

Transcript

Title: Swinburne International Webinar Series: Games | Future of Games and Gamers

Presenters: Zoe Brown, Dr Mark Finn

Year: 2020

Audio/video for this transcript available from: <http://commons.swinburne.edu.au>



Zoe Brown

Hi, everybody. Thank you so much for joining us today for our session around the future of games and gaming. I'm very pleased to have a very special guest lecturer. And this is Dr. Mark Finn.

So in terms of just Mark's background, Mark is a senior lecturer in media and communication. And he's also an Academic Director of International Partnerships. Mark was one of the first media scholars to explore the evolution of the world wide web as an emerging medium.

And for the past seven years, Mark has been specializing in the growth and impact implications of computer games. And he's also published widely on the Grand Theft Auto series. So I'll leave it to you, Mark. And if you have any questions, please use the chat box. And Mark and myself will be able to answer during or at the end of the session. So on to you, Mark. Thank you.

Mark Finn

OK. Thank you, Zoe. OK.

So what we're going to do today is talk a little bit about games and where they are now and where they're going in the foreseeable future. And it's a really interesting time to be talking about games. As one of my colleagues pointed out the other day, there's more games being played now that we're all in lockdown than has ever been played before. So it's actually a really good time for the games industry.

And I think in terms of students, I think there's a recognition now that games are becoming a more and more viable form of employment. So I think this lockdown that we've all experienced [AUDIO SKIPPING].

So what I'll do now is, I'll share my screen and I'll go to the presentation. It'll take probably about 25 minutes maybe, maybe half an hour. And we can have some questions at the end, if you like. So let me get to this.

OK. So this is the title for the presentation today, The Future of Games and Gamers. The reason why I wanted to do both was, I wanted to talk a little bit about the industry, but also the people playing the games as well, because it's important for the industry to understand who's actually playing.

And before getting into that, I just wanted to give you a little bit of a background of me and my relationship with games. So I'm 52 this year. I've been playing games since I was about 10 or 11,

which means that I got in right at the start. So up the top there, you can see my very first games console. That was an Atari 2600.

I then moved on to a PC kind of, with a Commodore 64. I eventually became a Playstation person and then an Xbox person, switching sides about 10 years ago. And most recently, I'm playing PC games. So I do a lot of gaming now on an OMEN laptop. That's actually what I'm presenting this presentation on today. So I've had a bit of experience across the whole gamut of games technology.

And in terms of the games that I've played, I've got, obviously, a catalogue of hundreds and hundreds of games I've played over the years. But these are just a sample of games that have probably being the most influential in terms of my understanding of games. At the top there we've got Grand Theft Auto 3, which was a really important game in terms of the creation of 3D worlds.

I'm a bit of a racing nut, so I played one of the very first Formula One games. That was the Formula One for the first Playstation. Tomb Raider, Spec Ops: The Line, which for me, was one of the first games that really pushed the boundaries in terms of how to tell stories with games. And currently, the games that I'm playing the most are Red Dead Redemption 2, which again, is a fantastic game in terms of story.

Call of Duty: Modern Warfare, my proudest achievement, I've just reached level 155, which is the highest level you can reach in the game. So I'm proud of that. And again, my motorsport background, Project Cars 2.

So I just wanted to do this. And I think when I speak to students in particular, it's important to give an overview of the kinds of games I'm familiar with, because students are always suspicious about people older than themselves talking about games. They don't think we know actually too much about it.

So that was me. And this is where we are more broadly. This is the games industry in 2019. But it's still applicable to 2020. And these are the kinds of games that are currently being played. As you can see down at the bottom, over 25% of all the games being played in the world today as shooters. And that's primarily games like Fortnite or PUBG or Call of Duty. And these are the most popular games in the world, the most lucrative games in the world as well, followed by action adventure kinds of games, sports games, role playing, and then racing, one of my genres, fighting, strategy, and other usually casual kinds of games.

But it's interesting to look at this, because this has actually changed pretty dramatically over the last 10 years or so. Fighting games used to be much higher up. But we've seen a real switch in the industry now towards shooting and action-oriented games, with sports games coming in a distant third.

Zoe Brown

Mark, can I just--

Mark Finn

Yes. Of course.

[AUDIO SKIPPING]

So I lost a bit of that. Sorry. What was that?

Zoe Brown

[AUDIO SKIPPING]

Mark Finn

Why did shooting games become popular?

Zoe Brown

Yes. Yes.

Mark Finn

I think to some extent, it's the changing demographics of the market. So gamers are getting older as well. And a lot of gamers grew up on shooting titles. So the average age of the gamer around the world now is about 34. There is an assumption that only kids play games, but the average age is actually much higher than that. So these are people that grew up on early shooting games and have continued to play shooting games.

The technology has also got much, much better. So the environments that we're playing these shooting games are much more realistic. And I think a big part of it is the evolution of the shooting category itself. So the big title now is what they call the battle royale games, where 100 or more people go into one arena and they fight it out to the last person standing. And that's become the most popular of the shooting genre. So I think it's a combination of different factors.

Zoe Brown

Thank you. Thank you.

Mark Finn

So what are they playing at now? Well, again, this is something that's changed pretty dramatically over the last few years. 10 years ago, the most popular format for playing games was consoles, Playstation or Nintendo or something like that. That's now changed. The most popular format for games by far are mobiles. So mobile devices, tablets, mobile phones, and handheld devices are basically taking up 51% of the market now. So it's a massive change in the way things happened.

Computers taking up about 24%, consoles now 25%. So the market itself has changed pretty dramatically just in the last 10 years.

The other big change that we find in the games market is the rise of China. Up to about three or four years ago, Europe and America were the most important markets in terms of revenue for the games industry. China is now quickly becoming the most important market. So there's a lot of games companies trying to get into China at the moment. So that's actually quite important to understand, too.

And this is just my perspective after being involved in games for a lot of years. And one of the things I probably should include in my bio that I forgot to mention to Zoe, in terms of Swinburne's games degree, I was actually one of the people that started the program because I've been playing games so long and involved with the industry for so long. I realized about 12 years ago, 13 years ago that we needed to have a focus on games at Swinburne. So myself and a few colleagues got together and we started the very first games course. So I'm not working in it as much as I used to. But the course is still evolving very fast.

So based on that experience, these are just some of the trends that I'm beginning to notice. And the first one, of course, is that more people are playing games than have ever played before. This is a fantastic time to be involved in games and the games industry.

But there's always a negative to almost every positive. And one of the negatives we see is that churn is increased. And what churn means in this context is that people don't play the same game for a long time the way they used to. They pick up a game, they'll play it for a few weeks, and then they'll move on to another game. And for the companies, that's actually a real problem because they want people to play their game as long as possible. So churn is becoming a bit of an issue for the industry.

We're also seeing more variety in terms of games. There's lots of really great innovation going on. But that innovation is being stifled, to some extent, because there's a few big companies that are essentially dominating the industry, Electronic Arts, Tencent, Rockstar Games. And these companies are big enough to control distribution. So we don't have as big a variety in the games industry as we possibly could.

There's also more ways to play. And it's really interesting tech. So I've seen some really good examples of virtual reality and augmented reality games. Some of the things that our Swinburne students are doing very much focused around virtual reality and augmented reality.

But they're difficult because the hardware requirements are pretty specific. And porting between different platforms can be difficult. So taking an augmented reality game from a PC and moving it across to a mobile phone or a virtual reality game can be a bit difficult.

One area that is growing a lot is what we commonly call e-sports. And while students often want to focus a lot on e-sports, one thing that's important to remember is that it's still relatively small compared to traditional sports. So it's big, but compared to football or cricket or one of these other major sports, the following is actually quite small.

And the final point that I've noticed is that more money is actually being made than ever before. I know in this post-COVID-19 world, there's a lot of people who are concerned about where the income is going to come from. But I think we can all pretty much agree now that games are here to stay. And they're only going to get bigger and bigger.

Lots of different revenue models for that. And some of those models aren't actually great for players. They tend to exploit what players are doing. So that's probably the negative side of the money being made.

So what I wanted to do for the rest of the presentation is basically talk through a few of the trends that I'm seeing in games in 2020 and sort of do a bit of future gazing and speculate about where this is going to go.

And the first element of this is what's commonly called games as a service. And what this means is that games are produced not as a finished product, but as a starting point for a product. So a developer will release a game. That game will be pretty basic. And people will start playing it. And if they like it, the developer will then release an update, an addition to the game, which has to be bought, has to be downloaded. So the people will buy that.

And what we see, and this is definitely true in terms of shooting games in particular, is we see seasonal updates. So in Call of Duty, for example, which I'm playing at the moment, we're at the end of season 3 of the game. And season 4 of the game is starting in about 20 days.

And what that is, is new opportunity for revenue to be generated. So what it means-- and it's sort of an antidote that the publishers are trying to install against that idea of churn. So they create a basic game, and they create updates to that game. And the idea is to try to hook players in and keep them hooked in for a longer period of time.

The negative side of that is that, you get what's commonly called MVP, minimum viable product. So the initial product that the game developers release is barely a workable game. It's playable, but there's lots and lots of features missing. And those features often have to be bought further down the track. So this is one of the trends that we're seeing as far as games are developing now.

The second big trend is mobile. I noted before that mobile is now the biggest segment of the entire games market. And that's something we're seeing strengthening, if anything. It's one of the things that we've focused on a little bit at Swinburne, as well. So understanding that mobile play is quite different to PC play or console play. Mobile play requires more simplified graphics, in some way, but still attractive graphics. And it requires a different way of thinking about the screen space.

This is an example, actually, of the Swinburne game that was released on Nintendo's Switch last year.

[UPBEAT MUSIC]

[CHEERING]

So this is a really good example of a group of students through our degree who got together. They formed a company, Harmonious there, got some funding through the Victorian state government and Film Victoria and produced what is now a commercially successful game on the Nintendo platform.

And when you look at the game itself, it has a few really important principles in terms of mobile game development. The graphics are fairly simple, but really colourful and really engaging. And the game play is good for touch. So you can manipulate the characters without having to use a controller necessarily. That was a very smart move on the part of the student game designers. That's about eight months' worth of work, just in terms of student development.

Another trend that we're seeing in terms of games is e-sports. And I mentioned before that e-sports is not necessarily as popular as traditional sports. But one thing we've noticed with COVID-19 is the rise of e-sports, even faster than it was before.

The example I always look to, and as I noted right at the start, I'm a bit of a motor racing fan, I was actually at the Melbourne Formula 1 track before the first race of the season. And of course, the first race never went ahead because of COVID-19.

So we've had all these Formula 1 drivers now sitting at home, not able to compete. What they've done is they've actually taken a commercial game and they're now competing online. So there's a virtual Formula 1 Championship currently underway.

So what we're seeing in the example there is, the current Ferrari Formula 1 driver Charles Leclerc in his virtual Ferrari at the Melbourne Formula 1 track.

And what I think this will do is, it will open people's eyes to the possibilities that virtual sports can entail. It's quite interesting watching some of these virtual races. Not only are the graphics so good that if you're not really paying attention, you can't tell whether it's a real race or a virtual race. The second thing is that the racing between the drivers is really, really good. So in terms of atmosphere, you lose something. But in terms of spectacle, you've got exactly the same kind of experience. So I think that's going to be really interesting in terms of where e-sports goes next.

Zoe Brown

Mark, in terms of the [INAUDIBLE], do they use this [AUDIO SKIPPING]?

Mark Finn

It's an interesting thing. So the game itself hasn't got the physics required to be a true simulation for Formula 1 drivers. There's actually-- each racing team has its own simulator that's much more sophisticated. But what the drivers do is, they use the game to learn the tracks. If they're a new driver in particular, they've never raced at a track, they can learn where the breaking points are and they can learn the layout of the track through the game.

And at the moment, if you look at the current crop of Formula 1 drivers, about 2/3 of them are actively playing the video game. So it's actually quite a big percentage of the field.

So another big trend that we're looking at seeing into the future is the rise of independent developers. I was speaking to a group of Indian industry experts, multimedia experts a couple of weeks ago. And they were talking about where the games industry in India is going in particular. And the thing that we're all agreeing is that independent development is the most important aspect of that.

The big companies have a slight problem, in that they produce really successful titles, but then they get scared. They don't want to do anything innovative. So you might get a really successful Call of Duty game. And then you'll get a sequel and then another sequel and then another sequel. The same with Grand Theft Auto. We had Grand Theft Auto 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 is in development at the moment.

So while each game is good and while each game is an iteration of the past, they're not actually innovating in any way. It's up to the independent games developers to provide the true innovation.

And the example I've got here is another game produced by Swinburne students. This is a game called Hyper Jam, which is a really interesting example of how they can take an existing concept, it's a fighting game, and put some really cool graphics onto it to make it a very different kind of feel, different kind of aesthetic.

NARRATOR: Get ready. Fight!

[UPBEAT MUSIC]

So that's another example of a student game that was made in their final years. It was a final year project. I think there were six, maybe seven students working on that game. And now it's again, a commercial product. It's available through the Steam store.

That game was developed using the Unreal engine. So one of the ways that games developers tend to work these days is, they take a commercially available engine and they use that to develop their own version of the game. So we used Unreal for that one. The earlier game that we saw, the Putty Pals game, was developed using the Unity engine. And they're the two most popular engines in the world at the moment. And these are the ones that we use at Swinburne.

Now when I speak to students, and this is particularly important, I think, for people advising students who are considering a games career, they always ask me, what should I do? How do I get started in this? And I always tend to come up with the same five points.

And the first one is that, they can't just play mainstream games that everyone else is playing. If they just play Call of Duty or Formula One, and they'll make, to be honest, pretty boring games. The innovation is actually happening away from the mainstream. So I tell them to go onto the Steam store or some of the other games stores that they've got access to and look for the really interesting titles, the ones that people are talking about as being different and pushing the boundaries.

The second point I usually advise students to consider is, learn about the industry and not just the games. Some of our most successful students are the ones that have a real industrial focus. So they know about which companies are going well, which companies are not doing so well. But also, about the revenue models. We do a strong focus in terms of the games to be on the business of games, as well as just the technical side of things.

The next three points are really related to the kinds of courses that they should talk about. And these are things that we've focused quite a lot on at Swinburne. And the first one is, study a course that's being recognized for games. Swinburne students have won many awards. And I'll talk about one of the awards in a moment. But a lot of different degrees or a lot of different universities teach games now. And I think it's important for students to look for a program that has industry recognition. So I think that's a good starting point.

The second point is that they should look for a course that focuses on play rather than design. And what I mean by that is, it's not difficult to make a good-looking game. But good-looking games don't

sell. The games that sell the most the ones that have really engaging game play. So it's really important for students to look for a course that thinks play is as important as how a game looks.

And the final point is, study a course that has close connections with the industry. One of the key things about the Swinburne games degree is, we've got an association, an agreement with what's called the Arcade in Melbourne. And the Arcade is a consortium of independent games companies that all exist under the same roof. And our final year students do an internship in the Arcade being mentored by professional games developers. And that kind of close connection with industry in their final year proves to be absolutely invaluable in terms of where students go in the industry.

As an example of that, last year, our students took out the top award for the first ever International Best Student Game at the International Game Awards. And this is one of our students accepting the award here.

Host

And the winner of the first ever Best Student Game is--

Host 2

Level Squared.

[CHEERING]

Steven Scoglio

Oh, wow. Thank you very much for actually creating this category. There's a lot of great student games that are being made. Just look at the other nominees in the category for examples of that. And also want to thank the judges, who are some of our heroes. I can't believe they actually played our game and possibly liked it.

I want to thank most of the team. The rest of the team's back in Australia watching on live stream. And I'm going to remember all their names. Producer Kip Brennan, Dane Perry-Svendsen, and Matt Harvey, Benedict Zang, Mike Tan, Tegan Nicholson, and Genevieve Rathgeber, as well as Swinburne University, the best place in Australia to learn how to make games. And also our teacher and mentor, Mr. Andy Trevelyan. Thank you very much. I'm graduating in a week. Somebody hire me, please.

Mark Finn

So that's just a nice little example of our students finding success on the global stage. And we think as the course develops, we're going to have more and more students are finding similar success.

So that's all I have in terms of my presentation. I'll close this down now so I can see the chat window more easily. And I'm happy to take some questions. Thank you.

Zoe Brown

All right. Well, thank you very much, Dr. Mark Finn. That was terrific. And I think we've all learned a lot about gaming and the future of games and how it's evolved over these many years.

And I actually think we do have a question.

Mark Finn

We do. I can see it. Employment possibilities in the games design industry.

So one of the good things about games is that the skills you develop in designing games are easily applicable in a whole range of other fields. So I always tell the students that getting a job in the games industry is difficult, because it is a very competitive field. And that the first job they get may not be in games, but it might be in IT, it might be in advertising, it might be in television, it might be in education. So the skills that students learn in games design cover a whole range of different fields.

So we're finding that almost all our students-- and I haven't got data on this, but almost all our students are employed within six months of graduation, but not always directly into games.

Zoe Brown

And Mark, in terms-- I was reading an article about the link between the sales of games and the COVID lockdown. So sales of game consoles went up 300% and physical games went up 280% in the same week Australia went into lockdown. I mean, obviously this must be an opportunity for game developers and upcoming talent. What are your thoughts around that?

Mark Finn

My consumption of games has gone up about 800% since we've gone into lockdown. So yeah. It's actually provided a great incentive for more people to get out and play games.

But I think the more games people play, the more they are thinking about the kinds of games they want to make. So I think we're going to see a boom in students wanting to do games degrees following this lockdown.

I'm just looking at the other question there. Is there an internship? We do have an internship built into the final year of our program with the Arcade.

Zoe Brown

OK. So eligibility criteria for the course.

Mark Finn

OK. So we don't require a portfolio. So this is basically a course that's designed to teach students everything they need to know about games design. If students do have a background in design or graphics or IT, it's helpful for them. But it's not mandatory. So they've just basically got to meet the basic entry requirements for the course.

Zoe Brown

And I think a 6.0 IELTS as well, with [INAUDIBLE].

Mark Finn

Yes. Correct, Yep. Alternative employment opportunities for games, what we're actually finding, which is kind of interesting in terms of where the students are going now, a lot of them are finding employment in places like government departments. And the reason why is, there's a thing that we often call gamification, which is how to use techniques of play to put forwards pro-social messages. So we're often finding, students are getting hired to make little educational games and things like that.

So that's where we're finding some of our students going now. Some, of course, are being picked up by games companies and some are being picked up by animation studios. We've got a double degree in games and animation. So the students get skill sets in both.

Salary package, look, it's incredibly variable depending on which country they're working in. Starting wage is usually around the same as an IT graduate. But it can be much higher and it can be much lower, depending on which studio they're working with.

Zoe Brown

Now I see there's a question regarding scholarships. So yes, we do have a range of new scholarships which we've just recently launched. So we have scholarships ranging from 10% to 75%. So yes, that information will be online and available very shortly. So we welcome you to apply. And you'll be automatically assessed for any scholarship the Swinburne International Excellence Scholarship when you submit your full application.

Mark Finn

So the courses don't need-- well, the games courses don't need to be accredited by any particular body. But we have a double degree in games and IT, effectively. And that does have to get industry accreditation for the IT side.

Zoe Brown

All right. Yes. I can cover some of these admissions questions perhaps a bit later. I've got the contact details of our participants.

Oh, just quickly, if there's any other general questions about the program or games in general, please feel free to ask Mark.

Mark Finn

Academic percentage. Look, in Australia, and I can only give Australian expectations, starting wage is usually around \$65,000. But again, it's incredibly variable, just depending on what company students are picked up from.

For the double degree, yes, because of the IT component. But not for the single degree.

Zoe Brown

That's for the maths.

Mark Finn

For the maths requirement, yes.

Zoe Brown

In terms of the types of games selling during COVID, I think there's been also a trend for the multi-player experiences rather than single player experiences. Do you think that's because people are locked in their homes and that's their way of being able to interact and socialize with others?

Mark Finn

Yeah. I think people are lacking social contact. And one of the ways they can get around that is to use games as a way of socializing. And I know, when I'm playing games as well, I'm often speaking to the people that I'm playing with or more like, they're shouting at me when I shoot them.

Do any of our panellists play games?

Zoe Brown

I'm sure there'd be quite a few, I'd imagine. Now, not all games are violent. That's correct, right, Mark?

Mark Finn

Yep, this is true. So, am I seeing a different chat window to you? Because I'm just seeing all panellists.

Zoe Brown

There's actually two boxes. There's a chat box and a Q&A box.

Mark Finn

Oh, OK.

Zoe Brown

So yes. We're getting from both.

Mark Finn

Now I understand. OK. Oh, someone's playing PUBG, yep. Very good. Command and Conquer, yep. Available for the October intake.

Zoe Brown

Sorry, you go.

Mark Finn

I'll let you handle that one, Zoe.

Zoe Brown

Yep. We have one intake per year. So it's a semester one intake. So that would be early next year, would be the next intake. So we encourage you to apply soon for that one.

Mark, I was just going to say, in terms of programming, is programming something that's required, or something that is undertaken during the degree?

Mark Finn

A little bit of both. So the way we've structured our games degree is, it's built around pre-existing game engines. So if the students are doing the double degree with IT, then they'll have to learn C++. If they're doing the single degree, then they'll be taught how to develop using game engines, pre-existing game engines. So they don't need actual programming. They'll learn a bit of programming, but they don't need to do much of it.

Zoe Brown

Now I have provided the link to our bachelor program in the chat box, and also in the Q&A section. So feel free to click on that and have a look at the program there. And also, feel free to look at any other programs.

Mark Finn

So does the university fund if a student has a brilliant game idea? So what basically happens is, the students start working on their games, essentially from the second year of their degree. And then they form teams in their final year to produce a fully, commercially-viable game. If the game has good commercial potential, we encourage the students to go out and seek funding for it.

So the Victorian government and the Australian government provides funding for developing creative content. So this is where a lot of our students are getting their games funded from.

Zoe Brown

There's also another question about recording. So we are recording this. So we will make it accessible through our agent and agent network. And I can also email it to you after the session.

Mark Finn

I think we might be coming to an end.

Zoe Brown

OK. Great. All right. Well, thank you so much, Mark, for joining us today. It's been really educational experience for all of us. And yeah, really enjoyable also to see the amazing work that our students have created and obviously done very, very well, especially at the Games Awards, which from my understanding, is like the Oscars but for games.

Mark Finn

It is. It's the most prestigious games award in the world.

Zoe Brown

So I think three years running, we were winners?

Mark Finn

Yeah.

Zoe Brown

Yeah. That's a huge testament to you and our teaching staff at Swinburne. And if any of our prospective students are interested in the games area, please don't hesitate to contact myself. And we can speak later. And I'll send you all the follow up email following this session.

Mark Finn

And I should point out for the students that the games I showed today are all available online.

Zoe Brown

For purchase.

Mark Finn

For purchase, yeah.

Zoe Brown

Great. All right. Well, thank you very much, Mark.

Mark Finn

Thank you. Enjoyed speaking to you. Have a good day.

Zoe Brown

Have a good day. Thank you all. Bye-bye.

Mark Finn

Goodbye.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]