

DGCPodcast 4 Tekstivastine: From gamer to game developer

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Wanda

Welcome to the DGC podcast, brought to you by Expa Game Business Co-operative and Jamk University of Applied Sciences. I'm your hostess. Wanda O'Rly. And here we discuss the game industry, games education. The bridge between the two and any related topics and projects. Today in the studio with me, I have the founder of Hanki Games and the creator of the indie hit sledders Niko Autio. Welcome!

Niko

Thank you, thank you.

Wanda

And from the University of Applied Sciences. Joining us is Mika Karhulahti, senior lecturer from the Games Production education program. Welcome.

Mika

Thank you very much.

Wanda

In our previous episodes, we've been discussing junior career paths and how universities and game companies can work closer together to solve the current challenges in the supply and demand ratio of young workforce for the industry. Today, we will take a totally new perspective to this discussion with Niko, who is pursuing to employ himself and others through a passion project without formal games industry education. So, Niko, to shed the light on the eternal question of how to become a games professional, could you give an elaborate answer on how you have gathered your knowhow and honed your skills to get to this point?

Niko

Yeah, I think that about how did I get into the programing and all the stuff. Yes, I'm a developer mostly. It was, left quite heavy hobbyism. And, at the time, a long time ago, I was very excited about it because

my school friend was he's making those amateur games and, it took me into the scene. It was kind of the hook and that that, because of that, I later since went to the school learning IT and physics. Yeah.

Wanda

How many years was this ago.

Niko

I started school around 2009, so. And, was, sometime at school, I think first to, 2014, when I participated this, game lab stuff and, like, let's say there was, some, hobby companies, so to speak.

Wanda

Yeah, those are popular.

Niko

Yeah. And I think the rest of the story is just simply that. Then go to the real work, get some real knowledge about, how to make real books. It still took, like, ten years I was working in the small, production house, working like a typical business SAAS application, stuff, then little bit consulting and helping. Different kind of startups, companies, not anything related to the games, but always bringing the game development hobby be on the side.

Wanda

Yeah. Okay, so so if I may kind of mirror that or summarize that. It's been like a from starting your studies to this day. It's like 15 years. And basically you've been doing, work as an, like IT professional, in general type of programing gulps of like, software as a service and so on. But always keeping that game industry hobby, like very close to you.

Niko

Yeah, exactly. I haven't published my stuff mostly. Always just working for my own fun.

Wanda

Yeah. Okay. That's that's very interesting. And, then, Mika, listening to Niko's personal development journey here, do you think that, like, young game education program is able to simulate similar type of

growth steps for students of, like, because they are studying in what would be called a much more controlled environment. So, if you if you think about that, that kind of like, how people who haven't got the games industry education have always have had that like hobby and, and passion and they pursue game development through that. How can we integrate or how do you integrate that, flavor to the, education program itself?

Mika

Thanks for your good question. We do this, by constantly trying to promote events, and we try to tell them that, okay, you should participate. You should meet people from the industry, you should be active, and you should be here because you have a passion for this. That's it. On the other hand, when I think about this, we also have lots of projects these days.

We just published a new curriculum this autumn and started following it. So the first project they do right away in the spring of year one and then every semester there. So one project and it ends in the and the big one in the autumn of your three, the, simulation of. So they simulate how to work in, a game company basically, and we make them publish the games do throughout the whole thing.

The passion, I think needs to come from the students sometimes, but we try to feed that because we constantly talk about games and, promote this, this type of, you know, active approach to games and game development. And I see it in that first year students that they are very interested in games and they come to certain classes and they are very much like they talk about games.

They think we have to do there to make sure that they actually understand that they are now studying to become game developers and not just gamers. So I think that's the thing. But we we try to still we try to tap into that enthusiast that they have us gamers and of course, oh, there are of course we have this. It's a very hard for to get to us right now. Last spring, for example, we had 4000 applicants, 30 starting points. So it's crazy. So you can be pretty sure that the people who got in are pretty good already, and there are lots of people who will have or already have some experience with games and lots of stuff. But yeah, but we do try to provide them with lots of opportunities to show that enthusiasm and to work with the projects to work with, with other students. And also to work with people in the industry and, to get to know the people in the industry. I yeah, I do hope that this kind of blabbering answered the question.

Wanda

Yeah it does. And I think you are bringing up two, very important points that I would like to ask Niko also about. So you mentioned that you really recommend the students to go into these events and start networking early on. Niko, what kind of role, has networking had in your game developer career? So, as a hobbies, have you had lots of other people around you who have been doing similar kind of stuff?

Niko

You know, yes, I think we have met many times before with this project with any where. So, yes. How to let's say it has been like the keep dream alive, or so to speak. So, I initially participate, local Kuopio IGDA gathering, just without any, expectation other than, it's nice to meet again some developer game developers. And, I think it's just, you know, socializing with people who are have the same kind of

interests. You kind of like a feeding your own passion. But if you're all of us just doing this alone, your focus may fly all around and such so. So it a little bit. It little bit gives like structure to what like what's what do you want to do.

Wanda

Yeah. So so you get to kind of spar and challenge yourself with others who are doing something similar. So you're not only stuck with your own ideas.

Niko

Yeah. And maybe. That's like I can also. I can talk with my own project to others.

Wanda

Yeah.

Niko

Cannot underestimate.

Wanda

Yeah, yeah. Well that well put them okay. And yeah. You also mentioned Mika in your answer that, you are kind of trying to, change the student identity from a gamer to a game developer. So, I, I trust that also, you, Niko, have a background in gaming before you started developing games yourself. So how would you, if you reflect back, at what point did you start consider yourself a game developer and not just the kind of, game gamer or someone who has passion for games?

Niko

I think that's, huge amount of aftermath, but I think you can I think the just the initial spark at the time when the I saw my friend at the time doing those all games. Yeah. And he was thinking that what kind of game it should be. I was just so enjoying the planning, designing some imaginary game, on the paper. And I think that, continuous enjoyment of, like a creative process. Well, later on, there has been some peers. So I think that even quite early on, I have a it's I think it has been hard to say, do I have played or developed more because.

Wanda

Yeah, yeah, it it's very, very typical. And of course professionals need to reserve a time for gaming as well because they need to keep up with the trends and, and so on. But usually with the students, it might be that, that it's, it's more important to develop more then play more or do you agree Mika.

Mika

Yeah I think so. Yeah. Because they do they do game play games a lot. So we have to give them time to develop. But I think that when they stop doing the projects, they realize this themselves because they suddenly have a goal in there ahead of them, and they know that they have to do something and they have set dates for which they have to do something. And it's it's like working in the game company.

Wanda

Yeah. Yeah, exactly.

Mika

Basically we try to do that. And so they gradually learn that, that yeah, they need to put more effort into developing that.

Niko

Then they have like a development debt at that point because they have played long time but not developed likely most before your school. So the development debt.

Wanda

Yeah. Yeah. Well put. Well, Niko, if you think about like yourself now, you are at this point where you have this indie hit in early access and, like a thriving, very potential game business building around it. If you were to mentor other developers or students, on their path from 0 to 1, so to say. So basically meaning that starting from scratch and getting to a point where you have a solid product and an emerging business, what aspects would you highlight and why?

Niko

I think, I think you need to be very honest for yourself about what do you how do you how would you compare, your own game into something which is commercially available?

I think that's the, then, second thing is that, it's let's say every single, all the first projects, almost likely to fail. So I think, just finish them, early enough and move to the next one, because next one will be so

much better than the last one. So this moving on. Improving. And, whenever possible, just be so dead seriously honest about how do you, your game compares to others?

And does it have any, in many ways sledders is extremely bad game. If you put it on the, you know, you give controller to somebody and then, let's say Ubisoft's riders of republic to another player. Okay. Try it to 10 minutes. I'd say that everybody says that sledders is it's just a bad game.

But it has some small heart in there. So it, it hasn't it doesn't have to be completely in every aspect better, but it has to be. It has to have something better than your competitors.

Wanda

Okay. That's really, really. Well, so I'm, I'm getting, like, brutal honesty and benchmarking to commercially available products that you are actually, competing against. And basically then the lesson of letting go and moving on is it's important to give yourself new opportunities. Again, reflecting these pieces of wisdom back to Mika, and how do these, elements, show in the education program. So I get you do many projects instead of work. So you are trying to hone this as well, would you say?

Mika

Well, Niko mentioned that the first one is going to fail. Yeah. Oftentimes it's just that then we kind of allow this failure to happen. Yeah. Because they are still in school, so they they don't really have that much invested in there. And we also try to teach them that you should kill your darlings and, so on, so forth. So lots of opportunities for failure and lots of opportunities to understand that sometimes you have to make some cuts. And, I think the, the biggest problem in student projects is that we, we try to, we usually allow them to come up with the ideas themselves. And the problem is the finding the good scope for the projects, because, the fact is that they really can't do the newest classroom in the in the six month period with the team of five. So that's not possible. So we tried to find stuff or try to push, them to thinking, understanding what's the right scope for them. And even then we allow the failure, of course. So because they are still in school, it's good time to fail. I don't know, really, what else to say in this regard, but that's that's kind of a thing that we try to try to give them opportunity to learn that way.

Wanda

Yeah. So, so basically, not not just like, well, when the students are going headfirst for the first time, it's about kind of not dreaming too big. But yeah, scaling down the scope.

Mika

Yeah.

Wanda

In this sense, yes. That's kind of realism. And on the other hand, like what the realism that Niko was going after for was kind of be honest about the quality of your product. How how so, yeah, honesty and many, many levels, coming through, I think that's, good, good point of view and, yeah. If we think

about, like, question for you Mika, previously in this podcast, we've been talking about, how your games education could collaborate with established companies, to streamline recruitment and to create more opportunities. But how about indie developers? So what kind of opportunities would you see in folks like Niko here? Engaging with the students?

Mika

Well, first of all, we welcome all the developers from the industry to come and have a, have a meeting with us and maybe talk to the students. That's one thing that I value a lot. If someone takes their time to come, from a, from an industry and talk to our students for an hour or so. So that's, that's always something that we welcome. And for sure, there is going to be a place for that. On the other hand, we do we could provide more student labor for the industry in some cases and in form of, but practical training is the obvious one. But then, of course, the thesis works that the students do, everybody needs to do must do the pieces at some point in their studies. That's a good opportunity for indie companies, I think, to study, look into some. So the things that they might not have time to do themselves because if someone does a thesis, let's say game design related, for example. So what kind of a game design document, for example, this this company might be, might work good for them. What kind of tools? They might want to use something like this. Or maybe it can be any related to any field really because we have students who are doing lots of different things. It's just a matter of matching up the needs. And also the student fields, all the focuses that the students have. So that's a good thing. But of course, maybe, maybe in the larger scale sometimes we could do larger projects within the companies. I don't think that we necessarily have the problem with time. I think the problem with time is in the company end, because they are busy, we usually can manage somehow, and we usually can make time from this. We can use student students to set up things and do things. But of course we can also have teachers coach those students. And we, we usually can always find, find some some, course. Or thing that we can put it in under.

Wanda

Yeah.

Mika

And of course, we would be happy to do this kind of thing. Activities more with with companies where we want to help them to do something, so that the students would actually be the ones doing the doing the work there in some sense. We have projects that they could do. We have the studies, we have the estimated phases and then practical training, lots of opportunities there, I think.

Wanda

Yeah, yeah. So, what about Niko? How does this, sound to you and your small, small team perspective and indie perspective? So basically what Mika mentioned was like, this type of, mentoring talks from companies to students, but then a lot of opportunities of using, the students as, training and kind of labor, for development through different kind of, projects. So what benefits do you see from the point

of view of a in the developer? And would it be something that, would feel natural for you to engage in?

Niko

Yeah. Always happy to mentor, next generation and, yeah, I think that's the easiest part was somewhat quite interesting that indeed I think that's possible. There might be some useful areas of, investigations which can be time consuming. You can quite naturally outsource, our labor, so to speak. I don't know if this is on wider, on in the field, but, on our case, I think we are currently so limited, of that, what we should do, I think we we will be very happy to, hear, hear more about what we should do. And, you know, like, industry, experience, like a burden, or hard experience, stuff. So, we are not currently bottleneck at about, like, missing hands. It's just about, doing the right stuff. And of course, you have mentioned many times that, you, made a hit for so to speak, still money. It's limited resources. We are not, Fingersoft or anything.

Wanda

Yes. So I believe, yeah. And that's what it's like, many, many times. But, I do think that what you mentioned there that kind of the struggle of, figuring out what is the right thing to do, that would be super valuable lesson for students to engage in to, to kind of in that real life setting where you will have very limited resources and you try to, keep your product alive and make it grow. And, and so on. So, these decisions, especially for those who are pursuing like, production and business side of things to understand and make the right decisions. So, yeah, I think that that's like, real value there. And, well, that's also something that, has been said many times that, in these, practical trainings, often if you get to be a part of a small team or like a small business, then you get also more responsibility as a student so that that that way, the value of, of training in that kind of settings, sounds to me like could be, a very valuable opportunity. All right. I think that's, like a positive thought to, to end up with, any any final thoughts from Mika?

Mika

Yeah. Just, if if you are, a business owner or if you are working in an indie company, just send me an email and we will set up a time for you to speak to our students. That's my message, always welcoming anybody from the industry and also, we very much like to use people in, in certain courses. So, for example, if we have a certain topic and of course, if someone would come to and want to share the experience, we will be happy to welcome those those people.

Wanda

Thank you Mika. And, any final thoughts Niko?

Niko

Well, just do stuff I don't I, don't be passive in your life. It doesn't have to do anything for games or

game development. Just improving yourself and. Challenge yourself.

Wanda

Yeah. Learning through doing. Very much indie developer talk. And, I appreciate that. So thank you Mika. Thank you Niko.

Mika

Thank you.

Wanda

This was, dgc podcast. And, thank you for listening. And tune in next time for more interesting gaming discussions.