Hold Shift to Sprint: The Affordability of Gaming

Hold Shift is a podcast where we explore aspects of video game culture

Desirae Sin: Hello gentle listeners. This is "Hold Shift to Run." The podcast where we explore aspects of the video game industry and culture. I'm your host, Desirae Sin, and I'm joined by Kenneth Thompson. Kenneth is a professor of digital media and design at the University of Connecticut and has worked on games like "Madagascar: Operation Penguin," and "Spacechem." So thank you, Kenneth, for joining.

What drew you to video games and how did you make a career out of it

Just, to start off, what drew you to video games and how did you make a career out of it?

Kenneth Thompson: Thank you for having me. and you know, what drew me to video games? well, I have to say, when I was a kid, ah, and I was in, I think it was like fifth grade, I had a lot of friends who played, this really expensive tabletop game. It's called Warhammer. and nothing against it, but I came from a very low, ah, income background and I was unable to play this game with other people because it generally is like three to five hundred dollars just to start. and so, you know, I was really frustrated with that. And the first time I realized, or looking back at, you know, my past, I realized that what,

happened there was I took the idea of this tabletop game and I designed my own version of it and I created a rule book and I made pieces out of things I already owned, you know, pieces of paper and that kind of stuff. and I played it with my friends. I play tested it and that was the first time I tried to make a game. And from there, just like every high school student does when they're trying to think, oh, what should I do with my life? What, what am I passionate about? And what could I see myself doing for at least eight hours a day? I thought video games was not only what I love to do, but also what kept me up at night having discussions about how to make them better. you know, whatever I was playing, my older brother and I would be staying up late talking about how to make this one thing better by changing this one thing.

Desirae Sin: That, sounds really interesting. And I understand the Warhammer thing because I'm not completely familiar with Warhammer vs Warhammer 40k, but I've heard people saying it pretty much takes 40k to pay for the hobby.

Kenneth Thompson: Yeah, that's definitely, it can be true.

For today's episode, we're talking about the affordability of gaming

Desirae Sin: So for today's episode, we're going to be talking about the affordability of gaming, like you mentioned. And there are a lot of price tags attached to games we love and hold dear to us. But expensive hardware and microtransactions can turn the hobby into a real expense. So the first question I want to dive into, it's about the new consoles and new games that we're seeing earlier. this fall it was announced that the PS5 Pro is going to release on November 7th and it's going to cost pretty much $700, 699 technically, but we know tax and right now the regular PS5 is still around $500 and it

hasn't received a price drop yet. So personally I've seen a lot of TikToks or jokes on the Internet about people selling their left kidney to afford the PS5 Pro or the idea that it's not that much, it's not so much better than the PS5 that it's going to make people want to buy it. So as a developer and a gamer, what are your thoughts on like these powerful new consoles that might not be as wanted as they think?

Kenneth Thompson: Well, you know, the video game marketplace has grown and is now an international marketplace, in a lot of ways. The cost of the PlayStation 5, you mentioned the $700 that's actually in line with most of the video game consoles from the past. I think the Nintendo sold for I think it was like $299. But adjusted for, you know, in days, today's value, it was not so much different from what we see with consoles. and there has been ones that have been more expensive when, adjusted for inflation. so as far as like the price point, I agree it is a lot. It is definitely the cutting edge kind of console. And with buying the best technology, especially if you're playing multiplayer games with people on other consoles that might be last generation, you might have a advantage in if you're playing competitive multiplayer or something like that. in general, video games have stayed also from a price point pretty consistent around the $60 mark. although you're right to mention that the marketplace is changing right now and we're seeing those prices start to creep up. and we're seeing other ways that video game companies have become really

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Kenneth Thompson: profitable from a, you know, just from a profits point of view, which is like you mentioned, microtransactions, which I think is a whole second aspect of video games that we really all should be really focused and concerned about how those kinds of microtransactions are presented and both in the game and how they're

presented.

There is a dark side to having microtransactions in a game

Desirae Sin: Have you made any games that have microtransactions like this or like small, you know, microtransactions? I don't know how to describe it.

Kenneth Thompson: Very, you know, I came in around the Game Boy Advance era, and I finished my entertainment career around the DS, the 3DS. if you want to think about it, that's how I think about my life is between, different consoles, what that, era was like for me. So I actually was in between microtransactions. So, you know, microtransactions as they are now, where you're buying costumes and you're paying money, sometimes more than $50, if it's a $50 game. However, I don't know if you have thought about it, but if you think about arcades and quarters, video games have had a history of microtransactions, but the microtransaction was a quarter instead of a dollar on an app. And there is a dark side to having microtransactions in a game. One of the few articles that I have published on a, you know, just a game developer website, gamedeveloper.com is specifically about how to create games that provide microtransactions that are fair to people that allow a game to be free. Because many people, if you take, "League of Legends," for instance, "League of Legends" is a free video game and it has microtransactions inside of it that allow the company to be profitable, but only. And I'm making up this number. I haven't looked at their statistics, but generally 1% or 5% would be a high number. But very few people end up purchasing those things. But 27, you know, so many millions of people are playing that game all over the world together and receiving this kind of free value from that. so there are ways that are out in the world where microtransactions. I've seen it done, right. But

then there's also, like you mentioned and stuff that I am very, I have very, strong feelings about. As far as, you know, it's very unethical to be setting up, for instance, children with access to a credit card and really no understanding of how they're making those purchases. and I've heard from parents as well, mentioning those kind of things.

Games with cheaper base prices have microtransactions for cosmetics, DLCs

Desirae Sin: on the topic of like, microtransactions and paying inside the game, an article by Rebecca Valentina at IGN, it mentions games with cheaper base prices are or are free, have microtransactions for cosmetics, DLCs or other content. as a developer, is there something that games have that game developers have to keep in mind when they're adding in these kind of features, like the ability to have a credit card on file in the game or somewhere on the hardware, not like a regular or not a regular, but just a fixed game where it might not have access to something like that or keeping it confidential.

Kenneth Thompson: In game development, we have the opportunity to create software that is, can be fun. In game development, when we create fun software, we're mostly thinking about how is it that the player can play this game and enjoy the most amount of content that isn't side of it. When as game developers we're looking at implementing these kinds of microtransaction features, the quote unquote good transaction features are things that do not affect gameplay. So for instance in a multiplayer game, if you're going to wear a special costume because your favorite character is a specific character and you want to spend a few dollars to wear that character outfit in "Fortnite" or, or whatever, those kinds of things don't impact the way games are played. And because of that there is not an incentive for players to buy those things. As an example, if I was

Microsoft and I'm going to sell you Windows, which is a mouse based system, if you had a Windows computer or even a Mac computer, you'd have to use your mouse to move around and click, right? Well, what if

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Kenneth Thompson: we had a free Windows software, free macOS, but you could only use a mouse if you paid for it? Well in that case you're creating an inferior product in order to create a marketplace. And that's a really negative way to create software, to create marketplaces by having software that doesn't work efficiently, only for the benefit of making money. And some companies do that. some companies also look very closely at psychological principles like the Skinner box, in which we you know, we as humans are somewhat susceptible to, you know, being convinced to do one thing or another, which is what video games are interestingly about in a lot of ways is we really want you to explore this world. Well, how do we get you to explore this world? We're thinking about ways that the software is interesting and engaging.

Desirae Sin: thank you.

Gene Parker: Let's Play is one of the most important historical preservation tactics

I know that we've been mostly focusing on the consumer aspect of it, but I kind of wanted to move on to another question I had about this rise of like let's players. So a Washington Post article by Gene Parker, Gene Park, in 2019 it described the growth of let's players and how a lot of YouTube's traffic is geared towards gaming content like

this and other streaming platforms like Twitch. So I was wondering what is your thoughts on this new genre of like esports or let's players on the Internet, where people aren't necessarily the casual gamers or creational gamers aren't necessarily buying every single new game that comes out, but they're actually watching other people play instead. So do you think this has something with like, what are your thoughts?

Kenneth Thompson: The let's play community is one of the most important historical preservation tactics that the video game industry has in this generation. And I want to explain something to you because what's your favorite game? What's the one you're playing right now?

Desirae Sin: I'm stuck on "Mortal Kombat 1." I'll be honest.

Kenneth Thompson: "Mortal Kombat 1," awesome. When "Mortal Kombat 1" came out, it was in the arcade, right? And that emotional quality of playing a game in an arcade is something that a lot of people today don't know about. But if you were even looking at like "World of Warcraft." In World of Warcraft, when I played the original game, it felt a certain way and it played a certain way. However, until very recently, there was no way to stay in 2011 or whenever, you know, whenever Warcraft actually came out. You can't like rewind time and remember how that game was back then because it's a live service and it keeps getting updated and updated and updated some more. And so if you're thinking about it from a historical point of view, if you want to show like, oh, look, this is what "World of Warcraft" was in the early 2000s. This is a historically important game. You can't show it because no one has a record of it. You can definitely not play it. There will be no way for human beings to play "World of Warcraft" once Blizzard end that service. Just like there have been many video games in the recent memory who have been, whose services have been discontinued, those games no longer exist in the

world. Much like in cinema, the silver age of cinema where we lost thousands and thousands of films. We are losing many video games and the way they were played and the way they were received and the value that they brought to our communities, we're losing all of that and we're losing all of those stories because we don't have a way to archive video games. Because for me, I tell all my students, playing a game is different from watching a video. If you have to watch the video. But all of my assignments are based around playing games that sometimes they're your colleagues games. But if you're going to give proper feedback about how this character feels, oh, the jump feels really good. Well, you can only feel that feeling if you jump yourself. You can't watch a video of jumping. And so we have playing as a key component to our craft, and that's being lost. So I applaud that whole community. I am thrilled that we haven't had some. You know, there are. It could be that video game companies could come out and say, no, we're going to trademark infringe all of these videos. You can't do a single one of these things. I

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Kenneth Thompson: have been impressed that the industry has not done that, to its credit, although we, you know, there have been some, but, but very minor. So I'm really excited about that from a humanities and from an academic perspective.

Kenneth Thompson: Everyone makes games, like I mentioned

Desirae Sin: so wrapping up now. Thank you again for joining me today. I really appreciate it and helping to shed light on, the gaming industry or your thoughts on it as a whole with technology, the economy and gamers. is there anything else you wanted

to note or let your students know?

Kenneth Thompson: Everyone makes games, like I mentioned. And the only thing that I am interested as an academic game developer is to get you to realize that you can make games, too. It takes your uniqueness and you need to bring your uniqueness to the development process in order to make a really good game. And those are the games that stand out, is ones that are really unique, really interesting. The way we get that is from a diverse set of stories, share games, make them and play them with each other. that's all I want to do here at UConn.

Desirae Sin: Thank you again. I'm Desirae Sin, joined by Kenneth Thompson, and this has been "Hold Shift to Sprint."

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