

Learning Light Knowledge Nugget

### **A games developer's view of e-learning**

The purpose of this interview was to gain the perspective of the video gaming industry on the e-learning market.

#### **Jacob Habgood**

Jake Habgood, (formerly of Sumo Digital, one of the UKs leading video games developers, who have also developed learning products) is now a Senior Lecturer in Game Development at Sheffield Hallam University in the UK, and has spent all of his professional and academic life developing videogames. He started writing games on the ZX Spectrum at the age of 10 and had his first shareware game published on the Commodore Amiga at the age of 18. He took a degree in Computer Science and then went to work for the classic British game developer/publisher Gremlin Interactive at the beginning of the PlayStation era.

#### **Sumo Digital**

Part of the Foundation 9 Entertainment group, Sumo Digital Ltd is an independent game development studio based in Sheffield, UK. It employs over 120 experienced development staff, many of whom have been working together for the last 12 years. Sumo is licensed to develop on all the leading gaming platforms: Sony PSP, PS2 and PS3, Microsoft Xbox 360, Xbox and Nintendo Wii and DS. Our clients include SEGA, Sony, Konami and Codemasters.

As Sumo's Head of Serious Games – Jacob Habgood - has a decade of development experience in the games industry in a range of technical and management roles. In 2003 he took a career break to study a PhD in game-based learning at Nottingham University's Learning Sciences Research Institute. Since taking up the role at Sumo, Jacob has managed a number of products related to game development tools for children. Jacob is also the co-author of a popular hobbyist game-development book called "The Game Maker's Apprentice".

#### ***Video gaming and e-learning – developments to date***

The games industry has certainly awakened to the commercial potential of self-improvement products in the last few years, but approaches it from a very different perspective to the e-learning industry.

Clearly Nintendo has been the great innovator in this area as part of their strategy to reach out to new markets rather than competing on graphics or hardware. Nonetheless, entertainment is still the central focus and Nintendo does not make educational claims about products like Brain Training (Which? Magazine March

2009). Terms like “pedagogy” are not yet part of the vocabulary of the games industry and it will probably be a number of years before it is seen as a necessary part of the development of an ‘educational’ title.

Microsoft and Sony (platform owners) have yet to take a clear stance on educational products, but they have more traditional gaming audiences which are less likely to be responsive to products aimed at learning.

### ***The role of Consoles***

There is no real resistance to educational titles being developed for games consoles – especially at Nintendo, but there are constraints which many e-learning developers would consider prohibitive.

The console developers make huge investments in releasing a new piece of hardware, and so consequently go to great lengths to protect their investments. They control the routes to market and have final approval over all content appearing on their systems. There are comprehensive lists of standards and requirements which must be met by every product for each console.

So although, for example, modern consoles are all internet-connected, this does not mean that you can do many things which e-learning products would consider routine (such as collecting data on learner performance, registering learners, etc). Although some consoles provide access to web browsers, it does not mean that you can suddenly include Flash in your products. It is not a universal part of the OS, like on a PC, and is often an old version of Flash.

It should also be remembered that each of the consoles are completely different machines, with different specifications, control systems and performance characteristics. Companies like Sumo spend a lot of time and effort creating cross-platform technologies which help to make it easier to develop the same product for more than one console at the same time. Nonetheless, you cannot simply port a product between a high-end console platform (such as PS3 and Xbox360) and a low end one (Such as DS or PSP) without additional work.

### ***Talent***

The video games industry has one other big difference – it is considered very very aspirational to work in, the industry is blessed with talent and attracts the best artists and programmers – we are not sure the e-learning industry has it quite so easy.

### ***The opportunity***

The opportunity is huge as the install base of consoles is massive, and the largest share of the market is within family-based products.

Install base (source Some Research)

PS3:	2m
PSP:	2m
PS2:	4.5m
Xbox360	2.3m
DS:	5.8m
Wii:	6.1m
PC:	3.9m

<http://www.slideshare.net/LearningWithoutFrontiers/sean-dromgoole-ceo-some-research>

Xbox is targeted at the older and more serious gamer, PS3 the teenager upward, and Wii is proving to be a major family friendly product – with the biggest install base. The Nintendo DS (a handheld) is in very wide distribution, the new DSi will support downloadable content.

Downloadable content is already available on the Wii, Xbox and PS3 and it represents a potential market for learning games, because of the reduced costs of purely digital products. Such products can be positioned in the casual gaming space with a reasonable price where buyers are happy to take a risk.

### ***Cross over and common understanding and misunderstanding***

Hopefully there will be crossover between the e-learning and console games industry one day, but at the moment we have two very different business models.

The video games industry is very effective in delivering large projects with big budgets and large teams: 50+ staff on one project is not at all unusual. We deal in man-months and man-years – not daily or hourly rates. In comparison the daily rates of some e-learning companies seem very high to us, but this is likely to be because of the increased management overheads and project down-time associated with delivering smaller projects.

I think we are also heading towards two different goals. E-learning is about having a ubiquitous internet presence and will always value accessibility over performance and production values. Conversely accessibility is controlled within console game development so performance and production values are king.