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"Train a Scribe" card from *Lost & Found*, illustration by Annie Wong and Mimi Ace

Interview with Joonas Laakso, Executive Producer at Next Games Oy, Finland

By *gamevironments*

Abstract

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Q1: Who are you and your company? When was it founded, by whom, and why or for what purpose?

My name is Joonas Laakso. I work as an Executive Producer at *Next Games Oy*. Previously I have worked at *Remedy Entertainment, Bugbear Entertainment*, as a freelancer games journalist, as a hobbyist games writer, and as a videogame blogger. Before games, I worked in consumer marketing. My educational background is BA of Arts in communication (college level), with a specialization in design management.

Next Games makes mobile games based on the biggest entertainment intellectual properties ("IP"), or brands. You can think of that as movie series or television series. We want to be the most desired partner for bringing your big entertainment brand to mobile games.

Next Games was founded in 2013 by industry veterans from the mobile, PC, and console gaming space. We are now around 120 people working in Helsinki, Finland,

When working on existing IP, like *The Walking Dead* or *Blade Runner*, we need to continue the narrative established in the IP, and come up with a way to make that fit with the kind of game we are making. With *The Walking Dead* we've both put the player into a similar scenario as the protagonists in the TV show find themselves in, as well as brought along characters from the TV show to play with.

Then if we look at *Next Games* as a studio, we are working with a global audience. The mobile marketplaces of Europe, North America, Asia, and the rest of the world are very different, and we need to adapt to each when we decide to launch a game in those regions. Very different things common in games are considered appropriate in different regions. As examples, we have to be careful with things like showing blood or dead bodies in games because of violence, or any religious symbols. This is sometimes hard as the Western world is pretty similar and open minded in these areas, and then you have big markets like South Korea where we cannot even launch a game if it would have to be age restricted.

The very reason for the existence of *Next Games* is the changing culture of how people interact with their mobile devices. They are spending more and more time on mobile devices, away from computers and TVs where the bulk of humankind's gaming time used to be spent just a few years ago, and we wanted to be part of that shift. The way players are used to paying for games and spending time with them is also changing in a major fashion, with more time spent on games that are free to play, and favoring many quick sessions throughout the day instead of long sessions at the computer or a game console.

popular is different, as are things like character appeal. There has been a lot of cross-pollination over the recent years, though, and it will be interesting to see where it ends up.

Q5: To date, what have been the most important achievements of your company? How did they come about?

Making *No Man's Land* a success. It was a completely unproven genre (turn-based tactics in a free to play mobile title) at the time, and we have managed to gather a loyal fan base who keep playing it. I feel it is the best example of its genre on mobile.

I feel that is a combination of being courageous enough to take a chance in exchange for an uncontested position in the marketplace, and simply the composition of the team building the game. The game is always a reflection of the team making it, and many of our key people had a PC gaming background, which made them go for something outside of the common mobile game tropes.

Q6: Apart from your company, in which way are video games/gaming related to your work?

My personal main interests in life are storytelling, music, and games. Videogames makes all of that come together. I write music, and games have featured in multiple songs, and have affected my musical taste in a major fashion, leading me to discover chiptune music, for instance - modern music created on old computer and videogame hardware, exemplified by digital artists using Nintendo Gameboys on stage.

I hope my long background in tabletop roleplaying games like *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974 and following) gives me a chance to do something still uncovered in the junction of self-expression, shared storytelling, and games.

In my spare time, I think about the games I still want to create. Sometimes I get so excited I start building one from scratch to see how it plays, using *Twine* or *GameMaker*.

Q7: In what way do you decide on new endeavors, f.e. do you follow an established process regarding how you formulate your projects?

We have something we call the incubation and prototyping initiative (“IPI”). It is based on the notion that fans are the best people to tell us how a given entertainment brand should work. It works by finding fans of the new property we are considering from within the studio, and then running through a workshop with them to establish what is important in the brand. In a sense, we wish to make the studio a fan of the brand. We do not try to come up with ‘game ideas’ per se, that is the development team’s job, but rather establish what is important on a wish fulfillment (fantasy) and emotional level in the brand.

Outside of the IPI process, we follow all the industry standard business intelligence and lean software development practices to find the best opportunities and deliver on them. I feel like focusing on the emotional core of a new game’s brand first is our difference.

Q8: What is your next project about, and when and where can we look out for it?

I am now working on a mobile game based on *Blade Runner*. We do not have any details released about it that I could discuss. I can say it is going to be out on the current leading mobile game platforms, Apple and Google.

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