

Ubisoft Game Makers Podcast
CEO Yves Guillemot on Ubisoft's 35th Anniversary
November 24, 2021

(UPBEAT MUSIC)

YVES GUILLEMOT:

What takes us apart is the ability and the willingness of all the Ubisoft employees to try new things. This energy, you don't see that everywhere. It's really something that is extremely strong at Ubisoft.

(UPBEAT MUSIC)

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

You're listening to the Ubisoft Game Makers podcast. I'm Charles-Adam Foster-Simard. In 1986, the five Guillemot brothers founded a company called Ubisoft in Brittany, France. Today, Ubisoft has more than 50 studios and business offices around the world, over 20,000 team members, and it is the creative powerhouse behind beloved franchises like Assassin's Creed, Far Cry, Watchdogs, the Tom Clancy brands and many more.

To celebrate Ubisoft's 35th anniversary, I'm very glad to welcome Ubisoft's CEO and co-founder Yves Guillemot who's going to talk about his experience leading the company over the last 35 years, what Ubisoft's priorities are today and how he sees the future of our fast changing industry. Hello, Yves.

YVES GUILLEMOT:

Hello.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Thank you for joining us today.

YVES GUILLEMOT:

I'm so happy to be with you today.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Well, it's a pleasure to have you. I'm interviewing you today for Ubisoft's 35th anniversary. So, I just wanted to ask you first, how are you feeling today on this pretty momentous occasion for the company?

YVES GUILLEMOT:

I feel really good, I feel very happy to see what has been achieved. And I think that there's so much possibility for the future.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

I'd like you to take us back to the very origins because you're CEO of Ubisoft, but you're co-founder. So, you were there at the beginning but there are other people there with you. So, can you take us back for those who don't know a little bit, the origin story of the company, how it all started.

YVES GUILLEMOT:

So it's five brothers. We are five brothers and our parents who had a company, but that company was set to disappear because the state wanted to actually make that business done differently. So, my parents said to my brother, you have to come back here. It was Michel, "You have to come back", and Claude, "And help to find a new business that will work for the company". So, they tried many things, they went to computers in farms, to the small shop where you could sell a certain number of products for farmers. And in that shop actually, at one point we had Commodore 64 and Amstrad CPC with games. And they were sold at three times the price that they were sold in the UK.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

But this was an agricultural store.

YVES GUILLEMOT:

For sure, yes.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

OK, but you were also selling video games.

YVES GUILLEMOT:

That's right, you were selling boots, trousers (LAUGHS) for farmers.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

OK, why not.

YVES GUILLEMOT:

All the things for farmers and including a little bit of entertainment. (LAUGHS) And in the entertainment you had those machines. And so, my brother Michel when he went for new year in London with his girlfriend, he saw that those games were really sold three times less. And he said, "Maybe there's a business there. We could probably take those products from England and take them into France." So that's what he did and he created a mail-order company that became instantly successful. I was there with him at the beginning.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

How old were you at the beginning?

YVES GUILLEMOT:

26.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

OK.

YVES GUILLEMOT:

So it was really his thing. And my brother Claude was actually importing audio DVDs and this business took off and retailers, when they saw those games, they said, "Can you also sell us some of those games?". So, we started to sell to the distribution and then we couldn't sell to all the shops because in Paris, all the big department store they didn't want to buy by telephone. They wanted to see somebody. And then I was assigned to go to Paris and open the big stores. So, I did that and we did it for a while and it worked. And then we said, OK, now we have to create the publisher because it's important that we create our own products." So, I had that task to do to create the publisher. So, I created Ubisoft where we worked only with third-party developers, people that were working at home. Very often they were 17 years old working alone on a computer to actually create small games but very nice games. So, we started with them and with a small team in-house and we created a game that was called Zombie.

And at the same time, we were distributing some English publishers, Elite System. And the Elite System business was actually financing the investment we were putting in creating games. And that's how Ubisoft was created. All the financing came from the distribution part and step-by-step we were able to have enough revenue to create games that we starting to sell in France, but we sold them very quickly in the UK, in Germany. And I remember the order from Germany on Zombie was almost the same quantity in one order that what we sold in France for the last 12 months.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Wow.

YVES GUILLEMOT:

So you realise that yes, you knew it was an international business, but when you see it on paper, it's something else. And then we went that way for a few years and then my two brothers, Gérard and Michel, came to Paris to create the studio.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

The first production studio.

YVES GUILLEMOT:

First big production studio, because we had a small production studio, as I said, with one team. But we realised very quickly that it was important to create big studios. So as Gérard was already working in Brittany to follow the game that we were creating

with external people and that small team, but Michel was still taking care of the first company that we created. And when he came with Gérard in Paris, we really went after the creation of big studios. And we started by France, Paris, and then Romania, and very quickly after, Montreal and Shanghai.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Right, so pretty early you're opening studios outside of France, you were going international.

YVES GUILLEMOT:

Exactly and my two other brothers, Christian was taking care of the account, taking the business from my mother. My mother was really the one taking care of the account for a long time. And when she decided to retire, he took over.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Mm-hmm, so it's interesting because when you're looking at the history of Ubisoft, I always see a lot of publishing in the beginning. But from what you're saying, it sounds like the publishing was financing the development. Like quite early on you wanted to produce and develop Ubisoft's own games, right?

YVES GUILLEMOT:

Exactly, that's what we wanted to do. But as we all know, even at that time it was costly to create games.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Mm-hmm, now I want to ask you a sort of personal question because I think not many people in the world are in your position of having co-founded a company 35 years ago and see it now include more than 20,000 team members and studios all around the world. And I'm wondering if that experience has taught you anything. If you have any lessons from those 35 years at Ubisoft that you're bringing forward with you in the future?

YVES GUILLEMOT:

For sure there are many lessons. The most important thing is to remember, is it's really a group achievement because we were hand in hand in creating those fantastic games, those great experiences, the main lesson is really work together, have fun together. So, you can create a lot more together.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Now, you mentioned creation and I mean, of course, Ubisoft has created its fair share of games and franchises and brands throughout those 35 years. And we're in a tricky industry because things are moving always super-fast. And I think that's always been the case, right?

YVES GUILLEMOT:

And that's why we are so passionate by this industry because the things are not set for the long-term. You have changes in technology that are redistributing the cards to different players. So, it's really something that helps new ones like us. We were challenger, we are still a challenger and this challenger was able to use those new tech revolutions and new machines, all the events in the industry to create brands, enter some markets.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

And in that kind of fast changing pace, how do you know when you're following a trend, when something is just a trend and when something is like truly a revolution that you can really follow and capitalise on and become a leader in?

YVES GUILLEMOT:

So first, there's one element to consider is all those new tech are not successful. So, you have to be careful and choose from the new trends, the new revolutions, because they are not all going to happen full speed. Some will happen over time and it's good not to be too early in some cases because when you go too early you can be tired when it actually takes off. But it's in trying, you try, you see how it goes and you actually accelerate or decelerate depending how it's received by players.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

And so today, I mean, I'm sure there's a lot of research and development happening and of course there's some things that you can't talk about, but what are some of the new techs, the new innovations that you have your eyes on, that you're really following and interested in for the future?

YVES GUILLEMOT:

There are really two things that are major and will transform the industry a lot. It's cloud, and with cloud there's more AI as you have more machine power. We will be able to create universes that will be fantastic in which the world will react to you a lot more than it does today. And you will be able to be with other people big time, creating things, building, being your own stuff that you will be able also to own, which is a new trend as well. And the second thing is VR, VR is at the beginning and it started very strong, but then it became a bit less important for a while. And I feel that it's going to come back big time. What will be the exact form of the glasses and so on to make you feel that reality, we don't know exactly yet, but I see that being emerged in a world in 360, it's something that is going to change the universe.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Now, we're talking about a bunch of different kinds of games, kinds of experiences, kinds of technologies and breakthroughs as well. And for me, also for Ubisoft, it's been the variety of types of games that Ubisoft has released over the years. Like a

really wide variety in terms of genre, in terms of types of players that we're trying to speak to, has that variety always been really important to you and for the company?

YVES GUILLEMOT:

Yes, it has always been very important because it came with what our teams also wanted to create. So, the goal of the company was always to give enough abilities to the teams to come with new ideas and take them to the market. So that's how the company was created actually.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

And bringing it back to today and to what's coming next. What do you think in this competitive landscape sets Ubisoft apart from other developers in the industry?

YVES GUILLEMOT:

So those days we still have to improve our abilities to create the best games. And we are working on our engines, on our tools in general and in studying more the market to see where things are going. But what takes us apart is the ability and the willingness of all the Ubisoft employees to try new things, this goal to change the world. And so, this energy, you don't see that everywhere. It's really something that is extremely strong at Ubisoft.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

And that's how you see as, kind of, one of our goals is to really to change the world with the games and the products that we make.

YVES GUILLEMOT:

It's exactly the goal. And if we really can make this place a better place by bringing a lot of fun and the possibility for people to actually hang out together and have fun, we will have achieved something very fantastic.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

You're connecting a lot, the history of Ubisoft with where we are today and where we're heading next, which I think is really interesting and fits of course, because you've been here the whole time. For you, is there something like an unshakable truth, like a core kind of value to Ubisoft that has always stayed the same and that you want to really defend and protect as we move forward?

YVES GUILLEMOT:

Yeah, I think the most important thing is for people to feel good when they are in their job, for them to also work with other people that are smart and that are pushing them to do more, not because they force them, but because they want to actually succeed together in creating something exceptional. But the goal of each one here is really to find his full potential and to continue to work on yourself so that you get better, you improve yourself and you're happy with what you become. What we want is for

people to really feel at home when they are at Ubisoft, so that they can be happy to meet, work, chat with all the other members of the company and be themselves when they are there and not play a role, but be themselves and make sure they create great things together.

The goal of the company is really to make sure that we create fantastic games, but that the teams actually create something that they are extremely proud of. And that each individual in that team feels that he brought really a huge part of what was done. And so, it's a collective creation for the benefit of the world we live in. So that's what I love in Ubisoft, being humble but create and try to create experiences that will please people for ages.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Mm-hmm, you sent an email to teams recently and you actually talked about the values of the company and what was kind of driving us. And you mentioned freedom and responsibility in that email. I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about that and what you meant by that.

YVES GUILLEMOT:

Yes, what I meant is that we need to be ourselves because that's where we perform the best. So, the limits of that is respect for all the other people that are around you and that everything you do is really in favour of a good consensus and a good fun also for everyone around you. So, the responsibility is to make sure that when you do things, you really respect others and you not only respect, you work with them and you make sure that it is a collective achievement. So, it's not yourself, it's not you alone. It is really a group creating things, achieving results.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Collective effort.

YVES GUILLEMOT:

Yes.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

And finally, Yves, I wonder if you can share a little funny story or an anecdote, maybe something that you haven't shared before. It's a little bit of a legend in the building. We're all now sharing the same building at HQ and some interns sometimes see you in the elevator.

YVES GUILLEMOT:

Yeah, we all have a mask now. So, it's different than what it was. But I asked the person who was in the elevator, "What do you do? In which service are you?" And the person told me and then the answer was also, "And you, what do you do in the company?". And then my answer was, "I am the boss," but it was funny to see that

somebody coming in the company wouldn't know who I was actually.
(LAUGHS)

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:
You aren't as famous as you thought maybe.

YVES GUILLEMOT:
I didn't expect everybody to know who I was. It's just, I was surprised by what happened.
(LAUGHS)

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:
Well, thank you very much for all these insightful answers, Yves.

YVES GUILLEMOT:
You're welcome, thank you.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:
Thanks for joining us.

(UPBEAT MUSIC)

Ubisoft is celebrating its 35th anniversary with free content for players until December 19th, including rewards, sales, and giveaways. Visit [ubisoft.com](https://www.ubisoft.com) to open your gifts and find out what's coming next. This episode of Game Makers was produced and edited by the team at Angle. I'm Charles-Adam Foster-Simard from Ubisoft. Transcripts of our episodes are available on Ubisoft News. For more from Game Makers, remember to subscribe wherever you get your podcasts. Thanks for listening.

(UPBEAT MUSIC)