Q&A: John Riccitiello, CEO of video game software company Unity, on AI and gaming's future

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This undated photo courtesy of Unity Technologies, a video game software company, shows Unity CEO John Riccitiello. Riccitiello has seen the video game industry evolve and shift during his more than two-decades in the industry, beginning in 1997 when he became the head of games giant Electronic Arts. Credit: Courtesy Unity Technologies via AP

John Riccitiello, the CEO of video game software company Unity, has seen the video game industry evolve and shift during his more than two-decade-long career, beginning in 1997 when he became the head of games giant Electronic Arts.

Unity Software Inc., was founded in Denmark and is now based in San Francisco. It's working with Apple to help bring games to its upcoming virtual reality headset, the Vision Pro. Riccitiello recently spoke with The Associated Press about how artificial intelligence is transforming how video games are created and played.

The Associated Press: What are the biggest trends coming down the pike in gaming?

Riccitiello: I think AI will change gaming in a couple of pretty profound ways. One of them is it's going to make making games faster, cheaper and better. It's already happening. I mean, you can use AI already for digital humans and editing environments and all sorts of things that make it faster. It's also going to be possible to realize experiences that were never possible before.

Q: Can you give some examples?

Riccitiello: You know "Call of Duty," you know "Grand Theft Auto," you know "Candy Crush." Any of these games, every single thing you see in that game and every line of dialogue, every environment, every lighting effect was coded by somebody anticipating that you would use that. So the perimeter of the game is the content that's been put on the DVD or on the internet download. There is no more. It is what it is. They can add to it over time by patching games and adding levels. "Candy Crush" shipped with like 50 and now it's what?

A: 10,000 I think.

Riccitiello: So they keep adding to it. But each one is a contained experience. So, I was involved in launching "The Sims" in 2000, and it was wonderful game. And you know how they used "Simlish," right? Did you know why? Because there's so many things you can do in "The Sims," it's like a crazy number of interactions you can have because you're actually creating characters. Those characters interact with each other. No writer could ever write all the appropriate dialogue for that. It would be as big as the Library of Congress when you're done.

Q: I think I know where you are going with this.

A: You know where I'm going, I'm sure. In the way that GPT 4 works, you can define the parameters. A player could do this or the game studio could do it. The game studio could allow the player to describe this character or their motivations, in the same way you write in prompts, to get dialogue back. And they could do this for all their characters in advance. And the AI could spawn in any language you want—English, Russian, Japanese, French, doesn't matter. I think that's a breakthrough. It is actually really hard to overstate how important that is. It's alive.

Another example would be one of my favorite games of all time, "Grand Theft Auto." And a lot of people like "Red Dead (Redemption)" because they're such brilliant, realized worlds. Sam and Dan Houser, the guys who created it at Take-Two Rockstar Games, are among the most powerful creators in history. But, again, every store heist, everything in the game was something they conceived as being possible. Now what you can do is you can create that world and you can basically create a set of things like "this is the store," "this is a criminal or not a criminal," or a player can say "that's a criminal." And then anything that you could imagine, any interaction that would take place between the store and the criminals is possible, including getting a job there—I mean anything could be possible.

Q: But within guidelines?

A: You wouldn't have to have guidelines, but it would just look like a complete mess if you didn't have something. Some of those guardrails enable creativity.

Q: What are your thoughts on the metaverse?

A: I always thought the word was loaded and kind of stupid. I gave a talk a couple of years ago saying I disallowed people at Unity from using it because I thought it was going to get overused and tossed out with the trash. That it was being used and abused by people for their own purposes.

But then I defined the metaverse as something very different than what most people do.

Q: How do you define it?

A: I said it's the next version of the internet. It's 3D rather than 2D. It's persistent rather than not, it's real time rather than not. And it's often a number of other things. And then I tried to explain what it wasn't. It wasn't about avatars, it wasn't about XR. It certainly wasn't about half-embodied avatars (which, by the way, was built on Unity by Meta). I was very happy they were building it and paying us, I just didn't think that was what it was.

We have customers like Hyundai building the factory of the future, where all the robots and people are interacting in this large environment and are controlling that. And the individuals working in the factory are doing their jobs on iPhones.

It's not going to be one universal 3D world. I think it's more likely to be

a set of very immersive experiences. And a lot of people, I think, pontificate in a way that I don't buy, that "no, no, you're going to want to be in Amazon, then walk right into "Call of Duty" and walk right into the NFL show and then walk right into your chat. And the thing is, that's really hard to make that work. People say well, what if I want to throw a bomb from "Call of Duty" on a chess set than I am playing? And you have to ask yourself, would you really ever want to do that past the first time you did it?

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