

Opinion: Making The Game Industry An Attractive Place To Work

[In this in-depth opinion piece, Electronic Arts' head of European talent acquisition Matthew Jeffery looks at the outside world's perception of gaming, and how we can overcome myths and preconceptions to attract dedicated, long-term employees.]

I have the opportunity to speak at many events outside of the games industry, at universities and other settings where one of the most frequently asked questions always seems to be, "What's it truly like to work in gaming?"

This is generally followed by a list of questions encompassing the myths - the good, the bad and everything in between - about working in games.

Recruitment is one of the biggest challenges facing companies today. Attracting and retaining the best talent affects not only the quality of games, but impacts the culture and the balance sheet's bottom line, and can quite literally make or break a business. There is no recruitment "crisis" in gaming, but what is true is that the "experienced" talent pool of game industry developers is shrinking.

All game companies are increasing in size and need talent to meet growth plans. This is coupled with the rapid expansion of other industries including film, music, IT, and mobile, among others, who are not only eyeing the game industry's talent pool enviously but actively fishing in it. That means that all companies have to have a compelling employment proposition and candidate experience to hold onto existing staff even before looking to recruit new staff.

Retention is a challenge for most companies. It's essential to ensure staff not only feel motivated to do the best job they can but that they enjoy what they do. It is essential to create conditions that nurture creativity and fun. If people enjoy what they do, feel empowered to make a difference, have a strong voice on a team and have the right conditions to feel creative then even better games will follow.

Fresh Perspectives From New Industries And Graduates

For our industry to continue to grow at its current rate of acceleration, we need to attract talent from other industries as well as more new graduates. The industry has become overly reliant on playing recruitment chess - taking employees from one competitor and then losing their own in return. This never ending game benefits no one, results in stalemate and does not meet the industry's needs for fresh perspective and growth.

A simple Google search for "games industry" reveals a number of preconceptions of what working in gaming is like. Today I'd like to acknowledge common perceptions and break through some of these myths. Together, we can debunk these myths and grow the industry with a new generation of talent.

Top Myths About Working In Gaming

- Work Hard/Play Hard
- Getting Lost In The Crowd
- Jobs, Not Careers
- Old Demographic Paradigms

Work Hard/Play Hard

Any industry which faces a project deadline will have challenges. Project deadlines face all companies in all industries ranging from financial services, retail, film production, consumer goods - the list goes on. The increase in working hours in project deadline industries is very commonplace. Although no one deliberately schedules for "crunch," it unfortunately occurs.

While studies indicate that people perform best when under pressure to deliver by a given date, the key is how to minimise longer working hours while still meeting deadlines.

EA has conducted extensive analysis on how to effectively plan for product launches while maximizing workload planning in the months and weeks leading up to the "crunch." More effective time spent in preproduction, especially focused on locking down game design, helps to make scheduling more predictable and manageable throughout the project lifecycle. While the battle to lessen crunch is ongoing, the industry has turned the corner and is improving work/life balance and quality of life.

Interestingly, the new casual entertainment focus of gaming has led to games that can be developed with teams as small as 10-15 on three-month development cycles. Casual entertainment gaming - online, mobile phones and the like - has already changed work life balance expectations of game developers.

There are many personal and professional benefits to developing casual games, such as the ability and flexibility to work on three to four projects in a given year, often within different game genres. The variety has an incredibly positive effect on employee morale and job satisfaction.

Getting Lost In The Crowd

Employees naturally worry when a company reaches a certain size that they will become a face lost in a crowd.

Yet many small game developers have struggled with embracing their growing size as they have kept pace with the dramatic changes in our industry over the last five or ten years. Simple considerations like the cost to develop, market, and distribute new games makes the barriers to entry much higher than in the days of creating a new game in your garage as a side hobby. The industry has grown dramatically in size, cost and complexity.

In most industries, the associations with being big are positive; simply put, "biggest" means "the best." This is true in the world of sports - players strive to play for teams like Manchester United and the New York Yankees, on the strength of their ability to be leaders. Conversely, large companies can be seen as unwieldy to a developer.

In the gaming industry, working for a large employer allows opportunity for creative risk on new ideas, without risking company stability. This is a great thing given the history of company failures in the games industry. Employees are able to work across a broad spectrum of different games and have the benefits of job variety. There are opportunities for many careers within one company - employees can learn more skills and increase the breadth of their experience.

Jobs, Not Careers

As the industry heads towards becoming a form of global, mainstream entertainment compounded by the challenge of a shrinking talent pool, it becomes even more important to find and keep good people. And as the costs to hire, train and develop new employees continues to increase, employers need to look at new hires as investments in the company, rather than simply filling positions that may easily turnover.

One of the myths about gaming is that we are still a relatively new industry and career paths sometimes lack clear definition. Career development should be top of the agenda at all games

companies, however large or small.

Job enrichment comes when people are motivated by their work and have clear career development paths. Training, development, and career mapping should not be perceived as a negative cost but a way of ensuring that a member of staff can not only fulfill his or her existing talent but exceed it. Career development not only ensures staff attrition remains low but helps raise the quality and experience of game development teams.

As gaming companies look towards building a global workforce that feels appropriately challenged and rewarded at all levels throughout the organization, we come back to a common set of questions that are important at any career juncture:

- Do employees feel challenged?
- Are employees well compensated?
- Are employees supported by their manager?
- Do employees enjoy their job? Is it fun?
- Do employees have an appropriate level of work/life balance?
- Are employees working on world class games?
- Do employees have an opportunity for promotion?
- Are employees receiving training and career development?
- Are employees ideas valued?

The goal is to ensure all are answered yes. It is vital for all gaming companies to ensure that career development is number one on the agenda, and to ensure staff feel inspired to not only reach but exceed their expected career potential.

As with most jobs in any industry, an employee's relationship with his or her manager is key to achieving job satisfaction and career development. A manager can have the greatest impact on an individual staying in a company and building their career, or in leaving it.

People management is a real art, and building meaningful relationships founded on trust and honesty is key. With so much importance riding on managing, inspiring people and career development, it is no wonder than some companies in the industry are moving towards new structures with specialists managing and leading people in contrast to craft leaders having the extra responsibility of people management.

Just because people are great in their crafts does not make them leaders of people, and often distracts them from their real given talents.

Old Demographic Paradigms

Games have stereotypically had the image of catering overwhelmingly for young males. That is no longer the case today, with games like *The Sims* played by an audience that is 60% female, and casual gaming sites like Pogo.com attracting more than 50% of users as women age 35 and older.

As the composition of the industry changes, we should expect our workforce to be in lockstep. Driving this is new talent, particularly graduates.

Graduate hiring is critical to the success of this industry, particularly for attracting a more diverse workforce. *Portal* was at the top of many "Best Of" lists for 2007.

What impressed me about the title, apart from its originality, was that team lead Kim Swift developed the game with predominantly a small team of her fellow recent graduates. What a great example for hiring creative graduates, and a triumph proclaiming that those who lack years of experience can make up the difference by contributing incredibly innovative ideas.

Development teams hiring the best talent are still predominantly faced with male applicants, be it in art, engineering, game design or production. However, to bring in new and diverse talent should be a bigger focus, and educating graduates and students studying at school of the merits of careers in gaming is key.

Changing the career destinations of diverse top talent attending university is not just an immediate win, but one which benefits the future of the entire games industry in years to come.

Entering The Golden Era Of Gaming

Interactive entertainment generates many emotions & situations. It can make you laugh, cry, scare, or feel surprised. You can be transformed into your sporting hero or immerse into fantasy worlds. It can help you learn new things, and you can be whatever you want to be. But most importantly, gaming is about having fun - escaping from everyday life and being entertained.

What job is better than helping people have fun?

There has never been a better time to work in gaming. As an industry we should all take pride in what we have achieved in only 25 years, from the likes of *Pong*, *Pac-Man* and *Space Invaders* to *Spore*, *GTA4*, and *God of War*.

Phenomenal entertainment experiences keep on coming. Already, in revenue terms the industry is bigger than film and music, but the real potential for growth is breathtaking. There are so many new opportunities, including Asian markets, online gaming, mobile phone gaming or casual entertainment.

As technology continues to drive our industry forward, who knows where we will be in another 25 years? Neural gaming? Virtual reality? What is certain is that our industry leads the entertainment revolution, and to fuel its growth, we need fresh talent outside of gaming and passionate graduates to overcome our industry's challenges.

We all need to work together to debunk the myths about working in gaming, and in turn, we will attract world-class talent to continue our entertainment revolution.

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