

**Podcast Transcript:** Scottish Games Network

**Host:** Katie Masheter

**Guest Speakers:** Brian Baglow

**Katie:**

Hello, this podcast has been brought to you by the University of the Highlands and Islands careers and employability centre. My name is Katie Masheter and today I'm speaking to Brian Baglow. He's the Founder and Director of the Scottish Games Network and a gamification consultant. So Brian, tell us more. The Scottish games network, all about representing Scotland's video games and interactive industry. We hear that you are also part of the team behind the brains and the creation of Grand Theft Auto. Big game! So tell us, how did you first get into the industry?

**Brian:**

Yes, thank you very much for having me. It's a pleasure to be here. I guess I started way way back in the dark ages when games still came on disks in boxes from shops, which seems very very sort of 20th century these days. I had studied software engineering, and this was back in the days where that was all about controlling drills and waves and you know machinery CNC equipment, and I had said to one of my lecturers, I wanted to work in video games. He said he would fail me on the spot, and that didn't really sit well with me, because I grew up playing video games. When I started, we got the Zed x 81 the world's first sub 100 pound home computer, and they promised the world. They promised that mum would be doing her recipes on it, dad would be doing the accounts and kids would be learning everything that they needed for homework. As soon as you got this thing all you realised that pretty much the only thing that was worth doing on it was playing games, and I played quite a lot of games. Fast forward a few years, and I discovered there was a company in Dundee called DMA design, and they had done a game called lemmings which I had played and quit and I had loved. So I applied for a programming role. And I crashed. I am a moderate programmer, at very very best and so they very quickly realised this and said thanks very much but I don't think you're ready for us. So six months later, I was still pining to be there. One of my friends got a job in the audio department, and it just sounded so wonderful and I applied again. But, I sent in a CV, which was about an inch high, and I just made stuff up and I sent it with a pack of Return of the Jedi transfers. Again, this was a while ago, marked very clearly as a bribe. They offered me a job as an writer. I'm not saying that's the route I would recommend to students these days, I don't think anybody would get away with that, the industry has grown and evolved into a serious business but that was what worked for me. When I joined DMA, they put me on this game which was kind of struggling, and it was a little top down driving game where you played a policeman, and you have to zoom about the city and arrest the bad guys. It was called 'race and chase', and so I wrote for that for a few months and went to the design meetings. The problem was it wasn't an awful lot of fun. And it took quite a lot of team meetings and several fights and then some more team meetings, and we decided to maybe let you play the bad guy instead. And that actually worked quite well. And it was an awful lot more interesting. And so we changed the name from 'race and chase' to Grand Theft Auto, and that's gone on to do okay I think.

**Katie:**

Absolutely. Brian, I feel you are being a bit modest on this one. Am I not right in thinking that it has become one of the best selling video games of all time, with a number of sequels and influence over hundreds of other games? I'm sure gaming enthusiasts tuning into this will be an absolute awe of your journey and being a part of writing such a world renowned piece.

**Brian:**

I was a very small part of a big team. As soon as I left, the game went global. So, I'm not saying there

was a clear connection but yeah, it's gone on to huge success. It's still one of the biggest games ever and is responsible for something like a quarter of all the game streams on twitch, it's ridiculous. And it's still designed, developed and written here in Scotland, so you know something to be proud of.

**Katie:**

Definitely. And just really interesting to hear about how an initial idea, an initial game was already in the works and then discussion and revision and refining of that and kind of challenging that initial idea led to a bigger and better thing. So you've worked in the interactive media and video games industry for over 20 years. Could you give us an overview of some of the job roles/ job prospects that there are within Scotland's Game Studios?

**Brian:**

very happy to. I'll try and touch on as many as I can. So we back in the early days, there were really only two primary roles in the game sector that was 1.) a programmer and 2.) an artist. And that was really where they were founded by one of those two roles and lead by people who came from those backgrounds. And of course, programming and art are still in hugely, hugely growing demand in the game sector. So if you're going through any of the games related courses that we have in Scotland at the moment. You are really setting yourself up well because the global games industry is still growing. You now have a variety of specialisations, and a whole lot of sort of sub sectors and really different focuses for people coming from that technical background. So you could be a general programmer, AI programmer, network programming is hugely in demand and only going to rise. Everything is happening online. You can do audio programming, you can do art and animation programming. There's an awful lot of specialisations and what that means is, you can actually pursue your passion and you can follow the thing that interests you the most. And similarly, in art and animation, back when I started pretty much every game was in two dimensions, but obviously now you've got 2D, you've got 3D, you've got hand drawn, you've got more mobile. The games industry now encompasses the simplest casual/social online mobile games at one end and the huge triple A console titles at the other end. The programming and art roles are still the primary creative driver for the industry but you can specialise and you can find ways to follow your dreams, because the industry is big enough to allow that. And it's also worth noting that nowadays, more and more opportunities exist to build and release your own games, you know, you're no longer having to go and work for a studio, or go and work for a big games company in order to make and release your own games.

**Katie:**

That's so interesting to hear it's not just about supplying that jobs market, there's the whole real entrepreneurial spirit in the game sector at the moment, which is fantastic.

**Brian:**

I would argue it's faster, simpler and cheaper now than it has ever been in history to make and release games. So all of the tools and platforms that have been used by the major companies – the biggest publishers, the biggest developers – are available for free, you can download and install them and use them and practice with them right now. And in fact, Epic just changed its pricing, a month ago, to say if you're using the Unreal Engine, we're only going to take money off you after your first million, which is quite nice. And in addition to those primary creative roles, you've now got the audio side of things. So, musicians, composers, arrangers, artists of all descriptions, have an opportunity to get involved. But similarly the role of the writer has changed and we now have what's called narrative design. So a narrative designer is a writer but a writer that has got experience with all these other roles and all of the ways in which you can create narrative flow in a game, that doesn't involve writing words. So it can involve audio, it can involve level design, it can involve

anything that helps the player to understand the flow of the game and the overall story arc without necessarily having to take control away from them and stick a cutscene in, or have a character stop and explain. So there's a real opportunity for writers to establish a different role, and you know in a far more fundamental role within gaming. If you look at related fields like screen, you know Film, Television, Animation, even performing out on stage, you cannot start any one of those without a script. It's absolutely possible to finish and complete and release a game without one because it's the programmers and it's the artists, animators, producers and all of these kinds of people who are providing input, but making it up as they go along. And I'm not saying it's massively common yet, but it's something that's really coming through, especially in larger games, you know, where you've got millions of pounds invested. If you've got a huge team working on something, and you need somebody who's got that vision, and of course, another very large part of this now, is production, because if you're working on a game where there's been a significant amount of money invested then we've got dozens, hundreds, in some cases 1000s of people, you know they can be all around the world working on one game. Everything has to come together. So, the production and management side of games is something that has really, really come through strongly in the last few years. And that's an area where you really do need more skills and talent and more people coming through these roles because it might not be as sexy and as glamorous as the programming and the art. But it's the fundamental bedrock on which games are built. If you can't produce a game on time and on budget, chances are your game is either A.) not going to get released, or B.) not going to make any money. So it's a fundamental part of business that I think is only really recently been getting the attention it deserves. And having people with those skill – organisation, business management types of skills and who can corral, shepherd and direct these creatives and technical people - is a really in demand business. Once you prove yourself with a couple of indie hits or a small studio, bigger guys with bigger publishers are going to come knocking on your door, or at least be willing to listen when you go knocking on their door. Once you've shown that you can actually get this kind of thing done, you have real, real value in this sector. We're now at a point where, making the game is no longer the primary activity. Obviously you want to make something, you've got to get everyone to market, it's got to be something people want to play, but as soon as you've finished making the game, as soon as it's done, back when I started, everyone took a fortnight off. However, nowadays because more and more developers and more and more companies are releasing their own games, they now have to be able to promote the game, support the game, they've got to be able to bring customers in, and bring players in and engage with them. If you're using a one of the new business models like free to play, you require people to come back on, on an ongoing basis so at some point they can give you money, whether that's directly or whether that's through incentivized advertising and multiple downloadable content. And these are some of the key skills gaps that the game sector, not just in Scotland, but across the UK, suffers from - the business people, the marketing people, the community managers, the people who can do user support, a quality assurance and testing team. They are all absolutely fundamental to this, and in smaller studios, some of these roles are not just doubled up, but can be tripled or quadrupled up, so the lead programmer is also the Social Media Manager, and the main artist is also handling all of the community, and all of the business transactions and refunds and yada yada yada. So, being multi skilled, being able to turn your hand to a number of things is fatally important if you're working in one of the smaller studios. More and more of the games companies in Scotland are micro businesses and will never really grown more than seven to 10 people, because they don't need to. And there are opportunities now to outsource. So, there are freelancers out there who are programmers, or audio specialists or PR marketing. There are even QA testers, who can give you the support you need on a daily, weekly or even hourly basis. So, it's a completely different world. It's far closer to the rest of the creative industry now than it has been in the past. So what we're seeing is an awful lot of people who come

through games courses or who have experience or have a background in games are making the move and jumping into a digital design agency or production company, or some other aspects of the creative world, because now their skills are being recognised and accepted and they're in demand by a much, much broader range of people.

**Katie:**

Thank you! That's such a brilliant overview of the different technical, non-technical, creative, PR marketing, advertising and sales type roles available in the industry, a lot broader than a lot of people probably initially realised. Are there a couple of examples of games studios that you feel you'd like to highlight they're doing a great job and putting Scotland on the map, in terms of gaming?

**Brian:**

Sure. Everybody knows about Rockstar North or I should say a lot of people know about Rockstar North, and a lot of people have heard about Four G Studios, since they're doing the console versions of Minecraft. But we have probably about 40 to 50 game studios across the country and they go from Stornoway all the way down to the borders, one of my favourite studios and one that I use a lot when I'm talking to people is a studio Elgin called Hunted Cow and the team there are fantastic. So, Andrew and Glen, who set the company up were graduates from Abertay, they moved back home and they started off doing chess by email games. A digital take on a very old idea. It very quickly grew so they started doing more online games that you play in your web browser, and they built MMOs - massively multiplayer online games. They built role playing games. They built up a really loyal online community. The studio grew, alongside the popularity of this. I think they've now got maybe 20-25 people, they are recruiting for about another at least half a dozen maybe 10. And so the studio is still growing. And they've diversified by specialising, you know, so they've worked with another local company called hex war, who produce turn based/ hex based wargames, everything from the Civil War all the way through to the Second World War, and everything in between so tank battle Africa 1942, Civil War Gettysburg etc etc. which is a really niche market. But, boy is it a loyal market. Producing a single game, and then doing lots of level packs for it is insanely popular because there's a huge, huge audience for American Civil War Games in America, that wasn't being satisfied by anyone else. Between their massively multiplayer online games and their mobile strategy games, they're now working with Warhammer, one of the biggest properties in the games market. They've kept local, they're based in Elgin, they've got a fantastic little studio, not just a little studio actually quite a big studio. And they are still going, they are still producing more and more and so they are a wonderful example, and they've built all off their own their own IP, their own games.

If you move down to Dundee you've got so many examples. And you may have heard of Outplay. Outplay are one of the biggest studios in Dundee and they do hyper casual games with the bubble busters, that kind of thing. But with ultra slick really high production values, all their own original intellectual property but they did so well. They've done a couple of games for Angry Birds. And similarly, Tag games who are near neighbour theirs have done work for Higher Titles so they've worked on games and apps for Channel Four, for the BBC, for different production companies. They did CSR racing 2, which is one of the biggest mobile racing games out there. They've done a Heroes of Might and Magic game. They've peppered that with some of their own original games as well. And in Edinburgh, we have a company called Game Analytics, who did analytics for video games, they rebranded as delta dma and their whole goal was to give you insight into your players - where they come in, where they drop out, what they buy, what they don't buy, what adverts they've seen, what promotions they've got. And it's all about in these days of free to play, you need to be able to keep your users, and you need to be able to make your users, paying customers. And the funny thing is

that in some cases are talking about making money from your video game can be a bit of a touchy topic. You know some people think they aren't going to charge anybody anything and that's madness. If you're making games for a living, at some point somebody has to give you money. So delta dna did this for companies across the world. Similarly, Tag Games realised that they needed all of the tools to track and support their players. And so they built their own technology, and then they spun it out into a company called chilly Connect. Now, both of those companies both delta dna and Chilly Connect were acquired. So they exited through acquisition, for the business students out there, because they got bought by Unity, who are arguably the world's largest games engine at this point in time. So they are now both rebranded, they're still in Dundee, they're still in Edinburgh, but we now have Unity technologies here in Scotland, who are offering the same services, but to game developers, all over the world. That's a huge, huge fantastically good story, because it means that we built something in Scotland, that was so valuable that the world's leading games platform (or one of), came in and went, yeh we want those best in class and they're being integrated into the next iterations of the Unity engine. So we've got so many fantastically good stories. We've got so many people doing interesting things, but sometimes you know the games tech side of things, gets overlooked. You know, we've got a company in Edinburgh called speech graphics, who were voted startup of the year, and they do real time facial animation and lip synching, Kanye used it in a music video, it's been used in an awful lot of the big trailers for the console games and so on and so forth. Much of the data that they're working with is provided through facial capture. And we have a company in Glasgow called dimensional imaging, who do the live ultra high res photo based facial capture so you're not having to have black dots all over your face. And that's been used in everything, you know we're talking Hollywood blockbusters, we're talking the biggest games in the world out there. And all of this is happening here.

**Katie:**

So I'm sensing there is a whole another layer to the games industry that a lot of people don't know about. So for students tuned in that are really eager to know more quite, enthused by all that they've heard from you today. Where can we find out? what should they be following? what should they be attending? who should they connect with to know a bit more about the industry?

**Brian:**

There is only the Scottish teams network. There is no other source for this information. Okay. In all seriousness yes there are several sites, and several publications that I can recommend. There used to be two separate magazines, they are now combined into one so you've got MC v develop. MC v handles the business and retail side of things, whereas develop handles the production and creation side of things. Games industry dot biz, which is purely online is one of the best sources for information about the global industry, but it's based in the UK. And then Pocket Gamer. You've got two sides of that. Pocket gamer dot com does all of the reviews on sort of the consumer facing side of things, and pocket gamer dot biz is all about the business side, and since, more and more companies are focusing on mobile, you're getting an awful lot of information coming through, about the sorts of companies who are out there, and the business trends, because things change so incredibly quickly in the game sector, it can be challenging to keep up. And in the very near future, I'm going to be supplementing the online side of things, the Scottish Games Network actual news stories, with a podcast of my own, and of live streams and really trying to drill down into some of the area of the games industry, especially in Scotland where I don't think we're getting the visibility that we need. So one of the things that I'm going to be pushing in the near future, is the fact that an awful lot of the opportunities out there for students and graduates now are entrepreneurial, building your own business, creating and publishing your own games is now easier than it's ever been. And the amount of help and support out there for new tech and software businesses is really

quite extensive, we're not doing too badly. I'm not saying it's a utopia but the startup scene in Scotland for new tech companies is buzzing, and that's across the country. I think there's a need to help students, to help graduates, to help people who are going to be looking for work to go actually 'Yes, they can go and I can join one of these'. But if you've got a good idea, and you've got this business idea, then you know that this is a really good place to be and becoming an employer, rather than an employee, as an individual, and you could be you know the brains behind the next Grand Theft Auto or the next Chilly Connect. The global market is growing. The COVID crisis has caused more and more people to be sitting at home, playing games. More than that, when can we start to emerge, and we have to find new ways of working, of meeting, of learning of educating children - games can and should be at the heart of them. We can take the tools and technologies and techniques of gaming, and then apply them in different ways. So it's a really interesting place to be right now.

**Katie:**

So let's talk about breaking into the gaming industry, I realised specific gaming graduate schemes are often hard to come by. So, for students and graduates tuned in. How can they boost their chances of success?

**Brian:**

Okay. That's a great question. One of the key things I think that an awful lot of students run into is that their experience with the industry, and their contact with the industry is really limited. So get out there, find out who's hiring, the sort of work they're doing, the sort of roles they're employing and see what works for you. If you have a great idea as part of your course, you're making something, publish it. It has never been easier to publish something. There's so much learning that comes from completing the process in design, development and production, really important. But nothing compares to having something out there on the market. And, as somebody who has taken on artists and programmers and producers in the past, somebody who can walk in and say here's five games that I've released, or even one game, are going to be head, and shoulders above people who have got a theory and have got a portfolio, but they've not got that live engagement with people. It shows initiative, it shows that you have actually understood the entire lifecycle. And it's something that far too few people are doing. There's also a corollary to this, which is, if you as an individual or as a small team have an idea. Then, making it and publishing it, even as a prototype is as valuable, and has value. And, and I know that there are going to be howls from people listening to this will 'nooo, if we just released it as a prototype, then somebody will steal the idea and it will never be a million dollar game', far too many people sit on the big idea and it never comes to fruition. It never gets released, and what it means is that you run the risk of never ever getting that dream job. If you've ever heard of or played a game called 'Portal'. That was a student project called the vacuum drop, and they showed it off at a local game fair, and somebody from Valve saw it and went back and said 'you should see this crazy 3d puzzle games' and so they were picked up, brought in house, funded to produce the game, and it's one more Game of the Year awards and anything since 'Half Life'. It's incredible and I'm not saying that's common but if you're not putting something out, if you're not brave enough to stick your head above the parapet, then you can run the risk of never developing the skills, never actually understanding what it is you want to do. And I guess the final thing I want to say on that is that if you are a team and you've got an idea, that's not the same as making your own business. Far too often, I get a team of 3,4,5 people coming to me and saying 'hey, we're a company'. And my response is usually 'are you though? Okay, what is it you do', 'we make games'. 'Okay, which games?'. 'Well, we've got this idea okay', 'that's not games that is singular'. What you mean is that, you've got an idea that you want to produce. You're a team, you're not a business, a business has a business plan, a business has a reason to exist, it's either creating a

product or a service or solving a pain point. You can be a game development studio with a purpose. You know Tag in Dundee has done an awful lot of work for hire, and has established a global reputation with Intellectual Property holders and brand owners. Outplay is doing their own thing, they are producing incredibly highly polished, great production values for hyper casual markets, you know, so they have a purpose, they have a reason, there is a goal which they are working towards. You know if you share your work, you are actually kind of crowd sourcing, you're sharing things that people can get passionate about. You want a concrete example of this, Minecraft, right before the game was released, it had been out there for months on early access, people were getting charged £10 for really ropey early versions, it wasn't pretty. It wasn't hanging together. Some builds were catastrophic. Some builds were pretty good. But they used that and they engaged with all of these players, and they built up a reputation, up to the point where they were happy with it, they published it properly, and it already had 10s of 1000s of players all over the world. This is a fantastic, wonderful, interesting industry to be a part of. It's a really really good time to be a part of this because all bets are off. There's no one size fits all. You can start your own thing, you can run it as a hobby. You can be an indie developer, you could be a freelancer, you can join a big studio or a small studio. The opportunities are limitless. And it's global, so you can take these skills and you can move anywhere in the world. As we record right now, the hot game at the moment is Fall Guys, which is going absolutely gangbusters. And that was published by the team at Devolver who are specialists in indie publishing, and it's from a studio here in the UK, and it's picked up such a lot of love, and they're riding that wave. But they're doing that because they've got people, essentially they're waiting, and tracking everything on not just on Twitter, on Instagram, on Twitch and on YouTube. Now that we have all of these different channels, now that we have all of these different platforms, go and explore, find out who's out there, find out who's making the games that you like. Find out where they are based, how they're recruiting, what roles they need. You need to see who's local, see who's nearby, see who does internships, you know, I go and talk a lot of different events, and a lot of universities and a lot of. And I asked two questions. The first question is 'Who can tell me the name of five games companies in Scotland, not including Rockstar or 4G Studios?' That's a tough one because very few people can give me the name of five games companies and say, Okay, 'let's make it easier. Give me the name of three games that came out of Scotland in the last year?'. If you don't know which companies are out there or what it is they do, how are you planning to get a job? If you don't know what sort of games they're producing. How do you know you want to go and work there? Do your research, hit meetup.com. Keep your eyes open for anything that's happening, whether it's a physical event or a virtual event. Everything is going to be online for the next while. Games Con, Dev Con, game developer conference, Develop down in Brighton, all of these events, even if you're not going, even if you can't get in the room, it will give you a sense of who's out there. Go to virtual events, networking is your friend, the games sector in Scotland is not so big and scary that you can't meet the right people.

**Katie:**

Thank you so much for your time today Brian. It's safe to say that you've opened up my eyes to the depth of the games industry, and all those examples, tips, ideas, and guidance that you've shared will really help students navigate their options when they're considering a career in the games industry.

**Brian:**

My pleasure. Like I say, it's an interesting place to be. And there's loads of so don't think it's like the hardcore geek jobs that it was once upon a time. Even better is that the industry is getting ever more diverse, and ever more inclusive, doesn't matter what your background is, doesn't matter what your skill sets are, there is a place for everyone in the game sector.

**Katie:**

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