

# Bingo Card Creator

## Visit App

Create an app that helps teachers create bingo cards efficiently.

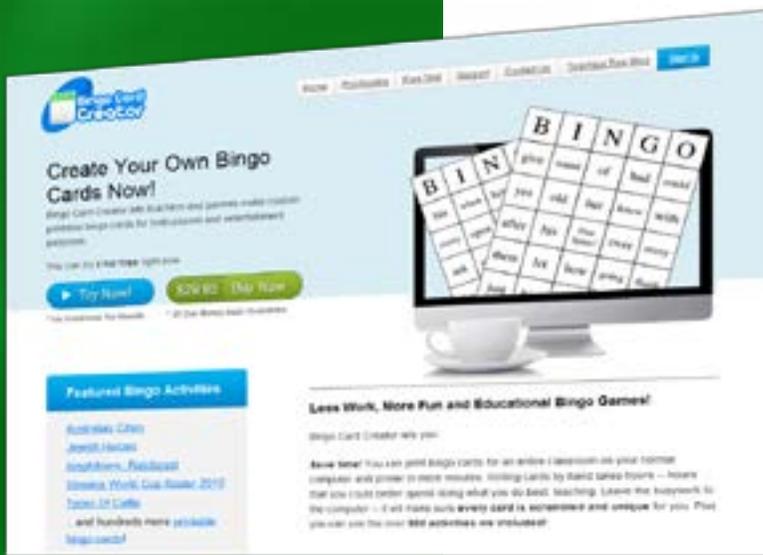
## Project Maker

Patrick McKenzie

# Hi Patrick

— You are a legend on HackerNews and other forums as “patio11”—most people know you as “patio11” there.

## Tell us about Patrick McKenzie and how you got started.



I graduated from Washington University in St. Louis with degrees in Computer Science and East Asian Studies. To make a long story short, I really wanted to be an engineer but was worried about increasing competition from China/India—so I thought if I did one really hard thing plus engineering, I would have a nice safe job at Microsoft for the rest of my life. Japanese is really hard, and Japan spends billions on American software, so I thought that was a natural fit. After graduating, I went to Japan to firm up my business Japanese.

My first job was as a technical translator at the prefectural technology incubator here in Gifu. (I won't tell you which one, but since Gifu is Japan's answer to Kansas, that narrows it down quite a bit.) I was a bit under-challenged at my job, so I spent quite a bit of time playing World of Warcraft in the evenings and wondering, “When does my career, you know, actually start?” Eventually, I decided to take matters into my own hands and create Bingo Card Creator, a small software business. I had no idea whether it would be successful and was aiming mostly to learn things about selling software on the Internet. This would have been back in late June 2006. BCC has grown gradually since then. I eventually switched jobs from translator to engineer and spent a very hard two and a half years at a Japanese mega-corp before reassessing what I wanted from life again. In the interim, BCC had grown to the point

Browser



where it would support me, so I went full-time on it as of April 2010. Since then, I've been doing BCC, consulting, and working on my new business, Appointment Remind-er (more on that later).

## You started Bingo Card Creator while you were working. How did you find time for both?

Bingo Card Creator was launched on a budget of eight days and \$60 and has been profitable since. The main reason that I had time to do both in the beginning was that my job was quite cushy indeed with regards to hours—somewhere in the 35 to 40 region. By the time I became a salaryman and was working 50 to 70+ hours a week, I had already optimized much of the running of BCC such that I could do things like throw a pair of A/B tests up over the weekend and just answer emails briefly during the week.

I'm very happy that I started part-time, since it reduced the stress of running a business considerably. In this last year, I've never been close to starving, but I definitely have transient money issues—such as can I afford to buy my ticket for Christmas now, or do I have to wait until October when BCC has a big month? With a full-time paycheck, that never even entered the radar screen. Also, with my general level of risk tolerance, I probably would never have been comfortable taking the leap without first testing out that I was able to swim.

## Can you walk us through the tools you used to build the initial version of BCC?

The first version of BCC was a downloadable Java Swing program written in Eclipse. The website was a template from [Open Source Web Design](#), customized by hand in Notepad, since that was the limit of my web programming ability at the time.

## What parts of your side project do you do, and what parts do you hire out?

At the start, I did absolutely everything for BCC. Since then, I've largely outsourced web design and writing new content for the website, but continue to do most of the programming, marketing, and customer support myself.



## What technologies are you using now?

As I grew in programming ability, the BCC marketing site transitioned from a static HTML site to a Ruby on Rails application, largely because this allowed me to conveniently publish large amounts of bingo-related content. (I have 942 or so individual bingo activities, with the intent of ranking for any activity a subject could possibly want to teach a lesson about using bingo. See <http://www.bingocardcreator.com/bingo-cards/>).

After I had the site running in Rails and figured out how to programmatically generate bingo cards without using the Java code, it was only about another three weeks of work to make an online version of the software. I launched this in summer 2009. Online software is hugely superior to downloadable software for [reasons that I've covered extensively on my blog](#). I've gradually all but eliminated the downloadable version, and most customers now use the web version. Conversion rates to purchase on it are about double what they were on the desktop version, and support costs are literally an order of magnitude less. I'm extraordinarily happy about this result.

## So when you launched, how long was it until you saw your first sale, and where did it come from?

BCC had its first sale approximately two weeks after launch, to a searcher who found an article I wrote about Dolch sight words bingo. If you were an English teacher, you'd have heard of the Dolch sight words, which a pedagogist identified many years ago as key to early readers' understanding of English. There are about 200 of the words, grouped into five grade levels. Many teachers don't know which words are on which grade's list, but they know enough to search for them. I figured that if I put up the word lists and provided an activity to go with them—Dolch sight words bingo—that would be an effective method of selling BCC. This was a major success and provided most of my sales for the first year.

## Can you walk us through all the different sites that make up Bingo Card Creator?

Bingo Card Creator is at <http://www.bingocardcreator.com> and is my primary marketing site for BCC, and also hosts the web application proper.

My blog is at <http://www.kalzumeus.com>. It doesn't do much for BCC these days, but was instrumental in getting links in the early years.

I have a stable of micro-sites covering individual bingo activities. Here are two that are fairly representative:

- <http://www.halloweenbingocards.net>
- <http://www.christmasbingocards.com>

These function mostly to pick up searches for their one activity and funnel a portion of those searchers into the trial for BCC.

## Micro-sites—for someone who doesn't know SEO too well—would you recommend this approach to them? Did it take long to appear in search results and start getting customers from it?

The reason those micro-sites work is that they are on exact match domain names. SEOs call those EMDs. If, for example, you own halloweenbingocards.{com,net,org} and someone searches for exactly “Halloween bingo cards,” you get a major bonus to your ability to rank for that particular search.

EMDs make up a fairly minor portion of my overall income for BCC these days. I wouldn't call them core to my strategy, but they're quite profitable. Whether I would recommend you to try them for your business depends on the particulars—if, for some reason, there is an EMD on a high-volume keyword that is clearly relevant to you and is available for \$8.95, absolutely—go to town. Would I suggest buying one for \$20,000 if you were just going to put a micro-site on it? Probably not. Then again, with the cost of AdWords in some commercial verticals, I could think of EMDs in enterprise software markets that would be a steal at \$20,000.

While building Bingo Card Creator, you built this side project from scratch in a week and blogged about it. It was really motivating for people to read about your success with the project. Do you think the blog itself helped that success at all? What kind of advantages did you have by being so transparent?

I have been blogging since I started back in June 2006. My specific reason for doing that was that a particular blog post by Brian Plexico, who made skeet shooting software, showed me that it was actually **possible to run a part-time software business**. Prior to that, I thought it was impossible—that there was some amorphous law of nature that said that if you didn't have 80 hours per week, you should just give up.

Over the years, I've developed a bit of a reputation for saying true and useful things in an amusing manner. That reputation is immensely valuable to me. For one reason, links to my blog improve my ability to rank for bingo-related searches, providing a direct SEO benefit to my website that I wouldn't have if I was just quietly working in my kitchen. For another reason, my Internet presence (blog, HN, various forums, conferences, etc.) acts as fairly effective networking for my consulting business. There aren't that many major tech companies here in Ogaki, but folks who have money and problems know my name as a result of my Internet activity, and they trust me to take their money and fix their problems. I'm often happy to oblige.

## What do you have to do to “maintain” Bingo Card Creator now?

As of writing, I've sold about \$26,000 of BCC this year. I anticipate I'll round out the year at or near \$50,000, modestly up from \$46,000 last year. Profits are generally somewhere in the neighborhood of 60% of sales.

BCC is in maintenance mode right now, so the only thing I routinely do is answer customer support email. I average 20 minutes of it a week. (Prior to quitting the day job, I averaged about five hours a week over several years, including development, marketing, support, and the like.)

My hourly wage for BCC in 2011 is probably somewhere north of \$500.

## What is the biggest mistake you made while building this project?

I did many things that were, in hindsight, suboptimal, but I'd like to think they were learning opportunities. I probably could have quit my job earlier if I had had more confidence in my own abilities, particularly as a consultant, since that massively de-risks running a product business. (If you have a bad quarter, sell a week or two of your time and wait for a good quarter.)

## What has been your biggest surprise?

Hundreds of thousands of people urgently need bingo cards to teach their kids how to read, and thousands of them are willing to pay \$30 to get them.

## Can you tell us about Appointment Reminder—how did you come up with the idea and how is it going? Have you considered live-blogging the journey like Bingo Card Creator?

I don't know if I would call Appointment Reminder a side project. My intention is that it is a business and will eventually comprise the bulk of my income. Sadly, the first nine months of it have not exactly had a rocket ship trajectory, but I'm still working on it.

**Appointment Reminder** was one of a couple dozen ideas sitting in a notebook when I quit my day job. I had experimented with Twilio a bit and was sure that it was going to revolutionize many businesses, so many of the ideas were Twilio-related. AR was clearly within my capabilities to actually deliver and pushed buttons for customers I talked to. Plus, when I implemented an MVP of it (a simple faked calendar which, if you clicked to “schedule an appointment,” the computer would call you and mark you as “confirmed” for your appointment or “canceled”—prior to reading you a prepared spiel about how good of an idea buying AR was), people were ready to write checks.

I released the MVP in approximately May of 2010, got distracted by life for a few months, then officially launched in December. It has been slowly growing organically.

## Did you take a similar approach to developing Appointment Reminder as you did Bingo Card Creator?

Appointment Reminder is a Ruby on Rails application, notably using Twilio for phone calls and SMS messages. My initial costs were on the order of \$2,000 for web design, hosting, and Twilio credits. The MVP took about two weeks to write and publish. The actual application took about six weeks from the first day I wrote non-MVP code to the day I started actually charging customers' credit cards.

My goal for Appointment Reminder was to have 200 paying customers by December 2011. Candidly, that looks unlikely at the moment, largely because other priorities have kept me from marketing it the last few months. I finally got back in the saddle in August, and then got sideswiped by immigration issues. Ah, well. It will happen when it happens.

Long-term? There are a few possible futures. If AR sold \$20,000 of service a month, that would leave me sitting pretty happy. It is possible that I'll eventually decide that what I really want to try next is to try running a company which takes investment, and if I ever decide that, I think AR is a good candidate for it.

## How are you getting users for the product?

To the surprise of essentially no one, my main strategy for marketing AR is through organic SEO.

I am not publishing exact stats for revenue/traffic/etc. for Appointment Reminder. The main reason is that there exists a subset of the market which is less "sign-up on your website for \$79 a month" and more "six months of presentations and then we sign contracts including an NDA and then cut you a five-figure check every month."

It wouldn't help either my readers or myself to say "Appointment Reminder is puttering around at \$1,200 a month of sales, boo hoo hoo," when the actual truth was "Oh yeah, and I've got a \$200,000 contract from a hospital system—but shhh, don't tell anybody because the NDA would make me lose my firstborn if that gets out."

## Do you think Appointment Reminder will be as successful as Bingo Card Creator? What are your current plans for it?

I would be disappointed if AR had BCC levels of success in four years. I'm pretty happy with where I am in life right now, don't get me wrong—but I've done "run a scrap-py little shoestring-business." Time for new challenges. New challenges might not be "build the next Facebook," but it is equally not "build the next Bingo Card Creator."

## What has been your biggest lesson so far with Appointment Reminder?

It's amazing how much easier it is to consistently work five hours a week when you have five hours of free time than when you have all the free time you could ever want.

## Are Bingo Card Creator and Appointment Reminder your full-time projects now? What else do you?

I do about ten to twelve weeks of consulting every year, largely on SEO, marketing, and conversion optimization for software companies. I never really planned on doing this, but people who I respect enormously started offering amounts of money that I just couldn't say no to, to do projects that were crazily interesting. I probably won't be doing that for forever, but it's great fun for the moment, lets me travel to the US semi-regularly, and helps to fund AR development. (For example, I can pay decent American-scale wages to the guy doing my web design right now, and eventually, I'll probably bring on folks to handle the programming so that I can focus on marketing/sales/etc.)

## What advice would you give to a developer who is just about to begin a micro-isv side project?

Ship! Ship! SHIP!

The single common thing among all entrepreneurs you admire is that they got over their mostly irrational fears and obsessions and actually shipped something to customers in return for money.

I've talked to literally hundreds of people who aspire to being micro-ISVs (such as to run small software businesses), and far and away, the biggest failure mode is that they never actually release software for money. (Number two, with a bullet, is releasing something but not marketing it.)

SHIP!

**Ship! Ship! SHIP! SHIP!**