

Indie video games make their mark

November 23 2013, by Mehdi Cherifia



A customer is seen playing a game on Sony Playstation 4, on display at Best Buy store in Pembroke Pines, Florida, on November 15, 2013

Indie video games made by tiny teams on even tinier budgets are increasingly competing with the big guys, making inroads on consoles after cutting their teeth on phones and tablets.

While a blockbuster console game by mainstream publishers can set you back as much as 70 euros (\$90), an indie—or video game produced by an independent developer—costs much less, if anything.

In a sign of their growing appeal, both Microsoft and Sony have stressed that indie games—which started around the 1970s—can be played on their new Xbox One and PlayStation 4, the latest battleground between the gaming giants.

Microsoft launched its Xbox One on Friday in more than a dozen countries including Australia, Brazil, Britain, France and the United States. It went on sale less than a week after Sony's PlayStation 4 hit shelves on Monday—which notched up more than a million sales in the first 24 hours.

The console war can only bode well for the indie movement, whose developers number in the hundreds if not thousands, from individuals on shoe-string budgets to big teams with sophisticated studios.

For Sony, that future includes bringing independent game makers into the fold.

"They are making it a lot easier for people to self-publish on the PlayStation," said Katie Hallahan of US-based Phoenix Online Studios.

"It means the player will have a good variety of games, not all shooters and action but cool stuff that is a little different," she added.

"Xbox has been noticing that and catching up."

Some indies self-publish, some enter into contracts with mainstream firms. If their product catches on, it can sell in staggering numbers up into the millions—like "Braid", touted as one of the biggest all-time indie games, "Minecraft" or "Cave Story".



Fans play a game at a Microsoft retail store in Houston, Texas, on November 21, 2013

"In our team, we all worked first for large (game) publishers. Most of us then left to concentrate on personal projects and escape the constraints of doing games to order," said a French games developer speaking on condition of anonymity.

"We know we will not make a billion dollars in three days like "Grand Theft Auto V" but our way of working, in a small team, allows us to be easily profitable even if our games (only) cost a few euros," he said.

Until recently, indie games existed chiefly on tablets, smartphones, and digital distribution platforms such as Steam—but that is quickly changing.

Console makers have been providing software kits and making it easier for small studios to create games for their hardware as they try to broaden appeal far beyond the stereotypical "hard-core gamer" devoted to blockbuster shooter or adventure titles.

Independent games are now part of the console titans' strategy to put themselves at the centre of home entertainment with offerings including streamed films, music, and more.

"They are enjoying significant success and manufacturers cannot afford to ignore this segment," said Laurent Michaud, director of studies in charge of video games at digital economy think tank Idate.

"There is a need to offer independent games, to match their presence on other platforms."

After a slow start on consoles and some successes such as "Braid" and "Journey" on the current PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360, manufacturers intend to expand their offerings in this area.

"We are going to continue to offer top-notch games on PlayStation 4. But we are also going to make an effort with independent games," said Jim Ryan, president of Sony Computer Entertainment Europe.

"We know very well that people do not only buy a console for independent games but they can bring a freshness which ultimately benefits everyone," he said.

Microsoft has not commented publicly on its strategy, with its first indie games set to be available next year.

But there is scope for this to open up game design on a par with the model pioneered with Apple applications.

"With the Xbox One, everyone will eventually be able to get into [game development](#)," said Hugues Ouvrard, director of Xbox France.

The highly competitive market, however, remains one in which it is difficult to stand out—something important for indie games whose developers want to protect their creative freedom.

"To remedy this, a solution can be to lean on a big publisher," the French games developer conceded, "but the risk is losing control of your creation."

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