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

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Special Issue

**Jewish Gamevironments**

edited by

Owen Gottlieb

## Issue 07 (2017)

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

By *gamevironments*

## Abstract

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

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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,

on different mobile games.

**Q2: What is unique in your company, and in what way is it innovative? How is it related to video games and culture?**

There is two different things about this: *Next Games* as a studio operating in a global marketplace, and our individual games.

The individual games are always different. Our flagship game is *The Walking Dead: No Man's Land* (2015), which appeals to fans of the TV show *The Walking Dead* around the world. That is a very broad demographic, but the game is relatively niche in its appeal, being a turn-based strategic roleplaying game. We have had to teach the whole game genre it's in to the wide audience following the TV show.

We are currently also working on a game based on the cult favorite science fiction movie, *Blade Runner*. We do not talk about the game yet, but the audience is markedly different from the *Walking Dead* fans. *Blade Runner* is more literary, it expects you to be into science fiction already.

Then we have our new *Walking Dead* game that we are working on, *The Walking Dead: Our World* (forthc.). It's an added reality ("AR") mobile game in which you move around in the real world to interact with the post-apocalyptic world of the TV show. The challenge there is to get people to change their real world behavior in order to play the game. *Pokémon Go* is the obvious example of a game having done just that. This involves all kinds of security and behavioral considerations that touch on people's real lives.

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.

**Q3: Why did you choose this name, does it has a specific meaning?**

I cannot comment on the reason for *Next Games* choosing its name, as I was not here at the time. However, I like to tell everyone that for most people here, we're not at our first game studio, but rather we have experience from elsewhere in the industry and now we've come together at *Next Games* to do things right.

**Q4: What are the objectives, aims or concepts you want to share in gameenvironments?**

I find it personally fascinating how different the mobile games culture is in the different regions. The classic example is Asia versus North America, but even within the Western cultural sphere, there are major differences in what is perceived as valuable, important, or even allowed. The value of money is very different, but also what is considered acceptable use of money. Members of some communities like other players to see what they are spending on – typically associated with Chinese and Russian players – whereas others like to keep it hidden.

Africa is very interesting. They are still almost completely isolated from our digital marketplaces, but likely that won't be the case for long. In a very interesting twist, Africa as a whole seems to be rejecting our very uniform Western values and aesthetics, and seems set on following their own culture. I cannot wait to see what comes out of that. If I recall correctly, Cairo was the most active site of the Global Game Jam in 2016, which is surely a sign of things to come.

Asia is also interesting and there are marked differences between the European – North American and Asian gaming culture spheres. The kinds of games that are





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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