GAMES FOR DEVELOPMENT

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GAMES FOR DEVELOPMENT IN GHANA
Abstract

The development of electronic games in Africa is rapidly growing and this growth is fueled by the popularity of mobile phones and climbing internet penetration. Games, which are traditionally considered as frivolous entertainment, can be applied to improve areas such as cognition and psychology, education, career development, entertainment, business and in solving critical problems in society. At the 3rd Accra Technology Salon hosted by Penplusbytes’ New Media Hub on May 26th 2015, consensus drawn suggests that games development in Ghana has the potential to contribute to the country’s growth, if given the necessary attention and support. However some challenges limiting the growth of game production on the continent are identified as the unavailability of technology, education and finance. there is the need for young programmers to create quality games which are relevant or identify with the African context so as to yield local interest as well as meet the international appeal.

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1.0. Games Development: Prospect for Ghana’s Growth

The worldwide gaming industry is indeed a huge one generating more revenue than Hollywood and while development studios in the more advanced parts of the world have been producing mobile, PC and console games for many decades, Africa seems to be the youngest player on the market and that is not without promise. Globally a two trillion dollar industry, electronic games development in Africa is rapidly growing and this growth is fueled by the popularity of mobile phones and climbing internet penetration. African game developers are increasing their share of this demand by developing culturally relevant games that speak directly to local markets.

Evidence has shown that while games are often considered frivolous entertainment, games can effectively be applied to improve areas such as cognition and psychology, education, career development, entertainment, business and in solving critical problems in society. It has also come to be associated with the power of spatial skills for achievement in science, management, multi-media, Information technology, engineering and mathematics.

2.0 Can Serious Games Accelerate Ghana’s Development?

It has become apparent that “Serious” games has the ability to basically help communities explore different development scenarios to solve critical problems in society.

At the 3rd Accra Technology Salon hosted by Penplusbytes’ New Media Hub on May 26th, 2015, Games development in Ghana and its potential to contribute to the country’s growth, if it received the necessary attention and support, took central stage; bringing at a table, some of Ghana’s finest developers and key players within its Gaming community including 3 Lead discussants, Eyram Tawia - CEO/Cofounder Leti Arts, Setriakor Kobla Nyomi – African Leadership Group of companies and creator of Oware3D, and Aaron Boateng – iSpace, and founder of Playbox who wield immense experience in this relatively young sector although their exploits within the African Gaming community has on occasions attracted worldwide attention.

The event, creating a platform for frank discussions on the core nature of the rather infant Gaming space in Ghana and its prospect to enhance Growth, traced the origin of the concept of “gaming for good” or games for social impact / learning to
about 10 years ago with the Serious Games movement starting around in 2002, and Games for Change following suit in 2004 all premised on the belief that games could live beyond entertainment and contribute to improve our society; making the world a better place. “A credible case by advocates and early developers who understood the concept of ‘games for good’ is getting everyone to look at gaming through a new lens; shifting the focus from just a pastime to a mature and diverse medium, capable helping us better understand the world around us and relate to real-world issues.” – George Hadjor, UNICEF

Concerning serious games, the vast majority of products being developed, particularly in Africa, are those designed to address social issues relating to health and sanitation with Games tackling HIV and malaria protection, and similar other issues receiving most mentions. This is however not too sharp a deviation from the global trend which is gradually seeing a growing interest from public and private donors to invest in gaming. While there is no formal research available highlighting the impact and education outcomes of such games, there is (education, agriculture, health, social issues etc.) by several donors. Few international initiatives now have dedicated section on gaming approach. An example is the mEducation Alliance that has had various seminars on the topic, and is regularly highlighting games at its annual symposium.

A break through achievement was, for instance, made in 2011 when “online gamers” revealed the structure of an enzyme that could be used to help fight HIV and AIDS. With enough evidence to pass the combating of HIV/AIDS as one of the greatest challenges of our generation, perhaps, it would not entirely be out of place to consider the possibility of leveraging the power of “gamification” as a contributing strategy to the fight. Yes! A real consideration of online gaming as a game-changing method for finding solutions to global problems that are currently considered “unsolvable”.

Locating where Ghana fits in this growing global space, Eyram Tawia describes Gaming and Game development as a whole as the next major phase of development in Ghana. He said:

“In order to combat poverty, we need to create more jobs and the virtual world is very important and Gaming presents that into the economic fiber of the country. Indeed, Gaming is one of the very few areas
that can make 72 billion dollars by just selling to the global market via an app store and I’m looking forward to seeing that in Ghana soon.”

"Serious" games helps communities to explore different development scenarios to solve critical problems in society, causing behavioural change, teaching different categories of people – youth, children and girls on their rights, responsibilities and culture - while providing employment to thousands.

3.0 Challenges of Games Development in Ghana

As already alluded to in previous paragraphs, the global video games industry has seen marked growth in the last couple of decade. As at 2012, the industry was estimated to be worth about $78bn (£51.6bn) with almost all games produced in the more advanced world. The critical question however remains of how is Africa missing out? Quite obviously, some of the biggest limitations on producing games on the continent can be named as technological, educational and financial, making it daunting task for local game creators to grow.

“The challenges are enormous and they include the percentage of smart phone users with interest in mobile gaming, bandwidth challenges, shortage of skilled people and talent which is seen largely as an education problem, inability to monetize games for a myriad of reasons including offline sharing of game apps.” - Setriakor Nyomi, creator of Oware3D

Some of the key challenges that local game developers and game studios are facing today that explain the reason for the relative non-take-off of the sector despite the opportunities, the size of the market and the interests of all stakeholders. 4 key challenges - Payments, Visibility & Discoverability of games, Access to finance and Access to capacity - can broadly be named as the main block challenges to game development in Ghana and in Africa as well.

Indeed, most local game makers focus on the international market owing to the challenges of addressing local markets. They see more opportunities for revenue due to higher purchasing-power for user in the more advanced economies and are therefore developing and designing games that will compete at the international level. An example of such a game is iWarrior by Leti Games with 8000+ download, mostly in the US, 3000+ paid users (75% in the US).
Challenges of Gaming development in Ghana is reflective of what is seen across the continent with one of the more damning amongst the lot being the fact that Game development in Ghana lacks a supportive ecosystem which has translated into attracting little recognition even at an official level.

Describing Ghana’s Gaming ecosystem as largely, a “virgin” territory, needing unalloyed commitment and hard work to make a recognized industry, the outcome of the 3rd Tech Salon Accra was a unanimous agreement that Gaming development in Ghana, albeit, at an infant stage, holds a potential of creating fun activities that challenges the mind, imparts effectively and positively on cognition and problem solving.

4.0 Way Forward

The way forward from Ghana’s current level is not lost on Aaron Boateng of iSpace and CEO of Playbox as he calls for the Game community in Ghana to identify itself as a start point to greater recognition. He said;

“We are at a birthing stage and fostering greater collaboration among the ‘few’ of us as stakeholders is the surest way to proceed. With this done, Gaming would find an environment to thrive in Ghana.”

The consensus at the meeting’s end remains that advancement in local technology and the advent of a tech-savvy generation mean that game development in Ghana, as on the continent, is growing rapidly with the challenge now to create games of good enough quality to international standards.

These challenges notwithstanding, the sheer potential of the industry and what impact it could have on Ghana’s economy remains the spur on factor for many of the stakeholders who stressed a continuous need to keep encouraging local programmers to create quality games relevant to the Ghanaian and African context to attract a lot more interest locally, seeing it as a business and not another leisure activity. As aptly put by Elikplim Sablah, a participant from Mobile Web Ghana;

“The focus should be as straightforward as strategizing to monetize your gaming app, while solving a social problem at the same time. As it stands, Ghanaian gamers don’t care where the game was made or who made it so long as it appeals to their interest.”