

# PLAYABLE FUTURES

## NEXT GEN THINKING FOR THE FUTURE OF PLAY

Playable Futures is a collection of insights, interviews and articles from global games leaders sharing their visions of where the industry and medium will go next. Initially published on GamesIndustry.biz.



## Game Publishing in the Post-Publishing Era

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If we are going to understand where publishing is heading in the future, we first have to tear up commonly held conceptions of where publishing is now.

When we talk about publishing today, most people still have that traditional picture in their head of developers making games and publishers publishing them. That dichotomy is gone. Any developer is now a publisher, if they choose to be so. In fact, we are already beyond that point. The people that are putting their games on itch.io for free are publishers; modders that are putting out content on mod-sharing platforms are publishers. That is the reality of where we are today and that is the trend we need to follow to understand where the future lies for publishing.

We are on a trajectory where publishing is moving from being considered a very exclusive, elitist activity, to an open, inclusive one. The explosion of self-publishing enabled by the digital revolution in the late 2000s and beyond is just a stepping stone to a point where everyone that has an interest in creating content and getting people to experience that content will have the ability to do it.

What I am talking about here is the emergence of a new kind of player that will radically change the shape of publishing and how we think about it. That is the emergence of the player-creator.

### Serving the Player-Creator Generation

From people building and sharing content in Minecraft, to modding, to what we now call UGC (user generated content), we are on a path where people are going from being consumers of content, to creators of content. The tools and platforms

are increasingly available for them to do this, and it goes well-beyond games themselves. When we look at games that have become phenomenal successes, you'll find there are huge communities that are not just about the game.

They are about the lore, the universe, and it's not just the publisher or developers signing licensing deals doing that, it's player-creators that are often creating a lot of the content that's building that out. There are webcomics, there are songs – look on YouTube and you'll find bands putting out songs on the theme of Genshin Impact. The phenomenon of 'The Backrooms' is a great example of how far this can go – a whole universe of lore born of an internet subculture that is slowly giving birth to new IPs based on it rather than being created out of an IP itself.

This is the reality of how a new generation of digital natives consume content. They live and breathe content and experiences in a way that a lot of the industry hasn't experienced firsthand and that's very disruptive.

In a context where these player-creators are having an ever greater hand in building out universes – and I'm using this broader term because I think the reality of this new world means we need to be thinking beyond 'a game' - and publishing their own content in various forms, we need to accept that the industry does not have a monopoly on publishing and that this changes things.

### The Transition To 'IP Creation Companies'

This means a number of things for the future of publishing. Firstly, I think it's very

As publishing evolves in tandem with the games industry and medium, it may take on radical new forms. Thunderful Group's Chief Games Officer Agostino Simonetta considers a future for game publishing defined by grand opportunity and grand changes.

important that we abandon the idea of 'being a publisher' and start thinking about publishing as an activity that companies or individuals undertake to bring content to market. That's certainly how we think of it at Thunderful now – publishing is something we do, but it makes no sense for us to conceive of ourselves as 'a publisher' in a world where anyone can take up that mantle at the click of a button.

Indeed, given that our audience is moving into this player-creator role where they are publishing themselves, we need to consider the people playing our games as not just people we need to market to, PR to, or even listen to. We are going to be looking at our gaming communities as contributors to the games or universes that we are creating. Whether it's them playing a role in announcing them, building content for them, or building and extending the universe, it will be a more collaborative relationship as we move forwards into this decade and beyond. We are going to move from where we are today where players give feedback on bugs or development to a two-way street of collaboration with players that aren't going to be just consumers anymore, they are going to become contributors.

Next, the games industry will increasingly have to think of their IP beyond the confines of games themselves. This phenomenon I've talked about where new audiences of digital natives seek to immerse themselves in the universes of the IPs they enjoy, supported by the infrastructure of the internet and social media, is a reality we need to adjust to by thinking of games as transmedia properties. This is going to become more and more relevant for creators of all sizes and shapes. People love a game and

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suddenly want to have the board game, they want the comics, they want a TV show. Companies would need to decide if they are game creators and would partner up to meet these needs, or they need to decide if they want to be more than a games company. I think we may well be on a path where 'game publishers' will move to become "IP creation companies" that transcends just gaming.

### **Publishing Evolved**

These shifts that I'm outlining that are already underway represent a trend that's going to continue to empower creators. The explosion of self-publishing is just a point on this trajectory where the content creator, the idea people, the creative geniuses will have more and more power in their hands. We have already seen examples where the creators suddenly had more power than the investors, the publishers and the platforms, because they had something so desirable that the balance of power shifted completely.

The online infrastructures we have now that support virality and the extent to which new generations of digital natives are embedded within that infrastructure mean that a creator can get all the visibility they need through going viral and at that point the power is in their hands. Not every single content creator will have this power, but it is now being enabled.

These developments are all leading us to a place where publishing will continue to be disrupted to the point that it loses its original meaning. It will solely be thought of as an activity, rather than a noun that describes a company. It will continue to move from being a closed, exclusive activity, to an open, inclusive one and, in doing so, will further blur the lines between audience and creator with the emergence of the new phenomenon of the player-creator. This is the reality that 'publishers' need to start adjusting to in a world where the classic conception of what that term means is already on the verge of irrelevance.