

DGC Podcast 6 tekstivastine: The Game Industry Through the Eyes of a Junior Developer

Wanda

Welcome to the DGC podcast, brought to you by Expa Game Business Cooperative and Jamk University of Applied Sciences. I'm your hostess Wanda O'Rly and here we discuss game industry, games education. The bridge between them and any related topics and projects. Today in the studio with me, I have the junior game developer of the legendary Finnish game studio because Miika Anundi, welcome.

Miika

Thank you very much. Great to be here.

Wanda

And from Jamk University of Applied Sciences, we have the academic coordinator of the games education program. Mika. Welcome.

Mika

Hello. Thank you very much.

Wanda

In some of the earlier episodes of this podcast, we've been discussing and focusing on junior employment from the perspective of big and small companies, CEOs, strategists and recruitment programs. I say it's about time. We also hear the perspective of an actual junior dev. So let's start with the with all the essential. Miika, please tell us a little bit about yourself, your background, how you made your way to the position of junior dev at the college, and anything you'd like to add to that?

Miika

All right. Okay. I am bit afraid to say this out loud, since we have a have a real IT teacher here. I do not have any IT education at all. I'm, master of education. So I'm, a schoolteacher by profession, and, around 2018, I kind of started to, teach programing for children. And from that route, my, like, experience, expertise with, programing grew. And, of course, games have been always a big part of my life. So I started learning more and more. And that's in, in a nutshell where how I, how I got here.

Wanda

Yes. So to say out loud, we're not surprised that you don't have like, official games degree behind you because that's usually, thing for the younger generation and most of the people that we, introduce here in the studio have a different background and have found games through passion and hobbies. But in terms of experience and life lessons and attitude, how does this sound from your perspective, Mika?

Mika

Well, I'm not surprised at all because I see the same thing as you see. But I would say that it's, regardless of the background and regardless of education, if you have a passion and if you have a will to learn, that's the key thing here. Yeah, we do provide to formal education right now, but this has been around for a few years only. So before that, there was really not that much going on there in this field. But of course, as we move along, in the future, then we have more and more people who have been having this formal education on game development, and I think that's a good thing, but not surprised at all by this thing.

Miika

It would be so great to attend, stay, stay in school kids, seriously.

Wanda

But actually but this is that is really interesting because, the backgrounds of the game devs that we know are so various. So, can you elaborate a little bit on like it? Not now. You kind of told us how you got into programming and how your expertise grew, but, how did you actually find your way to a game dev position?

Miika

Yeah, to, to that actual point, my journey was longer than traditional school. Like, if you would go to a five year school. My journey, was a bit longer. So I started, as a, project manager teaching programming for, for some unemployed youth. And from there, expertise grew again, like a different kind of, expertise with, with also, project management and stuff like that. From there I started my own company, called Loru Games. It's still active, but but, it's an educational game, company. So we all know that there's no profit in that business. So, it's kind of, hobby nowadays. And, after kind of two years trying to crunch it, for profit to make a business kind of, at, at, small level of burnout. But, quite quickly I realized that this is not gonna like, I'm not gonna do this for a long time. So I started looking for other jobs and few things here and there. And that led me to the project manager as Veikkaus in Veikkaus. So, I was, project manager running different level of project integrations, making small for two years in Veikkaus before, becoming a junior developer. Of course, my salary dropped like a 800 euros, but, I got to do what I'm passionate about.

Wanda

Well, you actually are already naming the elements that are bringing us to many of the things that are included in the jump program, starting from project management and, basically, doing the things that you need to know to run your own business. What kind of, roles do these skills play in the education program Mika?

Mika

Well, they are pretty important, I would say, because, as we all know, the games are made in projects

and people need to have those skills regardless of the role they are doing in the game project itself. So we do include those things into our studies pretty early on, actually. Right now we are working on, latest curriculum. I so that they are actually starting to do their first projects already in the spring of year one. And from onwards, from that point on, they do project every half years, so they will do between 4 to 5 projects throughout their studies in Jamk. And when they graduate, the, the, the biggest one is on the autumn of the third year. And we have we also stress that they actually do all the elements of the project work there. Of course, in the beginning they start, by learning more and doing less those things that are required in a real game process. But that's the progress. They will get to do more and more things that are related to, let's say, publication of games and marketing of games and thinking about the business stuff that are related to games like monetization and, how to how to get funds and stuff like that. And we do make them publish, their latest later games. So it's actually mandatory thing for them. They have to publish, some games at least. So yeah. The skills that are, they are, they are taught in the beginning they are class like things. But, as they progress. They do learn them when they do those projects in the school in a safe environment of school. So it's easier to fail when you have this kind of situation than to try out in an normal company or something like that.

Miika

Yeah, kind of like you learn a lot of different skills other than, developing games. So, great. If you find another position might be like game testing or something. But I would say for all the people looking for junior, their positions, be ready to, make some coffee, like start from there. If it needs to. Just get your, feet, between the door and get yourself in, in, in the, groups and and network a lot. Go to the game jams, IGDA stuff, meet people.

Mika

Yeah, we do bring our students here in DGC a lot, and we, encourage them to take part of the events here and, encourage them to take, you know, connect people who work here and that kind of stuff. We see that as a very important factor in their, their, you know, career as a game developer. So that's a big thing.

Wanda

Yeah. I really, really like the fact that even though you were nervous to kind of say that you don't have the official degree behind you, then like I basically described that the education itself imitates real life and the real life experience you have. So it's really, really more about, perhaps creating what you called it safe environment to, to, to test and fail. So not everybody would perhaps have to go through the burnout mentioned already. So.

Miika

Yeah, but I would appreciate a lot nowadays that I have had if I had a few courses of TypeScript or something like that, you like, that would have helped a lot. And so.

Mika

Yeah, of course. I must mention that we do have those basic stuff courses, where everybody has to have programming to some extent. Everybody has to have some extent art, game design, those are the

different fields that are kind of a on the basis of things. Then further along, there you go. They start to, focus more on the skill sets that they are interested in personally. And then they some of them become more technically oriented, and some of them maybe more artistic and some sound design and so on and so forth. So it's it's like this type of a machine that we have.

Wanda

So yeah, perhaps, that brings us to kind of the how, the how the machine roles from day to day. So, Miika, I'm very interested to learn, about your work environment and daily workflows and team work and processes. Could you describe a little bit what the day to day work is like?

Miika

When we at Veikkaus game studio, we work in, quite small teams. We believe that to speed things up and it's quite agile. So we have, like couple of artists, 2 to 3 artists in a team and few, like two programmers and a producer creating one, one game. And as you might know some of our games. They are not that, like super advanced in technology. We we don't do VR AR we don't do anything like that. We, create quite simple web games and we focus on that, like with this, technology that we have, we focus on that, like real good quality of the games. So and that happens in, really small group when we work together really seamlessly with artists and programmers. And we actually we create the game, usually, partly, in, in, game teams. So we don't get like really polished concept of game. We get some level, but we do create a lot while we are, building the game, we use a bit scrummish I, I've done in my scrum master, certificates. And I know what it's supposed to be, but, we don't like, go for scrum first. Like, we should do everything, but we do use like, two, two week sprint, get, like, iteration of stuff and then get the game like, we have, like, starting period. We have a production phase and a polish phase. And of course, we have a really big QA team, and we also have the testers in that they are in a different place, but they come to the process. We don't want them to come in the first week because we all know that. And I would always like point out things that we already know. Yeah.

Wanda

All right. So, well, Mika, you already mentioned that the students do a lot of projects and basically, do them in these small agile teams. Kind of like what Miika was just describing. So, perhaps, from the point of view of what Miika was just providing it, at least to me, it sounds like a it's a great match with what you are trying to prepare the students for and the insights on that.

Mika

Yeah, I'd like to think that is a great match, of course, because that's what we aim for and to do for us all. Yeah. Of course. But, as I mentioned, the projects, that they do in school or during the school, they are, of course, something that they are, it's easy to fail. And that's kind of the failing is part of the learning, so to speak. So maybe the difference is there. We don't really, expect them to be that polished, as they would be if they were actually doing a project for some, some company like that. So we have that. And of course, we also acknowledge that while they are doing their project during the studies, they are still learning. And that's one element there. We we let them learn. We let them they make their mistakes because that's the best way to teach them. And when when they run the project through, maybe make few mistakes. There and learn. That's the most key point because then they don't have to, have to make fail as often when they get the job in the industry.

Miika

Yeah. That's like there's no IT project without QA tickets it's like, that's gonna happen for everyone.

Mika

Yeah.

Miika

Even with, with the senior developers building stuff will get, like testing to get something fail.

Wanda

Yes. And you Miika mentioned that you have your army of QA people behind it. So that's probably what separates your workflow from the typical indie team.

Miika

Yeah.

Wanda

And what would you say is the impact of that?

Miika

It's huge. It's really huge. Like we have like one month of testing usually that, includes one main responsible tester. But also since we have so many QA game testers in-house, they will play the game together. Like that would be like 15 similar simultaneous testers coding for the game for a few hours. And and so so the iteration is like really huge on testing side.

Wanda

And how does the QA period, compared to the actual development period like time wise?

Miika

Well, of course the game has to be kind of like ready. I'm ready at that point, supposed to be and, we do not do any changes at that, like with changes at the time. The game and but but we do have a lot of work anyway since we will get those tickets, but we will usually start like another project during the Q&A time, like we can do. You said that we don't need artists to. I don't know why they don't fail, I think, but the programmers are usually who are fixing the queue and tickets, and artists can, concentrate on the next game.

Wanda

I think there's a very interesting aspect because, like, the, whole concept of QA and like, the, like no game that is being published is never bug free, but but, still, it makes like a huge, huge impact on that. And obviously different studios, depending on their resources, may struggle with how polished the products can be. But what type of role does the QA play in in, Jamk is there like, specific courses for that? And and yeah.

Mika

Yeah, we do have not that many, but we do have game testing, for example. And we do drive that thinking for them when we talk about project management and talk about how to run a software project, we do talk about quality control as well. Of course, it's part of the whole thing and separate courses and that, that, that kind of stuff. We do not have usually, the students do not usually have as much time to test their games as in proper companies because we have, like a few months, let's say, 3 to 4 months of project time. And it all has to be done by that time, regardless of the size of the team and size of the game. That they are about to make. And I would say that most of the time, the biggest mistakes they make are right there in the beginning when they, make their scope too big, no matter how much we say as teachers. Okay, you can not make really make this type of a game. They still sometimes try to do to a big game and that that's the recipe for.

Miika

Sounds like game jams, like.

Mika

Yeah, yeah, yeah. So but but yeah, of course we're, we're bringing testing and we're bringing, bringing those courses and also that thinking to that. But they just don't have enough time to do that properly. That's the point. So they, they maybe, maybe they're under project for a year or something. Then, then it would be possible to test them out properly. But we cannot do that as a school. We cannot have a four year project really running. We used to do that sometimes way back when we had this big, ticorporate demo that ran for an entire full year of studies, but it was too big a chunk of studies, and it was difficult for us to actually figure out what it is, the core, what are the core things that the students do in those projects. So we had to cut them down, that thing a lot, and that that's leading to the fact that they don't really have that much time to do the tests.

Wanda

Yeah, I think that's just the reality of it. And that's how the entire game degree program has kind of developed to its current state. So kind of iterating the same way that you iterate at any development. But perhaps I'm interested to learn that, do you know about like the how does it feel from the students perspective, or have you had any feedback on or reactions on the QA and philosophy of trying to break your own game? Not not just showcase how cool and wonderful it is, but actually just like make it break.

Mika

Well, I think there's desperation involved. I think that's yeah. But they do realize that it's important to try out different things and try and try to how to how to make it break and how to maybe fix it afterwards. But yeah, of course, it's sometimes, difficult for them. And also what is difficult is that the teams, are working together and they don't have lots of experience. None of them have a lot of experience on how to work on a project. So that's going to be that's going to generate also, a lot of, let me say, a lot of opportunities to learn.

Wanda

Yes, yes.

Mika

That's that's a nice way to put it

Miika

Maybe some peer testing would be something like my, my teacher internal teacher starts like thinking about this issue and like if you facilitate really, like, peer testing for each other's project that you need to peer that's 4 or 5 projects and have a really strict, rules what it should include. Like if you find a issue, you need to create a issue ticket and have this and this and that info, and definition of done and so on.

Mika

There is that to some extent. But maybe, maybe we should maybe put it in more organized form or something like that. That might be that might be something that we could look into.

Wanda

And obviously like the degree program is already quite ambitious in what you're trying to teach in the three years of time and all the project and training and experiences that that are involved, that's probably not all aspects can not be highlighted as much. But as you as you kind of said, the teamwork and the dynamics, is, is obviously there. And that's probably the most, most important thing when you think about just like making your way to work life. But. Okay, perhaps this naturally brings us to the next question that I had for you, Miika, which is that, could you describe some of the challenges you've had to overcome when starting in your current position? Would you have benefited from something you didn't have at the time?

Miika

Yeah. For for sure. As I already mentioned, the TypeScript course would have been really nice. We when it comes to, like, game development, people talk a lot about like, the big engines, like Unreal Engine, unity engine, the godot nowadays. But I what I faced was that, in Veikkaus, we don't use any engine at all. Not even pixijs we have built our own engine internally. So learning something that is not you cannot find infoes from YouTube or Google. That was quite surprising. Like, but I, I soon realized that those, people who actually created the engine are sitting in to the next, like, room. So I just walk there and ask them, why did you do it this way and how does it work. And so on. But yeah, like learning

like mostly it was unity for me. I feel like most like you to use engine and and for me, I learned a lot about unity, like building my own projects and jumping from there to another engine. Like, change your completely. Change your perspective. That was really like, in the beginning. It was a big challenge, but, I got used to it. Like what I want to I would advise for all the students that try all the engines, like at least one project with Godot and also the, web JavaScript engine like 3JS and PixiJS that are available, you should really, like, look into them all.

Wanda

Okay. This bounces back directly to Mika. So what do you have to comment on that?

Mika

Yeah. Well, we start with unity and then, some, some students, maybe more for, but not all, but some, some start working with Unreal Engine later. We don't really provide, guidance or, education for other engines. Might have some separate courses sometimes the special courses that might provide something, but, we don't have a systematic, approach to other engines. There's no reason why students, my my might why they wouldn't be able to try a different engine in one of their projects, because that's completely possible. They can do that if they want to. The only thing is that we don't have the staff, do you know, guide to them through them in that case, because we don't really have enough resources to grasp everything. And, you know, to have everything in-house.

Wanda

Yes. Again, we kind of come to the limitations of most of time and what you can actually pack into one, one degree program. But perhaps, I'm interested in like, what are the like, psychological factors or some something that you would be ready to accept or introduce yourself to a new engine. Could we explore this a little bit, like what are the challenges related to that?

Miika

Of course it's easier if you have a youtube video on Google. That's like something that you can browse and find, find like open projects and check out those those. But I'm pretty sure that when you go to, like, bigger companies or smaller companies in Finland to use, for example, unity, they have built their game, to, level that for a newcomer, it might be quite hard to understand what's happening here and like that. And my second advice, it's like, rework another developer's games like find open project from online and try to rework it for, your game. Unity also like offers these platforms quite complex and like modifying those to for your needs. Not like completely building from the beginning. That helps also because in real, like real life, when working, it's usually the case that you start modifying someone else's, code and it's not the same, then building yourself.

Wanda

Does this spark any ideas from educator's point of view?

Mika

Yeah. Well, of course we can always say that. Yeah, go, go look up something online. Yeah, that's why not. I don't know, I really don't know what to say, is it? And that's that. That's what you just said. We we don't. Yeah. We don't we we do encourage student to try out different things. And, whenever possible, we also try to help them out with those things if we have if they have that possibility, if some of our teachers, for example, have some knowledge on the topic, we do try to do that. And as I mentioned earlier, there's no reason why they couldn't try something different in some of their projects if they want to they have a good reason to for sure. Yeah, that's possible, but other than that, I don't even really know what to add there.

Wanda

Yeah, perhaps it's like a theme of its own to have an event on the game, postmortems where we open up the project and slice and dice and see what what happens to to kind of reverse engineer, perhaps to learn that type of thinking. All right. But, if we if we move on to, a little bit from the, like, worker's point of view to the company point of view, I'm really interested to learn from you, Miika, that, when we talk about, Veikkaus game studio, I think it's, quite exceptional, a studio in Finland, considering that, it's a government owned. And unlike most studios, it doesn't really aim for that global glory. But, actually, it's going for the domestic market. So.

Miika

Well, yeah, I read your question. Beforehand, I, I found this question really interesting since, actually nowadays we are building games for the global markets.

Wanda

Okay.

Miika

So in essence, we already have in Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Slovenia, France, and in some U.S. states also, like we are nowadays selling those, outside. But of course, they have been, as you say, the aim has been like Finnish, Finnish customers. But surprisingly it's had already worked around the world.

Wanda

Okay.

Miika

What, like I think Finnish players are quite like, needy and they, they do not accept really bad quality of games. So we have been forced to like at the quality on the game and that for whatever reason, the games quality has been, for example, when it comes to instant games, scratch games that you just open that, open the game and we animate stuff there.

Wanda

Yeah.

Miika

In France I think. Vei, Veikkaus games is currently the most sold there, even if they have like 50 or more their own games and they have like been for years, but they just launched one Veikkaus game and it's just, went to the number one there.

Wanda

Okay, okay. Can you, elaborate on this, like going for the global markets? When did this, change happen?

Miika

It's quite recent Fennica gaming was, started, like, was it two years ago or. I'm really bad with the years, but yeah, few years ago, we started fennica gaming as, like, other companies and since as a government company, Veikkaus can not directly we have our, like, our mission is by the law.

Wanda

Yes. This was my understanding of the situation.

Miika

Yes, yes. So that's why we have Fennica gaming which is actually company selling those games for Asian Markets.

Wanda

Okay. Okay. So. Well, so it sounds like you're off to a good start, with that mission, but, yeah. Still, it's a quite, like, exceptional setting. So does that reflect any how in your position as a junior dev.

Miika

Yeah, of course it of course it does. Like, we are quite relaxed. Working environment. We work in a quite like, you could say protected environment since, everyone's employed, the government, there's no, big boss. Whoever, in, in Malta or somewhere only the company, telling us what to do. So everyone employed in Veikkaus is just focusing on their goal and on their mission. And when it comes to like games that the best that the people who decide make the decisions are really close to us. They're like sitting next to us there. There's no like Big Boss telling us that you need to change this thing in the game.

Wanda

So you're able to kind of, have that sense of, in the studio in that sense that you're very close to your teammates all the time.

Miika

Yeah. And, all the changes are quite expected that there's no, like, big, so like, let's say, like, time timeline changes. We don't get those, like, okay, now you need to create a game in a month or something like that. Usually we do know quite well how long one project will take, and.

Wanda

Yeah, so the Veikkaus game studio is something like 30 people or?

Miika

I'm, I'm bad with years, but also with the like, counting people.

Wanda

Yeah.

Miika

Around around that.

Wanda

Yeah. I read something like this online, so I, I trust my sources.

Miika

Sorry boss.

Wanda

But but yeah, as you explained in the beginning, you kind of, found your way there through a roundabout, to the position where, where you're currently at and, wasn't first employed as a, like a game developer at all.

Miika

Yeah.

Wanda

What about the inside the house kind of moving into the games position then? And, yeah, this is like the harsh reality where we live at the moment that finding one's first game industry position can be really challenging. So perhaps a question for you, Mika. How do you encourage the graduating students to keep an open mind when it comes to job search? Do you also encourage them to kind of

see what else they could do with their skills that could lead into game positions later on?

Mika

Yeah, we do. We are well of course. We tried to help them find, find, find places to work in. And we have few companies that we look more closely with and talk about the practical training opportunities and stuff like that. But yeah, it is sometimes difficult to find the job in the industry. And we have, tutoring system on with our students and we do talk with, with everybody, especially in the end when they are, you know, thinking about moving on and thinking about finding a job. Right now, our system is so that the practical training is actually the last thing that they do when they study with us. They even do their, thesis before they start the practical training. And, and, this is to encourage them to look for the companies where they might be able to continue, then after after they have done the practical training, but also to make sure that they are already have done the thesis when they are done with the practical training, because that's used to be an issue. They didn't have the thesis and then they dragged along with their studies. But yeah, that is something that we constantly try to remind students about that. Okay. There are other other things and other places there. But of course, the people who want to have a job in the game industry are looking for jobs in the gaming industry. So that's for certain.

Wanda

Obviously

Mika

But there are some students who might might say that, okay, let's see. I could easily try to look in the other direction, perhaps because my skill sets so that I can, for example, go that direction instead of just straight to games, because they do provide with some, some skill sets, but they have some skill that might be useful for a more traditional job in the beginning at least.

Miika

Yeah. One could argue that I'm I myself. I'm not the game developer. Like I'm I'm building UI to just reveal some animations for players. You could like, say, as if you're like the student and building some, like, big project and your dream games for yourself. And so you could like argue that argue that. Yeah, you you are not actual game developer. But still like I do have a game developer on my title. I've learned a lot, like TypeScript stuff. I would tell anyone like, having this dream to go for a game developer job and not like, obviously the the positions are, really rare. A lot of people going for those get you're, like, sending your expertise from somewhere else. Meanwhile, like, don't sit at home and wait for for the right job to come out. Just go develop games. And then go for a company, for developing websites for us, for example, like, I've been developing a lot of like react. And since I use TypeScript in there, it's been helped me a lot. I bet that I wouldn't have got this position if I didn't do like web development a lot before that, since I got my TypeScript experience from there.

Wanda

Yeah, I, I really think that's, very, very valuable, advice and also a great way for us to wrap up here. So, thank you for your wisdom and advice, Miika. And your consultancy, as always. Miika. And this was the DGC podcast. Thank you for listening and tune in next time for interesting game industry discussions.