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Dear friend in puzzling,

The current paradigm for puzzle publishing is broken. Right now certain publishers and editors control the sales channels, but with an inferior product. In genres like crosswords, puzzle constructors are squeezed and make far less than they deserve for the work that goes into crafting a great puzzle. In other places, like logic puzzles and sudoku, the situation is even more dire. Very few, if any, constructors make any real money for their hard work. With no ecosystem to fund puzzle construction at the appropriate levels, and no single brand to gather this work, the most talented authors release puzzles on their blogs for free. Today is the start to a new paradigm. Today is the start to Grandmaster Puzzles.

Many businesses are formed around a new idea, with this business model: "1. Have an idea, 2. ?????, 3. Profit". In one classic example, phase 1 is "collect underpants". That business never worked. For Grandmaster Puzzles, phase 1 is to gather the best designers of puzzles, first logic puzzles but eventually all puzzles worth hand-crafting, to build a single brand.

Phase 2 is still unclear, but not because there is no obvious revenue option. Phase 2 is unclear because there are too many. I intend to start by putting together a website with classic puzzle types. I will use this site, as a publisher, to get sales for print books like I did with "The Art of Sudoku". But puzzles are solved on electronic devices too. Finding those outlets will be trivial if we control the supply of the best puzzles. Since winning the world sudoku championship, I get lots of emails from app designers that want my puzzles. Most don't have a good UI or any real way of driving business to their app, so they do not interest me. But a few designers are getting really close to solutions to the UI problem. And Grandmaster Puzzles will provide a product for them. Even if we eventually end up building our own web/device UIs for solving puzzles, and go to a pay-to-play web/app business, there are upsides to be found there too. Maybe we start running puzzle championships as another revenue stream. We'll already have the puzzles. At the very least we'll be providing them to tournament organizers in exchange for named sponsorships and getting more people to know about our puzzles. Many doors are waiting to be opened.

When will Phase 3 – Profit – occur? I don't know. But I'm going to make this my life's work going forward, and having achieved a lot when my puzzle constructing was unfocused and part-time, I see nothing but success with my undivided attention.

Right now I intend to have a daily blog puzzle with an 8-day category rotation so that puzzles/types progressively get harder the next time they appear, the following week one day later. After a 7 puzzle (Monday to Sunday) series in a given style, a new style will be introduced in the same genre of puzzle solving. Here is where I start:

A) Sudoku
B) Sudoku Variants – Arrow, Thermo, Consecutive, Tight Fit
C) Shading Puzzles – Nurikabe and Tapa
D) Number Placement – Skyscrapers and TomTom
E) Object Placement – Battleships and Star Battle
F) Loop Puzzles – Masyu and Slitherlink
G) Region Division Puzzles – Fillomino and Cave
H) One-offs – Web-only content like my existing Friday Puzzle

How can you help? I have a few ideas:

1. Let me pay you to write puzzles. If you are writing free puzzles on your own blogs now, please stop. Let me see your puzzles first, and pay you 10-20 dollars each to post them on my soon to launch website. If your puzzles are really great, I'll pay you even more and save them for the books. Your name will always be attached to your puzzles. And not in some smaller font under "edited by Thomas Snyder" as some lesser puzzlemasters might do. When I'm posting a puzzle, it will be a "Dr. Sudoku Prescribes" blog post. When I'm posting your puzzles, it will be under your own brand/pseudonym but on my site and nowhere else. If you want to post puzzles under the tag "From The Raven's Writing Desk", that's yours. Grandmaster Puzzles will be the umbrella for the best designers, and you can build your own name brand under that big umbrella. I'll want first rights to use anything you make from a single puzzle to a whole book or anything in between. Consider me your agent and publisher at the same time, where few others will pay you what you deserve.

2. Let me pay you to solve puzzles. To maintain quality, I'm going to need some puzzle editors. I intend to send blinded sets of puzzle types (no author names attached) to editors to solve, reporting back on difficulty, novelty, and quality. I'll use this data to figure out what puzzles to keep and where to use them. Some people will be good at this job and others not, but I'll let a lot of people try out for it before picking my favorite editors.

3. Let me pay you to help code puzzle tools. Having a broken puzzle is the easiest way to lose a customer in this business. We will never have this problem. I'm looking for editing/construction tools that will "solve" puzzle types from particular custom file definitions. Further, these tools should generate the art files (eps format) for the puzzle and its solution according to certain specifications.

What capabilities should the editing tools have? Well, for Sudoku and several variants, I have tools from Wei-Hwa Huang that let me see how many solutions are left in a mostly specified puzzle. Further, his output tells me something about what digits occur at what frequency in all the undefined spots in that puzzle by sampling as many as 1000+ solutions. The tool lets me find broken puzzles, and tweak puzzles to get to uniquely solving ones fast. I was pretty good at placing interesting seeds in Sudoku puzzles by hand. But until I had Wei-Hwa's tools, I couldn't tweak the identities of the extra givens to force only the solution path I'd embedded – that unique X-Wing or whatever. I want tools like this for all the above types and new types going forward, to aid the construction and publication of these puzzles. But not to do automated generation of the content itself.

4. Let me pay you to help with web design, graphic design, and other things. This will start with a website. Dave Millar has already helped me build a starting framework that will launch soon. There's a WordPress blog that will be the main place for content. We've already adapted an API Dave made to track puzzle favorites to also include "answer checking" with short strings. We'll know who's solving the puzzles, and how soon after posting they solve them. So we're going to have leaderboards, kudos, or other incentives for the solvers to keep coming back. We're also going to log user's ratings of puzzles, and find some way to pay out bonuses to the constructors of the best puzzles.

This is a start, but more good ideas are needed. If you give me a good idea for a new web feature, I'll compensate you. If you can implement it, I'll get you more. And it is not just web design. I need graphic design help. With "The Art of Sudoku" I did everything myself. I made a good company logo. I want a great one. I made a good book cover. I want great ones. I intend to use crowdsourcing to fund parts of this, so I'll also need help making videos to post on Kickstarter. If any of this fits with your interests and skill sets, please tell me.

And this will eventually be about networking. You are all close friends I've collaborated with before. I know some names I want to bring in, but I don't have the same close connection with those names. Some of you will know the next wave of designers that we should try to bring in. While I'm starting US only at the moment, I want to go international quickly too. I can't wait to be publishing juno's Masyu and Nurikabe for example. Let's make that happen. The sudden disappearance of the free content from a dozen top puzzle blogs reappearing at our site (still free at the start) will give us the whole tapped-in puzzle community within weeks or months, while we grow to new users and begin to implement monetization plans.

Right now I'm running this as a sole proprietorship, and I'd like to bring you all in as consultants, or "puzzlemasters", if you are interested. This is the easiest way for me to launch without having any salaried employees. And as we start, cash is all you'll be getting for the things you do. But if this gets big and becomes a corporation of some sort, it will be easy to look back at how much you've contributed – your "cash" statistics – to figure out future compensation. This could mean fixes that change formerly flat fees for puzzles to money + royalties. This could mean bringing people on as full-time employees, assigning equity stakes, or both. All will be on the table. When that moment comes, we'll have that talk. For now, I just want you to sign up and stop working for nothing.

Let's all grow a brand for great puzzles by forming a union of the best puzzle designers. And then, with the best content and a growing user-base, we can beat the computers and the other puzzlemasters who should be doing more but are instead sitting comfortable atop the old business model for puzzles.

Sincerely,

Thomas Snyder, aka "Dr. Sudoku"
Puzzle Grandmaster and CEO
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