

# Not all fun and (video) games for developers

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Big Huge Games in Timonium, Md., closed last May, taking nearly 100 jobs with it. Nine months later, a local studio that was launched from the ashes of the video game-maker shut down, too. And Zynga, which created "FarmVille" and "Words with Friends," closed its Baltimore County office several weeks ago.

So why aren't local [game developers](#) freaking out?

They're used to volatility - not this much, but quite a bit. And even with big game-makers facing tough competition and multimillion-dollar costs, tiny independent studios are popping up to take advantage of new opportunities in mobile and online gaming - and new ways of [raising money](#) to get games made.

"The industry moves really quickly," said Brian Reynolds, who co-founded three studios in Baltimore County and is working on funding to launch a fourth. "Things come and go. ... The technology's evolving, the platform is evolving and the market is changing for what kinds of games you do. Fortunately, it's broadening - you can make games for more and more people. But it's a turbulent industry."

Todd Marks thinks it's being turned upside down. He's got a newcomer's perspective: His mobile app and Web development company, Catonsville, Md.-based Mindgrub, launched a games division a year and a half ago to exploit the rise in [mobile gaming](#).

Demand is growing, he said, and Mindgrub Games now has more than a

dozen employees. He predicts market shifts will not be kind to the more traditional studios making big-budget "AAA games" for consoles and computers.

"That market got so terribly disrupted with mobile that they're on their way out," said Marks, Mindgrub's CEO. "It's now an indie market. ... But give it a couple years - when that market matures, companies like Mindgrub Games will be the next AAA studio."

It's not an easy market to forecast, given the speed of technological changes. Even measuring its current size is tricky.

Market-research firm NPD Group estimates U.S. consumers spent \$14.8 billion last year on video games, including smartphone games, and says that represents a 9 percent drop from the year before.

But game developers insist the count fails to capture all spending because new growth areas, including mobile games and online game downloads, are so hard to track. A separate report from the consulting firm PwC suggests that global sales of console and PC games have fallen in recent years but growth in online and wireless game sales is more than compensating.

PwC predicts that console-game sales will partially rebound when the next generation of consoles comes out. (NPD says gamers might have "a case of 'console fatigue.'" ) The PlayStation 4 is due for release before the end of the year.

Another element in the market: the indies. A variety of small game-development startups have launched in the past few years - some full-time efforts, some evening-and-weekend labors of love.

Among them: Twofold Secret, a two-person shop whose fifth release

will be a strategy game set in a summer camp "straight out of an '80s horror movie." There's also Discord Games, a four-man operation turning to funding website Kickstarter to raise money for its in-development computer game about a soldier trapped in a mining town. And there's Pure Bang Games in Highlandtown, Md., whose nine full-time employees have found a market making social and mobile games for clients - including other game-makers.

Discord Games founder James Petruzzi lives in Owings Mills, Md. The rest of the gang is elsewhere: Pennsylvania, Texas, Brazil. They make it work with Skype, the Internet call service. And they hire out on contract when necessary - their poster artist lives in New Zealand.

"It's just crazy to think we're working with people all over the world," said Petruzzi, who left a computer-programming job - not at a studio - to pursue his dream of game development in 2011.

Advances in technology are driving indie growth in other ways, too. While console games can run into the tens of millions of dollars to make, high-quality mobile games can be produced for tens of thousands, said Ben Walsh, head of the three-year-old Pure Bang Games.

"Mobile is an equalizer," said Walsh, whose company's "My Pet Rock" game on Facebook amassed 50,000 likes and attracted more than half a million players. "If your game can go viral, you can totally be successful on your own, just as a small team."

The downside to fewer jobs at larger, established studios is fewer jobs with health insurance and 401(k)s. Some of the developers laid off last month have left town - San Francisco-based Zynga relocated about half of its Timonium employees.

Gabriel Pendleton, president of BaltimoreGamer, a website for game

developers and players, worries about a brain drain to San Francisco and other places that have more big-name studios.

But optimism seems to be in larger supply than anxiety.

"I know quite a few people who are still in limbo now, especially after the Zynga closing, but I don't hear from many of them a sense of unease about their future," said Marc Olano, director of the computer-science game development track at the University of Maryland-Baltimore County. "In fact, some of them are talking about, 'Well, maybe now is the time to start an indie game.' "

Don Goddard, CEO of indie [game](#)-maker UFO Studios, calls this the most tumultuous period in his 20 years in the industry. And he's jazzed about it. He thinks the market shifts are custom-made for small, nimble developers.

"It's a phenomenal time because it's the classic American thing, which is opportunity," said Goddard, based in Stewartstown, Pa.

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