Lecture 32

The Industry
A Changing Industry

- The game industry is rapidly changing
  - AAA studios are contracting/cutting back
  - MMO Online studios are largely dead
  - MOBA and mobile studios have plateaued

- Nearing the end of the “Indie Bubble”
  - Hard to recognized; hit-driven culture
  - A lot like getting into film development

- **Focus**: Understanding the trade-offs here
Classic Industry Roles

- Developers make the games
  - Core studio of salaried people
  - Hire freelancers as deadlines approach

- Publishers distribute the games
  - Get the games into the retail chain
  - Advertise the game to customers
  - Give developers advances to pay salaries

- Console Developers make game platforms
  - Publishers license to publish games for platform
  - In AAA space, limits profit on a $60 game to $30
Talk Outline

• **Types of Developers**
  • How they publish; how they are funded
  • Limited to North America

• **Breaking in to the Industry**
  • Some sobering facts
  • How to prepare yourself

• **Going it Alone**
  • The modern start-up culture
  • Important indie resources
First Party Developers

- Make **hardware platforms**
- In-house studio for platform
- Help drive the platform
- Often make “launch” titles
First Party Developers

- **Nintendo**: Mario
- **Sony**: God of War
- **Microsoft**: Halo
  - Microsoft strategy changes
3rd Party Developer-Publishers

- Large public corporations
- Many development studios
- Multiplatform development
- Many concurrent projects
- **Advantage**: deep pockets
- Constantly shipping titles
- Current titles bring revenue
- Use to fund new projects
- Can support *large* teams
3rd Party Developer-Publishers

- Activision-Blizzard
  - Modern Warfare, WoW

- EA
  - Madden, Battlefield

- Ubisoft
  - Assassin’s Creed

- Take-Two
  - Grand Theft Auto
Independent Developers

- Mainly work on other IP
  - Lots of ports/some licenses
  - “Developers-for-Hire”
  - Building cash for own IP
- Often work in parallel
  - X days/week on contract
  - Y days/week on own IP
  - But keep finances *separate*!
- Some financed startups
  - These days only on VR
Independent Developers

- Moon Studios
  - Ori and the Blind Forest

- Climax
  - Castlevania: Lord of Shadows

- Double Helix Games
  - Killer Instinct

- Riot Games
  - League of Legends
Independent Developers

• Moon Studios
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Sometimes they “break out”
Established Independent Developers

- Work with major publishers
  - Both first and third party
  - Often get acquired by them
- Or publish non-traditionally
  - Digital Distribution, Steam
  - Before that, shareware
- Few concurrent projects
  - Publishers control money
  - A game away from closing
- Hardcore credibility
Established Independent Developers

- Valve
  - Portal, Left 4 Dead
  - Actually a publisher…

- Bethesda
  - Fallout 3, Skyrim

- Bungie
  - Halo, Destiny

- Respawn
  - Titanfall
Mobile Developer/Publishers

- Make games very rapidly
  - Smaller games
  - Smaller teams (<10)
  - Short development cycles

- But sometimes take longer
  - Identify IP as a major hit
  - Use other titles to fund it
  - **Example**: Popcap

- A lot are being acquired
  - Or are established now
Mobile Developer/Publishers

- Popcap
  - Bejeweled, PvZ
  - Acquired by EA

- Tapulous
  - Tap Tap Revenge
  - Acquired by Disney

- Rovio
  - Angry Birds

- Pocket Gems
  - War Dragons
“Indie” Developers & Guys at Computers

- Original Properties
  - Everything is your own IP
  - Often unusual gameplay
  - Similar to this course

- Very informal cultures
  - Entirely digital distribution
  - Get credibility at festivals

- Paycheck not guaranteed
  - Don’t quit your day job
  - Kickstarter?
“Indie” Developers & Guys at Computers

- Jonathon Blow
  - Braid, Witness

- ThatGameCompany
  - Fl0w, Flower

- Team Meat
  - Super Meat Boy

- Spiderweb Software
  - Avernum, Avadon

- Most iOS Developers

17 Industry
“Indie” Developers & Guys at Computers

- Jonathon Blow
  - Braid

- ThatGameCompany

Essentially “Start-Ups”

- Super Meat Boy

- Spiderweb Software
  - Avernum, Avadon

- Most iOS Developers
MMO/MOBA Developers

- Games w/ long life-cycles
  - Development
  - Maintenance
  - Expansion

- Very expensive to develop!
  - Up to $300 million at start
  - Continuing cost after launch

- Also includes social games
  - FarmVille is type of MMO
  - That market is on mobile
MMO/MOBA Developers

- Blizzard
  - World of Warcraft
- CCP
  - EVE online
- Valve
  - DOTA 2
- Riot Games
  - League of Legends
- A lot less these days…
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Some Reality Checks

- Do you *really* want to get into the industry?
  - Salaries are **MUCH** lower than industrial average
  - Crunch time = lots of unpaid overtime
  - AAA space is still shrinking (because of costs)

- Average “life span” of developer is 5 years
  - After that, promoted up or out
  - Says something about stress in industry

- Might be happier at Google, Facebook, etc.
Some Reality Checks

- Do you *really* want to get into the industry?
  - Salaries are **MUCH** lower than industrial average
  - Crunch time = lots of unpaid overtime
  - AAA space is still shrinking (partly due to indies)
  - Average life span of developer is 5 years
  - After that, promoted up or out
  - Says something about stress in industry

- More likely a *job* than a *career*

- Might be happier at Google, Facebook, etc.
On the Other Hand

- Some people love all this
  - Creative process > money
  - Would work hard anyway
- Top developers do well
  - Build up lots of experience
  - Leave to found own studio
  - High profile kickstarters
- But you must have passion
  - Too much competition now
On the Other Hand

- Some people love all this

  Until you get middle aged

- Top developers do well
  - Build up lots of experience
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- But you must have passion
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More Reality Checks

• As with many jobs, intern experience is key
  • Work on a title between junior & senior year

• But internships are cutting back
  • EA used to be great at training ... and collapsed in 2008
  • Zynga hired their recruiting staff ... and then collapsed
  • Riot picked up the internship slack ... and then over-hired

• It is an incredibly competitive landscape
  • Lots of game programs with cheap talent
  • Application has to have a hook to get noticed
Internships: Established Studios

- Search early in year with recruiting team
  - Application process is usually very competitive
  - Check the company website regularly
  - Starts online with later site interview

- The goal is to teach and train students
  - Structured learning environment to ease you in
  - Hopes you come on for full-time after graduation
  - In the past, would offer job at end of internship
**Internships: Indep. AAA Studios**

- Searches later in year with one, two recruiters
  - Positions are not advertised outside their site
  - Application process is usually much easier

- Goal is to get cheap labor to push a title to ship
  - You will get thrown into the mix immediately
  - Will be treated exactly like a full-time
  - Hands-on experience and credit for a shipped title
  - Future job and other factors depends on the studio
Internships: Indep. AAA Studios

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Preparing Yourself

• Build **professional skills**
  • **Programmers**: C++, Objective C, Unity 3D
  • **Designers**: Maya, 3D Studio Max, Unity 3D

• Build a **portfolio**
  • Make lots of games (even outside of class)
  • Distribute them or take them to festivals

• Become an **expert** in related area
  • **Programmers**: graphics, AI, networking
  • **Designers**: UI design, animation, concept art
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Becoming an Indie Developer

- You need a (somewhat) finished game
  - CS 4152 project (or an independent study)
  - Much more polished than just one semester

- You need a publishing platform
  - App Store: Acceptance is easy; marketing is hard
  - Steam: No longer different from App Store

- You need to market your game
  - Showcase your game at festivals
  - Reach out to the gaming press
Becoming an Indie Developer

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  - Steam: Acceptance is hard, marketing is easier

- You need to market your game
  - You cannot ignore this!
Game Festivals

- Similar to a film festival
  - Submit game for judging
  - A jury plays your game
  - Selects games for event

- **Goal**: Pre-launch hype
  - Get press to see your game
  - Release early builds to press

- Critical to success
  - You are only “new” once
  - Initial sales are key
  - Hard to rescue a bad launch

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**Examples**

- Independent Game Festival
  - Extremely competitive
  - But has a student track

- Boston Indie Game Festival
  - Easier for east coast schools
  - Accepts more games

- IndieCade
  - Focuses on “arty” games

- Other lesser festivals
What About Kickstarter?

- Not for new developers!
  - Team with established record
  - Media with existing platform (e.g. webcomics)
  - Everyone else usually fails

- Failure has consequences
  - Known as the “Failed Kickstarter”
  - Kickstarter does not remove pages
  - Can recover, but need new project

- New developers need a “day job”
Alternative: Kessler Fellows

- Internal Cornell award to help entrepreneurship
  - Funds your work at a start-up company
  - So you are a (legal) unpaid intern for company
  - But they have to agree to take you on

- The fellowship is very competitive
  - Have to prove that you are an entrepreneur
  - Start with indie route; leverage for fellowship

- Example: John Austin from Apsis
Support Beyond CS/INFO 3152

- **CS/INFO 4152**
  - Capstone course: take more advanced courses
  - Requires game to be more advanced in some way

- **CS 4999**
  - Often sponsor two projects a semester
  - Take competitive proposals at semester start

- **Digital Gaming Alliance**
  - Student club to support game designers
Useful CS and Info Courses

- For programmers
  - CS 4620: Introduction to Computer Graphics
  - CS 4700: Foundations of Artificial Intelligence
  - CS 4758: Robot Learning
  - CS 5414: Distributed Computing
  - CS 5643: Physically Based Animation

- For designers
  - Info 3450: Human Computer Interaction Design
  - Info 4400: Advanced HCI Design
  - More coming soon…