Building Casual Flash Games for MSN Messenger
Phillip Kerman   phillipkerman.com LLC

Adobe Max Wrap up

Overview of Two MSN Messenger games
>   Sudoku Too
>   A forthcoming two-player jigsaw game

Live demo of Sudoku Too
>   Cooperative mode (players work together to complete a synchronized puzzle)
>   Competitive mode (turn based game with points)

Making an easy and fun game
>   View a series of design comps (board designs, color themes, animations)
>   Note sponsorship

Localization considerations (only 20% of messenger users are in USA)
>   Don't worry, be crappy.
>   Demo of other language Sudoku games (in Microsoft's "GDK"—Game Development Kit)
>   Code samples:
>>   Text layout control
>>   Replace name token

Working in an IM environment
>   Rules and promises
>>   Message frequency can't exceed 120/minute
>>   Each packet can't exceed 1500 bytes
>>   Every message *will* go through and in the same order you send it
>>   No callbacks (except homemade)
>>   Datastore limited to 2000 bytes but that's actually 1500 bytes when other player restores game
>
>   Demo
>>   Throttling message frequency and grouping queued messages
>>   Replacing identically messages before sending
>>   Race condition when messages cross
>>   Addressing "grieving" situations
>>   Compressing messages
>>   Using a homemade random seed

Note: actual persistent environments (Flash Media Server, XML Sockets, Flex Data Services) are not only faster but have ways to lock shared variables. That is, everything is channeled through a single (server side) gateway.

View Jigsaw prototypes
>   Requirements and expectations
>   Snapping
>   Cutting the pieces
>   Stacking
>   Hit test (for move tool)
>   "Infinite workspace" (zooming and resizing)

MSN Messenger Stats:
250,000,000 messenger users
15,000,000 unique game users a month
"Potential of 30-50 millon players"
30% average yearly growth
From "Developing Casual Games for MSN Messenger" presentation available at `tinyurl.com/yjj92m`

Other networks:
AIM: http://developer.aim.com/webaim
Yahoo: http://developer.yahoo.com/messenger/

Wider Casual Games Market Discussion

Terms:
An "adver game" is a free online game usually hosted by the sponsor. These could be a licensed version that's been skinned for the client but, increasingly, they're built 100% custom for the client at hand. Such advergames are likely the only place where a developer can build a game for hire.

A "casual game" is a debatable term. At first I thought it referred to a "lite" or less complex game. Casual games to allow you can get in and start playing without first investing a bunch of time learning a background story. Also, you can usually drop out in the middle of a game and pick up later without much pain and suffering. I heard one definition that a casual game was simply a downloadable game less than 50 megabytes. Almost invariably, a casual game contains a "try before you buy" element. During the trial period, users are given enough of a taste of the game that they can get hooked—but not so much that they feel they've exhausted the entire game.

Note: There is also a revenue model (pretty much independent of the game type) where the host simply presents advertising while the users wait for a game to load or in the margins like a banner ad. While a giant portal or IM client can definitely see some money from this, it's not commonly the primary way to make money.

Numbers:
Casual games usually retail for $19.95. Through various promotions and subscriptions, most players end up paying $10-12 per game. The portal site (that hosts your game—such as: oberongames.com, bigfishgames.com, zone.msn.com, realarcade.com, or king.com) will typically take 65-70% of that gross. This works out to about $3 per purchased game for the developer.

The factor by which a game's success is measured is the conversion rate—or what percentage of those who download the trial version end up really buying it. Currently, if you see a conversion rate greater than 2% your game is a hit, 1%-2% is about average, and less than 1% is poor.

The life of a really successful game (not necessarily a blockbuster, but a very respectful game) might expect this sort of history:
In the first weekend: 60,000 downloads, 2.4% conversion, or $15,000 gross.
First full month: $100,000 gross. Next few months see the gross gradually drop to about $50,000 month to finally settle into about $10,000 per month. Realize, too, that while the game is hot the portal will promote the game.

While the "arms race" has already started in the casual games market, a typical game costs between $100,000 and $200,000 to produce.

Controlled Environments:
While any portal is effectively a controlled environment, I wanted to mention some of the opportunities to create games that are hosted at Xbox Live Arcade. Microsoft says that the first generation of Xbox Live Arcade games cost between $75,000 and $300,000 to produce so you can start using fractions of millions in your estimate. There's a very high quality level expected and an associated certification process that affects the cost of producing such games. Despite the much bigger investment, they're still "casual games" in that there's a try/buy mechanism and a relatively small download. These games sell for about $10 in a very "frictionless" manner (you can issue credits to your kids and they can purchased games that get debited from their account). The attraction is that Microsoft indicates that these games have a *much* greater conversion rate (30%-35%) and you can negotiate for a greater share of the revenue (50/50 or better instead of the typical 30/70 on portals). Naturally, I'm just throwing around some of these numbers—your mileage may vary.

Demographics:
Perhaps the most compelling rational for why the casual games market is growing is the target user. While so-called "triple A" games have huge budgets and make millions of dollars, their market of (mostly) teen boys is flat. Casual games target older people (centering around 45 years old) and are about 60% women. I attended Microsoft's GameFest conference and expected to be very much out of my element. While there were plenty of sessions targeting triple-A game developers (with math skills way beyond me), by far my biggest take aways were: casual games are not "lite" and they're definitely a hot market.

Links:
www.igda.org
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Casual_game
http://garagegames.com/developer/torque/
http://developer.popcap.com/