

New platforms open door to innovation in video gaming

March 10 2010, By Troy Wolverton

After struggling in recent years to adjust to its last revolution, the video game industry is now being shaken by another one.

The first revolution, symbolized by Nintendo's Wii, shifted the industry's focus from hard-core enthusiasts to a more mainstream audience. The new one, spearheaded by the iPhone and Facebook, is shifting the focus away from traditional console-based games to new platforms.

This upheaval -- like the one before it -- could prove unsettling or even deadly to established companies. But it promises to further democratize the making and playing of games.

It will be a big topic of conversation at the Game Developer Conference, which opened Tuesday in San Francisco. As in past years, the conference will include a number of two-day "summits" that focus on particular topics. This year, the summits will include two new ones that put the spotlight on iPhone games and games for social networks.

Among the speakers are many who might be considered revolutionaries, including executives from Facebook, social game makers Zynga and Playfish, and iPhone game maker Ngmoco.

As someone who has long played games but was never a "gamer" per se, I find the changes wrought by these upheavals very exciting, especially considering where the game industry seemed to be heading not so long ago.

As recently as four years ago, it looked like video games were going to go the way of the movie industry. The game industry was dominated by a handful of large companies structured to produce, create and distribute expensive [blockbuster](#) franchises targeting a young audience of enthusiasts.

The latest game consoles seemed likely to speed this trend along. Sony's [PlayStation 3](#) and Microsoft's [Xbox 360](#) were powerful machines whose sophisticated graphics and online capabilities required far more development time and resources and threatened to drive the cost of creating games -- not to mention their retail price -- to new heights. That augured a future of even fewer companies making games and potentially an even more narrow audience of consumers.

The casual games revolution -- led by the Wii, Nintendo's DS handheld, and the emergence of relatively simple games that consumers could download from the Web and play on their PCs -- changed all that. Instead of focusing on graphics and expensive licensed content, the companies and developers that spearheaded this revolution focused on making easy-to-play, fun and affordable games.

The success of that revolution upturned the industry, throwing the established game makers such as Electronic Arts off balance and opening up gaming to women and older consumers.

However, that revolution has had its limits, particularly in broadening the number and diversity of [game makers](#), not to mention games. What's so exciting about the new revolution is that it promises to replace the game console with entirely new platforms that are opening up the business to new [game makers](#).

Creating a game for the iPhone or Facebook is far less costly than for even the Wii. And -- complaints about Apple's approval process aside --

Apple and Facebook have opened their platforms to far more games than are offered on any of the consoles.

The new platforms offer access to huge audiences. [Facebook](#) has some 400 million users worldwide. Apple's sales of [iPhone](#) and iPod touch devices already have topped sales of Nintendo's [Wii](#).

Small startups and entrepreneurs can compete on an equal footing on the new platforms with the giant traditional players. They can explore new types of games and revamp old ones by making them easier to play alone or with friends.

To be sure, the revolution is messy and its outcome uncertain. There have been plenty of complaints, for instance, that the deluge of games on the new platforms has made it more difficult for consumers to find a particular title, and the opportunity for small developers to succeed on the new platforms may be closing a bit.

Even so, I'm betting that the end result will be a far greater number of companies making games, a far greater range of games being made, and a far greater number and diversity of people playing them.

Viva la revolucion!

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