

Lecture 27

The Industry

So You Want a Job in the Industry

- The market does **not** look good
 - Outside of China, video games are in decline
 - Consumers are revolting against costs and AI
- **Result:** Studios are cutting back heavily
 - Getting a job is more competitive than ever
 - GDC is more students than professionals
- But it is not impossible
 - We have sent students to Respawn, Blizzard recently
 - You have to be **driven** and need a **plan**

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- State of the Industry
 - Why are things so bad?
- Nature of the Industry
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Gaming Mirrors the Tech Slump

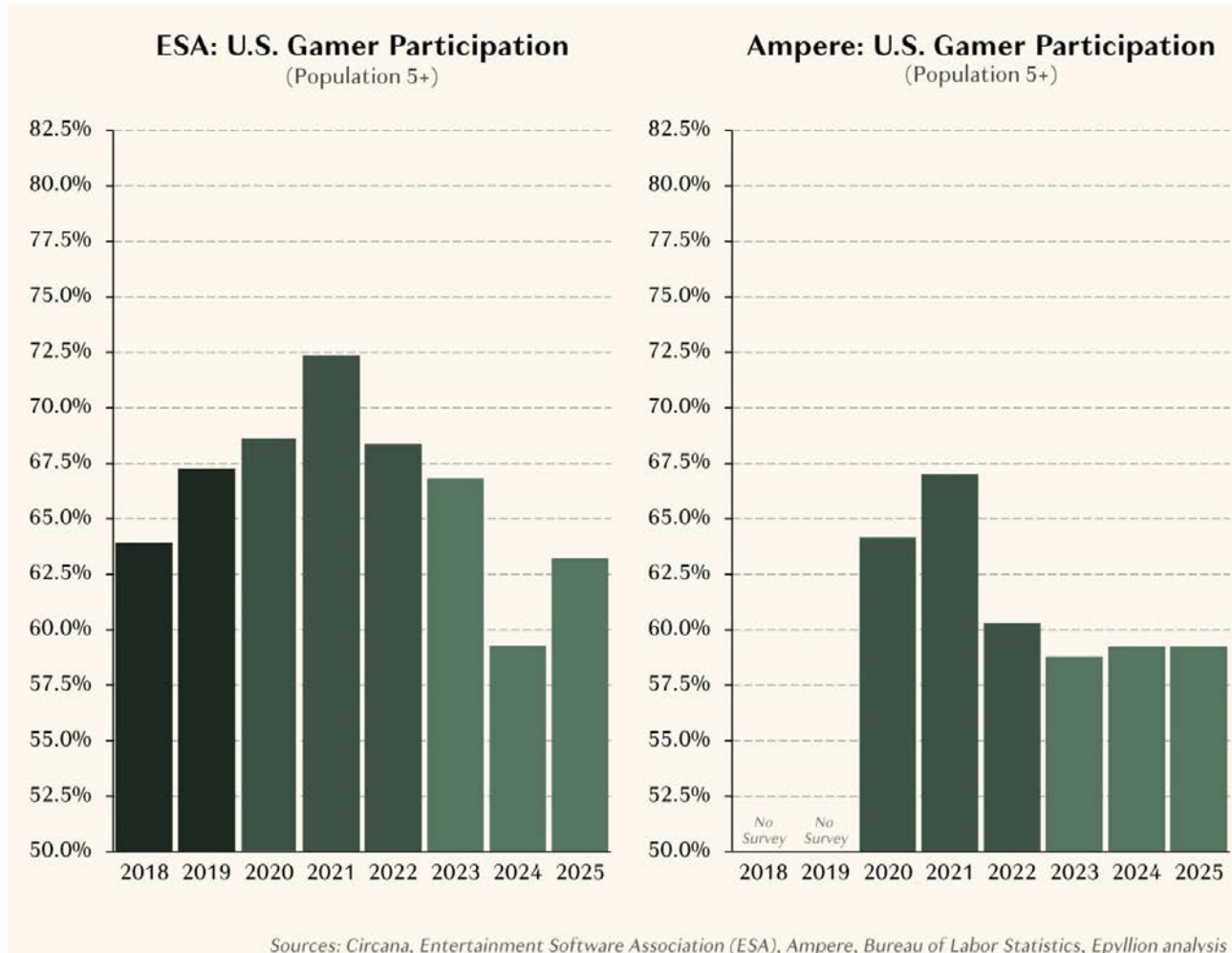
- The **pandemic** created certain expectations
 - There was a spike in demand for digital services
 - This caused a massive surge in tech hiring
- However, this change was **not sustained**
 - We have slowly “gone back to normal”
 - Demand in many places has gone to before pandemic
- Companies have **too many employees**
 - They need layoffs to remain profitable
 - Gen AI often used as excuse, even if not true

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- Companies
 - They
 - Gen A

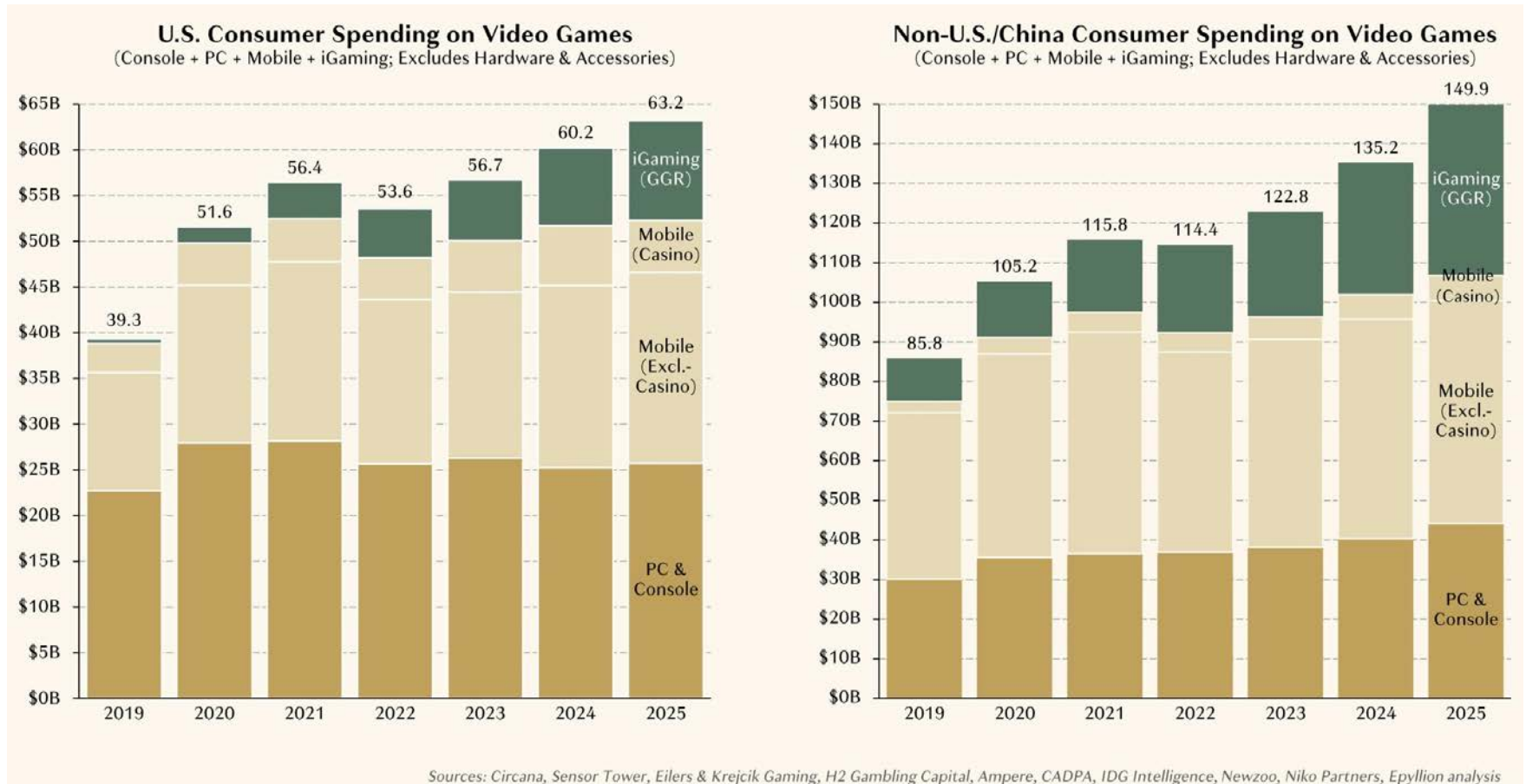
As a design field, gaming is more AI resistant than other tech areas.

Real Problem: Decline in Gaming



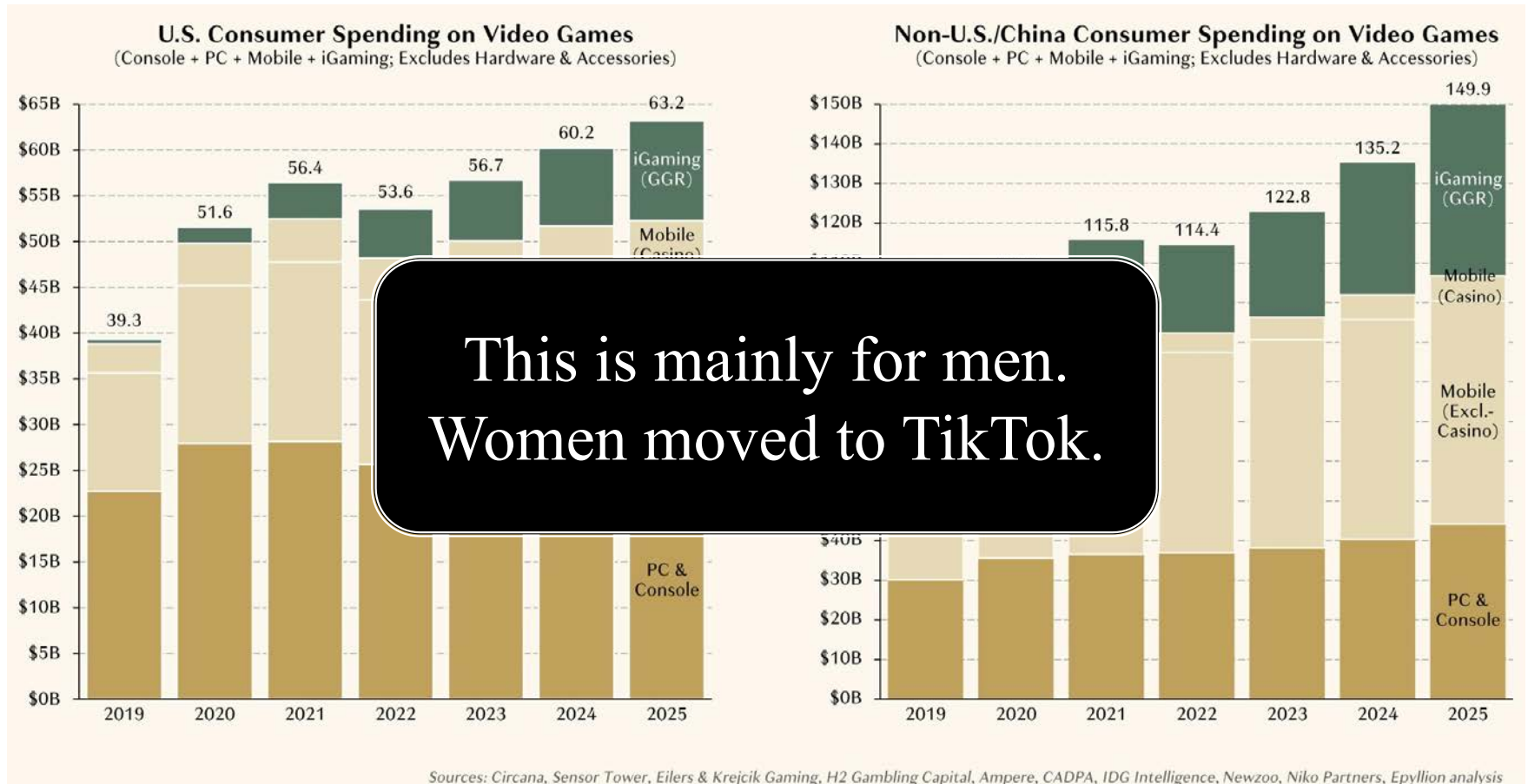
[State of Video Gaming in 2026, Matthew Ball]

Gambling is Eating a Lot of the Market



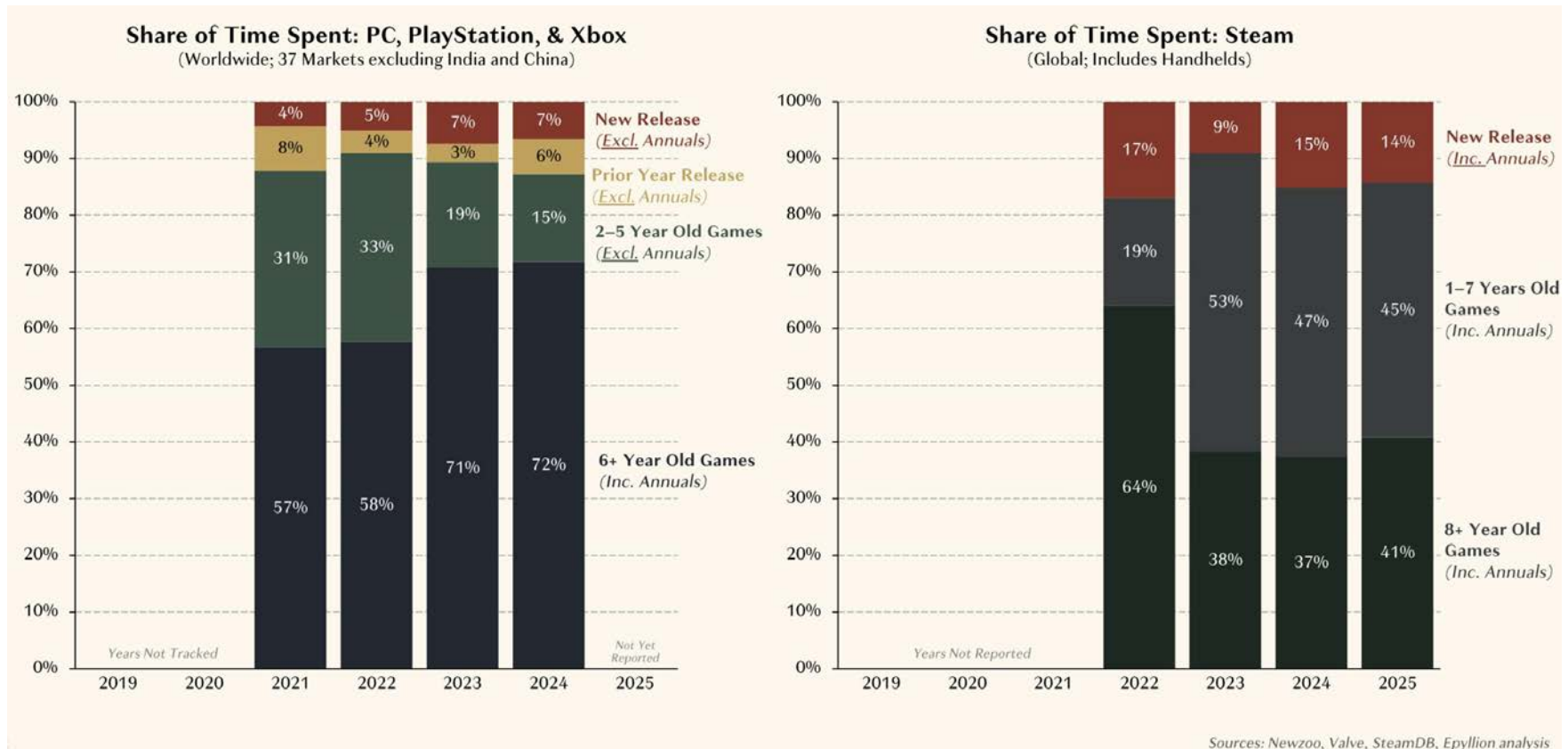
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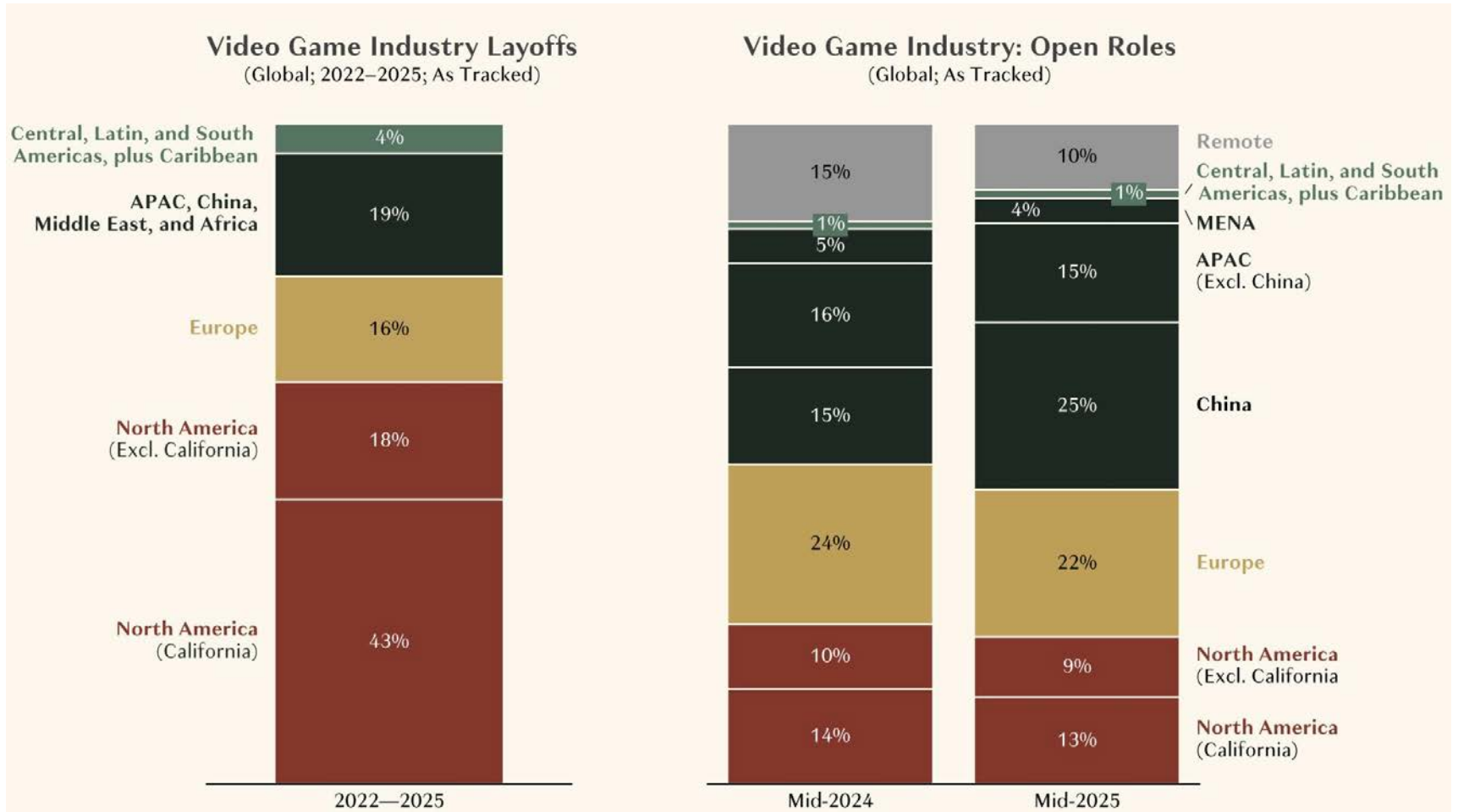
[State of Video Gaming in 2026, Matthew Ball]

And Those Left Play Older Games



[State of Video Gaming in 2026, Matthew Ball]

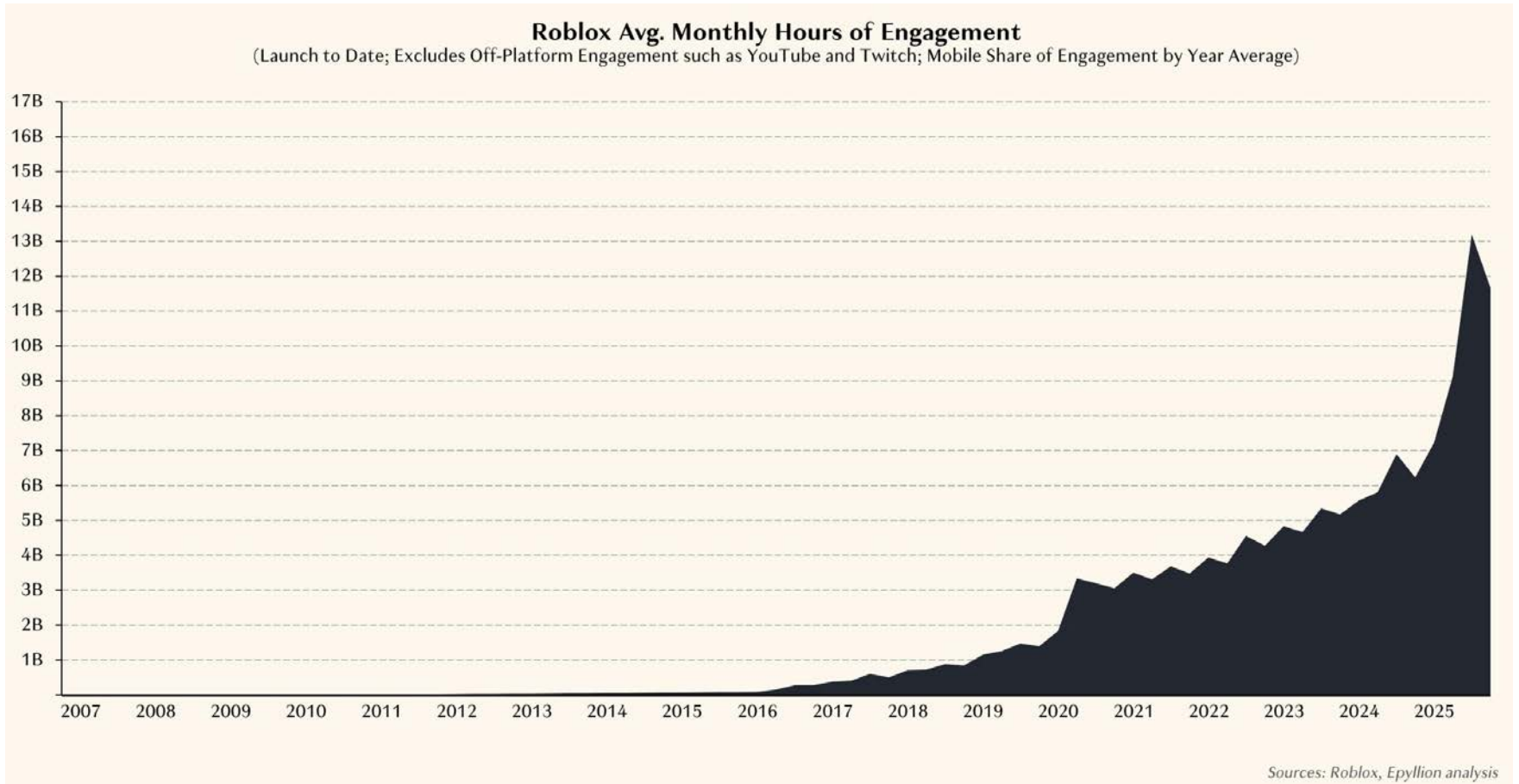
Job Growth Is Largely Outside the US



[State of Video Gaming in 2026, Matthew Ball]

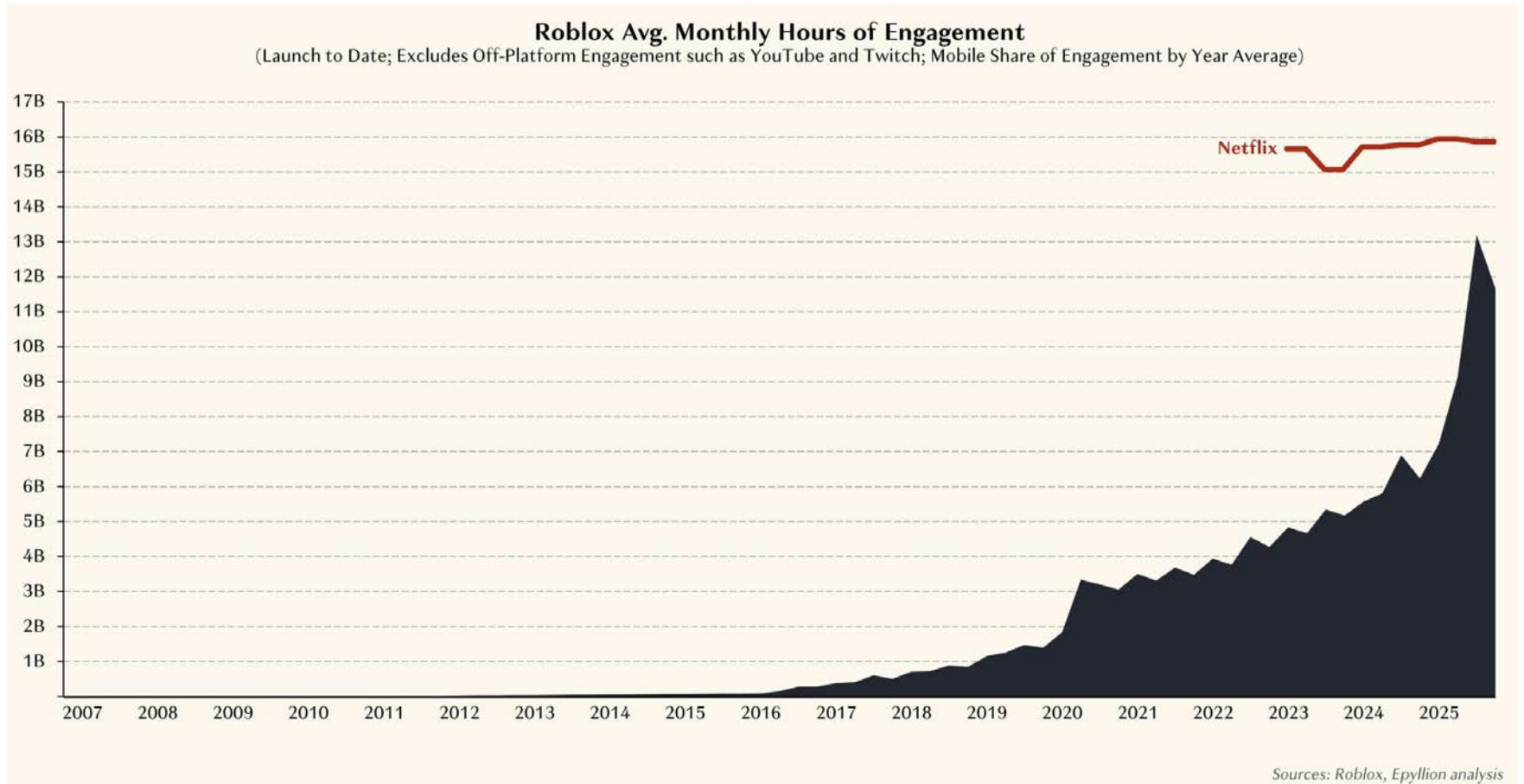
Sources: Amir Satvat / Always Supporting the Gaming Community

With One Exception: Roblox



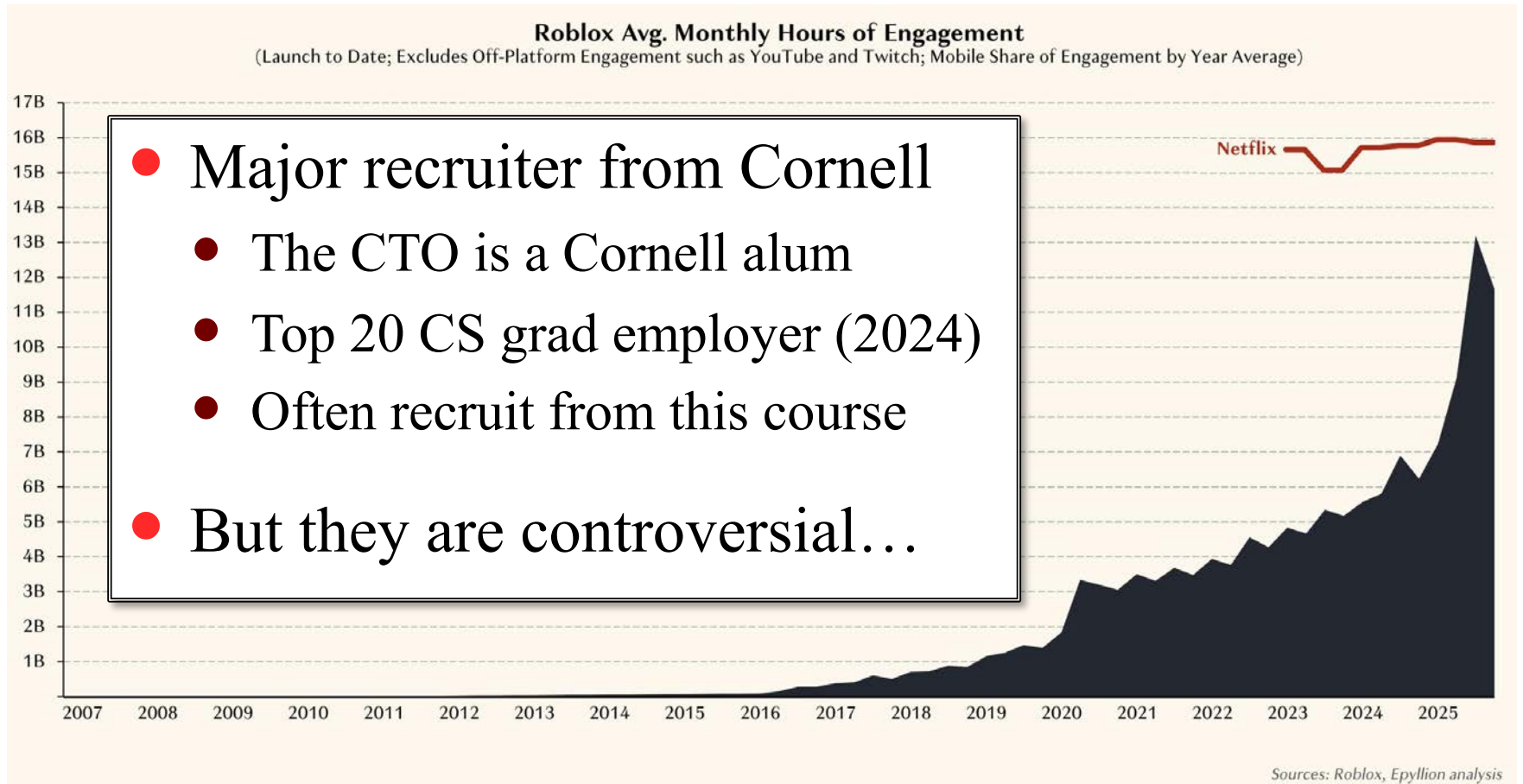
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The Classic Industry Roles

- **Studios** make the games
 - Core group of salaried people
 - Hire freelancers as deadlines approach
- **Publishers** distribute the games
 - Get the games into stores (digital or physical)
 - Advertise the game to customers
 - **Give developers advances to pay salaries**
- **Platform Developers** make game platforms
 - Publishers license to publish games for platform
 - In AAA space, limits profit on a \$60 game to \$30

But the Division is Not Clear Cut

- **Publishers** often own several **studios**
 - Treat studios as a portfolio of investments
 - In-house studios typically work on established IP
 - Riskier bets are made by external, contracted studios
- **Platform developers** are often **publishers**
 - Physical game media is largely dying
 - The store fronts are almost all digital these days
 - Platforms are incentivized to make their own stores
- True independent game studios are extremely rare

First-Party Developers



- These are platform studios
 - They make “launch” titles
 - Help drive the platform
 - Crucial for subscriptions
- Often “bought out” studios



First-Party Developers



Sony Studios:

- Insomniac
- Naughty Dog
- Sucker Punch
- Guerrilla Games

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Microsoft:

- Activision
- Bethesda
- Halo
- Mojang



Nintendo:

- Most in Japan
- Few overseas

3rd Party AAA 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
- High budget games: **AAA**

3rd Party AAA Publishers



- **EA**
 - FIFA, Battlefield
- **Ubisoft**
 - Assassin's Creed
- **Epic Games**
 - Fortnite
- **Take-Two**
 - Grand Theft Auto
- **Krafton**
 - PUBG: Battlegrounds

3rd Party AAA Publishers



- **EA**
 - FIFA, Battlefield
- **Ubisoft**

Too many associated studios to name

Creed



- **Take-Two**
 - Grand Theft Auto
- **Krafton**
 - PUBG: Battlegrounds

III (Triple-I) Publishers



- **Devolver Digital**
 - Enter the Gungeon
- **Playstack**
 - Balatro
- **Raw Fury**
 - Star Trucker
- **Annapurna Interactive**
 - Storyteller, Cocoon
- **Netflix (?)**
 - Monument Valley 3



In Between: AA Publishers



- AAA market at a budget
 - Cheaper games
 - Smaller in scope
 - Often a “weekend game”
- **Focus Entertainment**
 - Space Marine II
- **Kalypso Media**
 - Tropico Series
- **Paradox Interactive**
 - Cities: Skylines

In Between: AA Publishers



- AAA market at a budget
 - Cheaper games
 - Smaller in scope
 - Often a “weekend game”

I think this is one of the healthier spaces right now.

- **Paradox Interactive**
 - Cities: Skylines

Aside: What is Valve?



- They still make games
 - Counter Strike 2 (2023)
 - Deadlock (TBD)
 - But not core competency
- They are **the** PC publisher
 - Primary digital store
 - Epic, GOG are far behind
- They are also a platform
 - SteamOS, Steam Deck
 - Devs focus on platform tech
 - No need for “launch” titles

Independent Developers



- Not owned by a publisher
 - Publisher gives contracts
 - Publisher cannot close them (can only cancel contract)
 - Can have many publishers
- Funding is a mixture
 - Publisher advances
 - Product sponsorship
 - Profit from previous titles
- A game away from closing
 - Sold off if a game flops



Independent Developers



- **Larian Studios**
 - Baldur's Gate 3, Divinity
- **Supergiant Games**
 - Hades, Bastion
- **MegaCrit**
 - Slay the Spire
- **Team Cherry**
 - Hollow Knight, Silksong
- **Remedy**
 - Alan Wake, Control



Small Indie Developers



- Gaming rarely a “day job”
 - Often some other business
 - Build cash for the game
- Developers-for-Hire
 - Ports of existing titles
 - Game tech consultants
- Often work in parallel
 - X days/week on contracts
 - Y days/week on own IP
 - But keep finances *separate!*

Small Indie Developers



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 - Often some other business
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● Or Patreon Funding



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Small Indie Developers



- **Spiderweb Software**
 - Avernum, Geneforge
- **Zachtronics**
 - Opus Magnus, Exapunks
- **Patrick Traynor**
 - Patrick's Parabox
- **Bay 12 Games**
 - Dwarf Fortress
- **Pontoco**
 - Last Clockwinder



Hybrid Game Developers



- Mixes traditional and digital
 - Digital board game
 - Digital add-ons
 - Sometimes AR features
- Extension of mobile market
 - Typically mobile/tablet
 - Needs to be inobtrusive
- Overlooked but sizeable!
 - Often not part of job search
 - Need mobile experience



Hybrid Game Developers



- **Asmodee**
 - Mansions of Madness
 - XCOM: The Board Game
 - KeyForged
- **Wizards of the Coast**
 - D&D Beyond
 - Magic Arena
- **JackBox Games**
 - Quiplash
 - Fibbage



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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
 - Data shows this market is shrinking
- Average “life span” of developer is 5 years
 - After that, promoted up or out
 - Says something about stress in industry
- Might be happier in financial services

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
 - Data 1
- Average tenure of a developer is 5 years
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More likely a *job* than a *career*

On the Other Hand

- Some people love all this
 - Creative process > money
 - Would work hard anyway
- Great learning opportunity
 - Build up lots of experience
 - Skills are easily transferable
 - Can start your own studio
- But you must have **passion**
 - Too much competition now



On the Other Hand

- Some people love all this

Until you reach middle age

- Great learning opportunity
 - Build up lots of experience
 - Skills are easily transferable
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- But you must have **passion**
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Internships: Primarily Large Publishers

- Only publishers have money to fund these
 - Interns are a significant investment in time and money
 - Requires company with long term strategic plan
- Location means less likely to recruit on campus
 - For best result, you must apply to them online
 - Even for companies with alums in HR (e.g. Rockstar)
 - **Exception:** Roblox still recruits traditionally
- You must make yourself competitive
 - The Cornell FAANG advantage does not apply
 - You are competing with a lot of established programs

Marketing Yourself

- You need to make games
 - A lot of games; not just one game in a course
 - Studios care about what you can do, not your degree
- You need a portfolio for your games
 - Create a website with your games
 - Focus on images and videos, not GitHub links
 - **Example:** [Emily Penna](#)
- You need to publish your games (even for free)
 - Steam >>>>>>>>>> Itch.io
 - Steam has analytics you can convey in interview

Aside: Game Festivals

- Similar to a film festival
 - Submit game for judging
 - A jury plays your game
 - Selects games for event
- **Goal:** Networking
 - Event will have lots of press
 - Will write about your games
 - GDIAC viral hits start here
- This is how you get cred
 - GDC has too many students
 - You need a way to stand out

Boston FIG

- Festival of Indie Games
 - Favorite east-coast festival
 - Selective, but accessible
 - Currently in October 2026
 - Application data unknown
- I will fund your travel
 - Have to apply on your own
 - Have to get accepted
- Watch your CMS email

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 - Selective, but accessible
- Also NYC Festival in May (next week)
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Internships: Types of Positions

- **Technical Game Designer** (Gameplay Programmer)
 - You add game mechanics or features to a game
 - Tech and design skills are equally important
 - Interdisciplinary communication is a must
 - This is an area we excel in (point of this class)
- **Systems Programmer**
 - You program lower-level technical features
 - **Examples:** graphics, networking
 - Need to be (one of) the best at Cornell in area
 - Often do not even need to take game design courses

Internships: Types of Positions

- **Gameplay Analyst**

- This is a mixture of game design and business
- Look at player analytics (often using ML)
- Use analytics to redesign your gameplay
- We talk about this in the advanced class

- **Producer**

- This is a management position
- Similar to being project lead on your team
- We have placed many alums in these roles
- Traci is the ideal resource for this

Internships: Types of Positions

- **Gameplay Analyst**

- This is a mixture of game design and business
- Look at player analytics (often using ML)
- Use analytics to inform design decisions
- We talk to designers

I have no advice for artists
(Sorry)

- **Producer**

- This is a management position
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Interview: Technical Game Design

- They will ask you about **your games**
 - Want to know your goals & challenges you overcame
 - Want to know your specific contributions to each
- You will get a **test project** (no Leetcode)
 - In a commercial engine like Unity or Unreal
 - Might be a short game or features to add
 - Will be evaluated on efficiency, meeting prompt
 - Will be expected to justify your design choices
- After that, similar to normal technical interview

Alternative: Contractor Work

- Smaller studios often looking for cheaper labor
 - Not an internship; contract work for limited time
 - Want you to help them ship a title in crunch
 - Get hands-on credit and (potentially) credit
- Historically done through gamedevmap.com
 - But that pipeline no longer exists
 - Now fragmented into a bunch of smaller sites
 - **Examples:** Work with Indies, Remote Game Jobs
- This is **much** harder than getting an internship
 - This has suffered from student spamming

Alternative: Jiang Fellows

- Internal Cornell award to help entrepreneurship
 - Funds your work at a start-up company
 - 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 game festivals; leverage for fellowship
- **Example:** John Austin, founder of Pontoco

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So Was This All a Waste?

- Very few of you will actually go into industry
 - But you still may use your game design skills
 - These can give you an advantage in your search
- **Game engines** are now generic 3d platforms
 - Useful for visualization in many fields
 - Also (somewhat) useful for simulations
- **Game design** is a transferable skill
 - Interaction design applies to any customer-facing area
 - Challenge design and assessment are the same thing

What Areas Use Game Tech?

- **Medicine**

- Surgical training
- Medical scan visualization



- **Automotive**

- Autonomous driving simulation
- Virtual showrooms



- **Architecture**

- Real-time building walkthroughs
- Construction sequencing



What Areas Use Game Tech?

- **Film Production**

- Virtual production (Volume)
- Previsualization



- **Retail**

- AR try-on experiences
- Virtual showrooms



- **Manufacturing**

- Factory simulations
- Robot training environments



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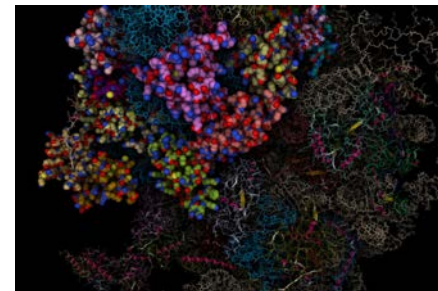
- **Defense & Aerospace**

- Flight simulators
- Mission rehearsal



- **Simulations & Visualization**

- Climate simulations
- Molecular visualization



- **Education**

- Assessment tools
- Virtual labs



This Informs the Cornell Philosophy

- Game design has existed at Cornell since 2002
 - We are one of the oldest programs
 - I have run the program since 2007
- We will never be anything more than a **minor**
 - You need a broad set of skills for a flexible career
 - Pure game development jobs are extremely rare
 - Holding on to them long is even rarer
- Game development skills make you very competitive
 - Where else will you have an interdisciplinary team?
 - Where else are you graded by real user feedback?

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Many alums note this as the most important course they took.