

EGDF MINUTES

“Middleware and European Standardisation”
16.8.2011 GDC-EUROPE, Cologne

Dr. Malte Behrmann, European Games Developer Federation (EGDF)

Panel: Anne-Marie Sassen, European Commission, InfoSoc
Felix Roeken, Havok
Dr. Andreas Gerber, Xaitement

Minutes:

Malte Behrmann: Middleware and European Standardisation

First of all, with Game Co-op Malmö we run a website www.gamemiddleware.org. It is like a phone book of the game middleware. The game middleware is important. It is between a platform and a game itself. It allows higher portability and allows better maintainability.

This event has been made possible by the NEM initiative.

Why do we talk about standardisation? The standardisation has a long history in Europe. One of the biggest success stories is the metric system, as a result of its introduction our economy went up. More recent success was the introduction of GSM standard, which gave Europe a good head start compared with other parts of the world; a head start that we have lost now.

Another thing is that Europe does not control end-user technology. We do not control consoles at all, less and less mobile phones etc. Middleware gives greater independence to European developers.

In addition, European developers want less and less reinvent the wheel while developing their games.

European middleware companies have a greater and greater role in markets. Not necessary in the USA, but e.g. in Korea Europeans almost dominate middleware markets. Thus although Korea is ahead of us in game development, this is not the case with game middleware. European middleware is becoming stronger and stronger outside Europe. We should see that on the technology side we do not have to hide.

Europeans are confronted by standards from other continents. These are de facto standards run by network effect and the economy of scale. Google was a small company not a very long time ago, that we should not forget.

Thus our vision is: interoperability, multiavailability and tools that serve game developer community.

My last point is that standardisation happens anyway. The standardisation machine is going on all the time. The problem is that we, the game industry, do not contribute to that discussion. Our voice is not heard.

Anne-Marie Sassen: Standardisation in the European Union

Standardisation does not always work, but sometime it does. If you have a standardised product, the development is easier, trading is easier; it simply makes life easier. Even if you are a newcomer, you don't have to reinvent everything. It improves interoperability and leads to better competition. In addition, it creates less dependence.

The European success story was GSM, as it created the base of mobile industry in Europe. The question is if something like that can be created for game industry in Europe.

In the game industry Europe holds a good position in middleware. The industry is driven by high-tech SME's and it has great potential for growth. Consequently, the digital agenda of Europe can help the game industry. The agenda tries to remove barriers and create a single digital market in Europe. Barriers like cyber crime, the lack of skills and fragmentation are hindering the growth of high tech companies.

The Digital agenda tries to create more standards and introduce standards that all countries in Europe should use. These standards are developed for certain policy areas (e.g. e-health, accessibility) and for single markets.

A standard is only useful if it is used. The digital agenda proposes that whenever a national government pays for an ICT product, it should demand that it follows certain standards. This is not the case at the moment. This could be an intensive for certain standards, perhaps not for games, but perhaps for serious games.

In addition, EU supports research projects. That could be something that could be used to help game developers to develop right standards.

Of course, global industry and big consortia develop important standards that are widely used and are important. But when does standardisation work? If there is really a need for the members of an industry group to co-operate in order to keep their market share and globalize their business (eg. telephone companies while roaming), then it works.

It does not work when a dominant player does not benefit from the standard (e.g. odf and ooxml). Or when the technology is not mature enough. Then new technologies just replace old standards quickly.

What should be done: try to identify good candidates for standardisation, choose appropriate standard body and check how European research projects can help you.

Panel:

Dr. Behrmann: One good example is mobile chargers. European parliament just forced it to happen.

Ms. Sassen: Behind that was also environmental issues. I would not use laws to force standards for game industry.

Dr. Behrmann: The game industry really knows that laws are not always good

Dr. Behrmann: Mr Roeken, please introduce yourself.

Mr Roeken: I'm working for Havoc now. I used to be the CEO of Trinigy that has been acquired by Intel recently. On the other hand having choices is a good thing. But if a game developer has to merge six middleware tools for their products, it is not fun. The industry has to consolidate. And it is happening quicker that I expected. What we are seeing now is that consolidation is the first step to standardisation. But in some years we will have some middleware companies dominating markets. Do these dominant players want to co-operate? Most probably not.

Dr. Behrmann: Mr Gerber, please introduce yourself.

Dr. Gerber: I am the founder of Xaitement. I suppose that big companies are not looking for standardisation, because standards are making markets more open. They do not want that, as it only creates competition for their own products.

Dr. Behrmann: Here in the GDC Europe, we are taking the view of game developers. Can we improve the situation of European game developers with standards? Our industry is moving quick...but where would you place standards?

Dr. Gerber: Graphic engines have standards, but not physics engines do not.

Mr Roeken: It is a nice idea, but I wonder how the providers of physic engines would be ready to open their product.

Dr. Gerber: Business and technology are two separate things.

Mr Roeken: From an ideal perspective I would agree, but from a business perspective it is impossible.

Dr. Behrmann: Are there any other industries that have a similar situation as game industry?

Ms. Sassen: I don't know, but if you think about the open source community, they are forcing big players to open their products. If many small players co-operate, they can make the difference.

Dr. Behrmann: You can see the change in the game market: the digital shift, less and less games are sold in stores. As a result, we have web-driven companies like Unity...what is the impact on a technology side? Is this good or bad for Europe?

Dr. Gerber: On the other hand, Unity is good. Less technology you have to use while developing games for browsers and thus for Indie market it is very good. On the other hand, in the beginning they were open, but not anymore. I think it is the same for all companies: while they are small, they are open for standards; when they get big, not anymore.

Mr Roeken: In all 3D browser games, we have the same problem, no matter if we use Shiva, Unity etc., a plug-in downloading problem. Flash is a good example, how it should be done.

Mr. Maarten Noyons: Is Unity profitable company today?

Dr. Gerber: Yes, I suppose so.

Mr. Maarten Noyons: If you think companies like Unity, the best things for them is to be acquired by another company, like EA. Then they claim that everything will stay the same, but why they would offer tools for their competitors? That creates the problem.

Dr. Behrmann: I think the acquirement of Criterion by EA is an important milestone, as after that, many developers have refused to outsource technology from their company.

Mr. Hannes Blick: I would think that game industry as a creative industry will have huge problems to follow standards?

Dr. Gerber: The technology side of game industry is developing extremely fast. There are no standards and it is very challenging to develop standards. If standards become too large and too complicated, nobody will use them.

Dr. Behrmann: Serious games have lots of connections to military and there are lots of standards? What is your relationship to there?

Mr Roeken: When we started to do business in security and defence industry, we learned quickly that if you do not support standards, you are out of business. The reason for this is that governments require them.

Dr. Gerber: I have a similar example. And it is very challenging to enter those markets. It keeps small companies out and helps big companies to keep their dominant position.

Mr. Fred Hasson: Can European Commission fund open source projects?

Ms. Sassen: Yes, external experts decide what the best projects and if open source projects are among them, they are funded.