Apple Arcade is a home for premium games that lost their place on mobile

For more than six years, designer Zach Gage has been toying with an idea for a game where players explore dangerous dungeons, but did so through various cards stacked in a grid, rifling through piles to heal or fight a monster. It's an idea he played with endlessly, until around two years ago when he turned it into a functioning prototype that he'd show only trusted friends.

But Gage wanted to do something bigger than he was used to. He made a name for himself with twists on existing games like *Sage Solitaire* and *Really Bad Chess*, but he also typically developed games solo. His new idea, he thought, would be perfect for a bigger production, with lots of great art to showcase monster designs and spell cards. The problem was that the state of premium-priced games on mobile was becoming increasingly dire, which made investing a lot in the game a risky proposition. Then Apple Arcade came along.

"Basically once Apple got in touch I was like, 'Oh! Yes! This is the perfect time for me to make this game,'" he explains.

The final product, *Card of Darkness*, was one of more than 70 launch titles that debuted alongside Apple Arcade last month, and to develop it Gage collaborated with indie studio Choice Provisions and *Adventure Time* creator Pendleton Ward. All told, around 10 people worked on the game, which now sits alongside new releases from the famed indie studios behind games like *Monument Valley*, *Alto's Adventure*, and *Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery EP* on Apple's fledgling

subscription service.

Apple Arcade – and in particular the funding from Apple – has given mobile developers the freedom to think big without having to worry about how they're going to make that money back. With the premium market all but untenable for everyone but the biggest games, Arcade has now become a home for mobile games that otherwise might not have existed on the platform. "It's creating a space where you can take risks," says Andrew Schimmel, producer at *Alto* developer Snowman. "You don't have to think about the monetization model as you're designing."

[embedded content]

There have been a lot of questions about how Apple is paying developers on Arcade, particularly in the wake of Google Play Pass, Google's subscription service that explicitly pays developers based on user engagement. For games, this can be a tricky thing. A short, artful experience like *Assemble With Care* – an Arcade launch title from *Monument Valley* developer Ustwo – wouldn't be feasible if its creators were paid based on how long or how often people played it. And while no developers have yet said explicitly how or how much Apple is paying them, it sounds like it definitely isn't based on time spent in the game.

"The deal I took with Apple was very good for the game and very good for me."
"The Netflix model of providing and paying for content is a lot more in line with what this is, versus, say, Google Play Pass which they're clearly stating is based on engagement metrics," explains Ryan Holowaty, from Noodlecake Studios, which published three Apple Arcade launch titles, including the beautiful puzzle / adventure *The Enchanted World*. Gage echoes those thoughts, adding that, "I know that the deal I took with Apple was very good for the game and very good for me, and it's one that I was happy with when I signed it and I'm still happy with it now."

Whatever and however developers are being paid, it appears to be enough to give them the ability to focus on the kinds of games they want to make, rather than the kinds that currently dominate mobile app stores. If it's not *Minecraft*, it can be hard to put a price tag on your game, even on iOS. The most lucrative apps for both the iPhone and Android remain free-to-play titles, usually from giant studios like Tencent, Supercell, and now Nintendo. And in many cases, Arcade served as something of a lifeline for smaller studios.

[embedded content]

Where Cards Fall, a collaboration between Snowman and The Game Band, has been in the works for some time, and over that period it's grown in size. The final product is around 20 hours of narrative-driven content, not exactly the kind of thing that is easy to price for a user base accustomed to free. The studio considered charging $20 for it; they thought it was fair, but they knew that would likely be too hard of a sell on the App Store. Meanwhile, a price tag of $1.99 felt like it would devalue the experience. But being part of a subscription service felt like a great middle ground. "People are used to this Netflix model," says Snowman creative director and founder Ryan Cash. "It's more about the perception."

"If premium games were dying on iOS, they've been a rotting corpse on Android."

Noodlecake was in a similar position. The studio is best-known for the *Super Stickman Golf* series, but it's also become a major publisher of indie titles on both iOS and Android. There were a number of titles the studio was looking at, but was unsure of where they could live before Arcade came along. Holowaty cites his studio's Arcade launch title *Possessions* — an emotional puzzle game about looking at objects from different perspectives — as an example. "It would've been a hard decision as to how we would go about publishing that game, because it's a shorter experience. It's a more artsy

puzzle game, and a premium experience like that on the App Store isn't really selling anymore," he explains. "We knew that would be a struggle."

It helps that games don't have to be exclusive to Apple Arcade. They can't appear on other mobile platforms or subscription services, but otherwise developers are free to support Arcade and sell their games on console or PC. Standout launch title *Sayonara Wild Hearts*, for instance, is also available on the Nintendo Switch and on PS4. The real loser in this scenario is Android users, who likely won't see many of the biggest iPhone games ported to their platform of choice. For developers, though, this may not be a huge loss. "If premium games were dying on iOS," Holowaty says, "they've been a rotting corpse on Android." (Holowaty speaks from experience: Noodlecake has long been the go-to studio for porting iOS hits to Android.)

There are added challenges that have arisen from Arcade. Many studios had to dramatically speed up production in order to hit the September 19th launch deadline, and Arcade games have certain requirements that make them more technically demanding than a typical App Store release. Arcade games need to support multiple platforms with differing control schemes – iPhone, iPad, Apple TV, and Mac – and they also need to be localized into 14 different languages. These are great features for users, but can be challenging for developers.

"Localization is one specific struggle," says Gage. "It's a pretty incredible lift, especially since some of those languages are extremely challenging." Ultimately, though, he says it's worth the effort. "I think the fact that Apple is launching 70 games in Arabic that are high-quality and awesome is incredible."

Mobile game development is typically a metrics-driven business; developers can look at how users play their games, and tweak things to better serve their audience (or, in more

sinister cases, figure out how to squeeze more money out of them). But with Apple's recent shift toward privacy, that isn't the case on Arcade. "I know how many people have downloaded the game, but that's basically it," says Gage. And given how early the service is, even that number can be difficult to parse; it's hard to know what a hit on Apple Arcade even is at the moment. "We're looking at our numbers coming in, and it's kind of strange because we don't know what the adoption rate of iOS 13 is," says Holowaty. "So how do we know if, relative to that, what we're seeing is good or not?"

[embedded content]

And given that Arcade is such a tightly curated service, it gives Apple even more control over the games a very large audience will play. The company has already had issues with censoring games that deal with nudity or political imagery, and based on Arcade's launch, it appears that will continue to be the case for its subscription service, which is devoid of anything that could be deemed remotely controversial. Apple Arcade appears to be a great experience for the developers who can get in, but that's a relatively small number of studios.

"When Apple is curating things based on quality, that bodes well for us."

That said, the service may also be a necessity to get away from the outright dominance of free-to-play games. "Personally, when I look at some of the free charts and I see the games that are in there, I'm disheartened," says Holowaty. "When Apple is curating things based on quality, that bodes well for us." Apple Arcade games are restricted from having ads or in-app purchases, and the current library features a wonderful range of experiences, from comedies like *What the Golf?* to classic puzzlers like *Grindstone* and more involved strategy games like *Overland*.

It's unclear how Apple Arcade will grow or evolve in the future, but it's off to a surprisingly great start, providing

a new option for games that might not otherwise have a viable home on mobile. Many of the people I spoke with said that the existence of Arcade has changed how they think about upcoming projects. Arcade also comes at a time when subscription services, both in games and for other forms of entertainment, are becoming increasingly prevalent. The relatively inexpensive $4.99 price tag for Arcade should help the service stand out (as could the potential for some kind of Apple bundle). But most developers I spoke to seem to think that the sheer scale of Apple means that Arcade has a better chance than most of becoming a long-term success.

“If anyone can make it work on mobile,” says Cash, “it’s Apple.”

https://www.theverge.com/2019/10/1/20893691/apple-arcade-subscription-gaming-price-premium-games-zach-gage-noodlecake-snowman