

Indie game makers shaking up world of play

March 4 2015, by Glenn Chapman



A pair of 3D glasses sit next to a tablet displaying the game Dig Rush at the Game Developers Conference in San Francisco on March 3, 2015

Independent studios are boldly taking on blockbusters in a gaming world being transformed by smartphones, tablets, and online access to play.

Thousands of [game](#) makers, many from studios made up of just a handful of people if not a one-person shop, are at a Game Developers Conference in San Francisco this week to share insights in a ceaseless

quest to get better at their craft.

"This is the largest family reunion of [game developers](#) in the year," International Game Developers Association chief executive Kate Edwards told AFP at the week-long gathering.

Veterans from big-name studios behind "Triple A" console games were in the crowd and headlining sessions, but independent game makers were being touted as the people shaking up the industry with creative new approaches to play.

"Indie game makers are basically democratizing game development," Edwards said.

"It is one of the most exciting things we have seen in this industry in a long time; I think it is a form of revolution."

At the heart of the revolution is the fact that tools for making video games are ubiquitous and often free, meaning people can take a shot at it the same way they could get pencil and paper to try writing a book, according to Edwards.

Distribution of independent games is equally accessible through online services such as Steam or virtual shops such as Apple's App Store or Google Play which stock shelves with digital games for play on smartphones or tablets.

Risk takers

Game Developer Jenna Hoffstein founded Little Worlds Interactive studio in Boston, where she is a member of a collective of indies.



Ubisoft Senior Producer Mathieu Ferland demonstrates Dig Rush at the Game Developers Conference in San Francisco on March 3, 2015

She works solo, farming some work out to contractors while producing games. Her latest title "Counting Kingdom" has won raves for combining education with fun.

Titles being developed by others in the Boston collective include a rhythm game that casts a player in the role of a monkey trying to save the rain forest and "Robot Roller Derby Disco Dodge Ball," which Hoffstein said was pretty much what the name suggested.

Independent studios tend to take a lot more creative risk than big operations behind Triple A titles, perhaps because launching a dud of a game could cost hundreds of workers their jobs along with losing millions of dollars in production costs, those interviewed by AFP

reasoned.

"The indie scene is really this proliferation of interesting, unique, possibly total-failure ideas," Hoffstein said.

"Because the independent is only risking their own salary, we have these zany, unique, off-the-wall ideas."

Examples that came to mind included mobile puzzle game "Monument Valley," which has a style influenced by minimalist sculpture and challenges players with optical illusions.

Console kings court indies

Powerhouse video game console makers Sony and Microsoft have both been reaching out to independent game makers, enticing them to play on PlayStation 4 and Xbox One, respectively.

"When the new consoles came out it, was a clear sign from the biggest players in the industry that some of the best innovation right now in terms of game content is coming from indies," Edwards said.



Attendees at the Game Developers Conference in San Francisco, California on March 3, 2015

"Big publishers want to be part of that; to get that really cool content."

Independent games broaden diversity of console play, providing lighter options to big-budget blockbusters such as Skyrim, Halo, and Destiny.

"There will always be someone who wants that really huge, massive game; it is like going to see a film in IMAX 3-D," said Edwards.

"But, then there are going to be people perfectly happy playing a game on their phone. There is room for all of them."

Titans including Google, Microsoft, Amazon, Sony, and Facebook-owned virtual reality firm Oculus are taking part in GDC to court game makers.

The risk-taking natures of Independent [game makers](#) is well suited for

exploring the potential of [virtual reality](#) head gear, according to Steel Crate Games studio co-founder Ben Kane.

"Independent developers can try lots of weird things and just experiment," Kane said of independent game studios such as his.

"Virtual reality is an unknown quantity."

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