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Video Game Developers

Industry Overview

Bridging the industries of entertainment and software engineering, video game developers create immersive virtual worlds for the public to enjoy. Much like movies, songs, and other products of the entertainment industry, video games are not created in response to a societal demand. Unlike the need for a cure to a disease or the need of a software solution to streamline workflow, video games usually do not have a similar need. There are cases where video games may be purposed for rehabilitation and early education software, but most mainstream video games are for entertainment purposes only. Thus a video game developer creating mainstream video games must generate need or demand through the demonstration of the product, and because demand is different per game, the industry grows on an as-needed basis with that demand. A video game studio may range in size from an independent, one-person operation to big companies known for their multi-million dollar productions called AAA games. Regardless of size, developers strive to create smooth experiences, utilize the utmost of current hardware limitations, and deliver their products on a platform that maximizes audience exposure.

Japan may be considered the homeland of video games, but the popularity of video games in the Americas and Europe is so formidable that these Western markets dictate the global trends of video games scheduled for global release. Despite global trends, many Japanese video game companies still cater to local markets. Japan has a video game market, largely unnoticed in the West, consisting of visually simplistic, choose-your-own-adventure games which constitutes for a majority of the video game titles released in Japan every year. The mainstream video games that reach Western audiences are from well known studios like Square Enix with their role-

playing Final Fantasy series, Bandai Namico with the arcade fighting games of the Tekken series, Capcom with their arcade fighting franchise called Street Fighter, Konami with their Metal Gear action series, and the publisher of the Grand Turismo racing games, Sony Interactive Entertainment. Among the mainstream games, it is stereotypical of Japanese games to have a linear story line and have a fantasy theme while Western games are known for explicit gore and darker themes. Notable Western video game studios include Electronic Arts Games who develops professional sporting franchises' games, Blizzard with their online role-playing game World of Warcraft, Ubisoft with their Assassin's Creed action series, Bethesda with their medieval role-playing series called Elder Scrolls, and Rockstar Games who develops the controversially violent Grand Theft Auto series. Although recently, more independent developers have saturated the Western market with first-person shooters type games. This proliferation of independent developers is due to the availability of a more accessible marketplace on major gaming platforms such as computers, Sony's PlayStation 4, Microsoft's Xbox One, and Nintendo's Switch. The games from such independent developers are known as indie games. Compared to AAA games, indie games are known for poorer aesthetics and prone to have glitches, but some players consider such qualities to be charming.

Platinum Games Inc.

Of the popular AAA titles released in 2017, Platinum Games Inc.'s Nier: Automata appealed to audiences in the East and West. Nier: Automata was published by the famed Japanese role-playing game developer Square Enix, but had an unorthodox combination of game mechanics such as Japanese-style top-down perspective shooter, tile-shifting puzzles, open-world role-playing, multiple endings, and melee battles. The game mechanics were intertwined with a dark, post-apocalyptic fantasy setting that Western markets preferred. As Nier: Automata's sales

exceeded 1.5 million copies, Platinum Games Inc. avoided bankruptcy with the success of the once lackluster Nier franchise (Freeman, 2017).

According to their Company Overview (n.d.), Platinum Games Inc. employs a modest 197 employees at their sole location in Osaka, Japan. Unlike most AAA video game companies in Japan, Platinum Games Inc. does not have branch offices nor are they located in Tokyo. The significance of the company's location is rooted in the history of the founding members' previous employer, Capcom, whose main offices are also in Osaka. Atsushi Inaba, Hideki Kamiya, and Shinji Mikami were members of Clover Studios under Capcom's direction as an "internal Capcom studio formed under the ideal of bringing together top creative talent to make original titles" (Stanton, 2016, para. 5). Despite expectations, Clover Studios' games sold poorly and Inaba, Kamiya, and Mikami formed SEEDS Inc. after parting with Capcom. SEEDS Inc.'s goal was to develop the original games that the "sequel-obsessed and resistant to backing new IP" Capcom once hindered (Stanton, 2016, para. 8). Tatsuya Minami, who was a producer at Capcom, shared SEEDS Inc. motivation to create new and original video games, and would merge his ODD Ltd. with SEEDS Inc. to form Platinum Games Inc. in October of 2007.

Notably, three of the four founders and the original director of the Nier series shaped Platinum Games Inc. into a successful action-game developing company. Atsushi Inaba was the CEO of SEEDS Inc., but became a producer, executive director, and early vice president at Platinum Games Inc. As described in an interview by Corriea (2015), Inaba is very involved in every stage of game development such that Inaba personally meets with developers multiple times each day. Tatsuya Minami was the first president of Platinum Games Inc. and under his leadership, the company developed notable games such as the Bayonetta series and a spin-off of the popular Metal Gear series from Konami. Minami is no longer president of Platinum Games

Inc. but it is unclear whether Minami is still employed within the company (Ashcraft, 2016). The director of the popular Bayonetta series, the current vice president, “the studio’s most experienced director and lead game designer” is Hideki Kamiya (Laswson, 2017, para. 15). Kamiya is the visionary behind Platinum Games Inc.’s largest titles, but perhaps his biggest title in collaboration with Microsoft, Scalebound, never left the development phase. With Scalebound out of production, Platinum Games Inc. game designer, Takahisa Taura, recruited the creator and director of the Nier franchise, Yoko Taro, to develop the company’s next big AAA title, Nier: Automata. Continuing from the success of Nier: Automata, Platinum Games Inc. recently demonstrated their next AAA title based on Granblue Fantasy, a popular Japanese mobile game, and hinted at a sequel to the Bayonetta series.

Current Trends

As smartphones became common, video game developers targeted mobile platforms to compete in the handheld console market that had been monopolized by Nintendo’s 3DS. Nintendo returned to the handheld market in 2017 with their hybrid console, Switch, but smartphones still accounted for 35% of developers’ platform choice (GDC, 2017). Even with AAA developers creating for the mobile platform, mobile games are targeted towards casual audiences who do not mind the compact user interface, lower production quality, and lower hardware specifications of the mobile platform. These negative impressions repel serious or professional players, but there has been no shortage of high grossing titles such as Angry Birds, Clash of the Clans, and Candy Crush.

Virtual reality is the future of interaction between video games and players, and mobile developers adapted the technology as greater processing power and sensors became readily available to smartphones. Building off augmented reality which superimposes virtual objects into

a live video stream, virtual reality immerses users into a completely virtual world and uses sensors to track a user's position in that virtual world. Modern smartphones are equipped with cameras, accelerometers, and gyroscopes to act as sensors, but while virtual reality through smartphones are a cheap alternative to expensive stand-alone headsets and cumbersome full-room setups, the inaccuracy of smartphone sensors fail to produce a smooth, immersive experience. Other known setbacks of current virtual reality technology include the high processing power needed for virtual reality displays and users experiencing nausea.

Developers releasing special versions of their games optimized for computers along with the typical console versions have become more common. Once thought to have an incomparably worse performance to specially engineered consoles, computer gaming hardware has advanced to compete with and sometimes outperform mainstream consoles. Playing mainstream computer games often meant building or buying a specific gaming computer, and the skill of assembling a computer was too cumbersome for the average consumer. As tutorials from online communities such as YouTube became more readily available, many consumers overcame the mysteries of assembling a gaming computer. Presently, the increased demand for computer hardware has led to a supply shortage and an increase in retail prices (Shah, 2017).

Compared to older games where players are contained within individual levels, modern games favor open and procedural generated worlds. Open worlds allow players to access to most areas in the virtual world without the need to gradually unlock access through completing tasks. The wide range of freedom in open worlds gives players an escape from a linear story and lets players enjoy exploration. Procedural generated worlds are randomly created levels made from small, basic components. Conceptually, two procedural worlds are never the same, which keeps players interested in exploration. A recent game that demonstrated both features was No Man's

Sky which allowed players to traverse an open universe of planets generated from elements reminiscent of real world elements. Another notable open, procedural world games include Minecraft which featured a world built from interactive three dimensional pixels called voxels.

The World Health Organization recently recognized video game addiction as an illness, yet competitive gaming known as eSports are being considered for the Olympics. The growing eSport trend is noticeable in South Korea where internet cafes offer customers high-end gaming computers with gaming peripherals, but cases of customers dying from neglecting their own health while gaming have communities wondering if developers can implement something to curb addiction. With gaming addiction unresolved, developers are pressured to be more ethically conscious of a game's content in relation to addiction.

Personal Goals

As a graphic designer in college, visual communication is emphasized but not necessarily through coding. Web design courses introduce HTML, CSS, and Javascript, but not enough back-end programming to go beyond simple aesthetic purposes. User interface and user experience design, also known as UI/UX design, enables a higher level of interaction which improves communication with audiences; a result that aligns with the goals of graphic design. The ability to guide audiences through information in an optimal fashion is so high in demand that the title of graphic designer became synonymous with UI/UX designers. For UI/UX designers, the depth of interaction with vast audiences required from video games is ideal because it pushes designers to communicate visually beyond written language. The ultimate goal is to go beyond interfaces and have an influence over every aspect of the game that an audience senses, and that is the role of a game designer.

In the simplest sense computer science courses teach how to create programs and video

games are simply heavily interactive programs. Even seemingly less applicable subjects like database and networks can be applied to online gaming mechanics. Alternatively, students can familiarize themselves with game engines by recreating assignments in programs such as Unity or Godot Engine. For aspiring video game developers, it is a must to apply video game applications to all assignments or apply topics from assignments to game development. Group assignments may be an exception as not all computer science students share the same goal, so networking with students who are fellow aspiring video game developers are a great asset.

Just having a computer science degree is not sufficient to obtain a position in the video game industry. As stated at a professional panel discussion by PlayStation (2014), a portfolio of games created is more demonstrative of a developer's skill than just a degree alone. Although making a complete game is daunting and time consuming if not integral to coursework, an employer would not spend hours playing a potential hire's game, so creating multiple short demos highlighting an aspect of a game's mechanic is more realistic and achievable. Getting exposure to the industry also helps future developers understand what employers may seek. An immersive exposure such as a part-time job or an internship with a video game studio is ideal but may be difficult to obtain, so attending gaming conventions and staying updated with industry news are also viable sources of exposure. Conventions are also great places for networking with independent developers and larger companies, and some conventions have competitions with notable awards that would look great in a portfolio.

Conclusion

Even in the early stages of education, aspiring UI/UX designers should strive to develop games and connect with people in the video game industry. Future developers should keep updated with newer technologies that can enhance a player's feeling of immersion into a game's

virtual world and be conscientious of the negative social impacts of games. Through proactive learning, one could aspire to create a virtual world of a globally appealing AAA video game title like Platinum Games Inc.'s Nier: Automata.

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