page must be live for at least 2 weeks, and the store page and build reviews each take 3 to 5 business days.¹⁴
- **Google Play:** the closed test needs at least 12 testers opted in for 14 days in a row, then review can take up to 7 days.¹⁵
- **Web portals:** CrazyGames runs a basic launch of 7 to 21 days. Poki runs a 3 to 5 day web test.¹⁶

08

TELL SOMEONE EVERY WEEK

In a study of 149 adults working on a four-week goal, the group that sent weekly progress reports to a friend did best.¹⁷ But announcing who you'll become ("I'm making an epic RPG") can make people work less, because it already feels like progress.¹⁸



Share progress, not promises.

Each week, post one GIF (a short looping clip) and two lines: what you built and what's next.

A devlog (a short progress post) on your itch.io page or a post in the AI Game Bootcamp community both work. Don't expect devlogs alone to bring players; treat them as a way to keep yourself on track.

09

WRITE YOUR POST-MORTEM

Within a week of launch, while you still remember, write down what happened. This look back is how one finished game becomes a better second one. Use this template:



The facts. Game name, link, engine, days taken, hours logged, tools (including AI tools), where it's released.



Plan vs reality. What was on your Must list on Day 1, and what shipped.



Three to five things that went right, each with one example.



Three to five things that went wrong, each with its cause, not just what happened.



The numbers. Playtest rounds and testers, first-week plays, ratings or comments.



Three rules for next time, written as actions.



What's next. An update, the next game, or the Steam version.

10

WORDS YOU'LL SEE

Playtest

Watching someone else play your game.

Greybox

A rough version built from plain grey blocks.

Toy

Your main action, playable, with no goal yet.

Juice

Small effects that make actions feel good (shake, sparks, sound).

Vertical slice

One short part of the game at near-final quality.

Feature freeze

The day you stop adding new features.

Content lock

The day all levels, art and sound are in.

Release candidate

A build you'd be happy to ship today.

Build

A playable version of your game.

Stand-in (placeholder)

Temporary art or sound you replace later.

Devlog

A short post about your progress.

Post-mortem

A written look back after launch.

AI GAME BOOTCAMP PREMIUM

GO FROM GUIDE TO FINISHED GAME

This guide gives you the plan. Premium gives you the coach and the lessons to follow it all the way to launch.



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

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SOURCES

The 30-day plan is the Dream Game Coach's schedule. Outside sources were checked in October 2026.

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