Games industry unites to inspire the next generation of tech talent in our schools

We were delighted last week to formally announce that SEGA and Warwickshire County Council (WCC) join PlayStation® to unite behind Ukie's non-profit creative computing initiative, Digital Schoolhouse. It's vision: to bridge the gap between industry and education to prepare the next generation for a digital age.

We've created the Digital Schoolhouse, and powered it with support from PlayStation, to capitalise on our understanding that play-based learning is the best way to engage pupils and teachers with the new Computing curriculum. The programme realises the importance of not only providing young people with the skills necessary to thrive in a digital economy, but educating them with prospective career opportunities, forge tangible links with industry, and prepare students for digital jobs that don't event exist yet. The games industry joining forces in their support of Digital Schoolhouse is helping us to meet our vision in creating the next generation of creative polymaths.

Last week's announcement was made following a panel discussion which brought together PlayStation®, SEGA, Warwickshire County Council, Kings College London and Townley Grammar School, highlighting the needs of the teachers tasked with teaching this new curriculum, and questioning how the creative industries and education sectors can tackle the digital skills gap together. Hearing the panel were representatives from across the games, education and government sectors, including Computing at School, Gfinity, Department for Education and DCMS, who all have a stake in helping to shape the next generation's digital future. Discussing how the DSH model is working to plug this gap made it more evident than ever that we need industry support to allow the programme to continue reaching as many children as possible in this critical time.

The discussion clearly demonstrated a need to motivate and engage teachers and pupils, including a repeated emphasis on the need for more creativity in the curriculum. The panel also revealed that while digital skills are important, the development of the understanding is just as fundamental; and to do so in a way that stimulates, engages and challenges students is essential. Games are an excellent way to do exactly that, they help inspire creativity and remind us that learning should be playful.

Following the 'grown-up' panel chaired by Ed Dorrell (Head of Content, TES), the real stars emerged. Key Stage 3 pupils were brought on stage to discuss their perspective on the subject. The pupil panel, featuring Year 9 pupils from Gildredge House and Year 8 pupils from Townley Grammar, reinforced the need for industry and education to work together to increase their engagement in Computer Science: "If we had better links with industry it would encourage us to study computer science to greater levels".

The pupil panel also revealed that "Computing should be taught earlier - learning at secondary, there is not enough time to get interested in it before choosing GCSE options". Digital Schoolhouse engages primary pupils

to eradicate this problem, by presenting them with the opportunity they deserve to acquire the skills they need for a sustainable career in a digital age. Alarmingly, one pupil stated that "none of us really want to do it after GCSE". So although "There's a place for everyone in games" as said by Sony Interactive Entertainment's Luke, it seems that much more needs to be done to engage pupils earlier in the journey to ensure that they reach this goal.

Nevita Pandya, Deputy Headteacher at Townley Grammar explained that "Making partnerships directly with industry, we found really hard". Digital Schoolhouse aims to increase the talent pipeline in the long-term by raising GCSE and A-Level numbers, but how do we do this?

It's clear that the games industry's involvement could be hugely impactful on supporting the talent pipeline to meet the industry's needs and therefore we've made it even more accessible for companies to get involved with a new Red Tier sponsorship package, which is being formally launched at Ukie's AGM at EGX. The new tier enables companies to come on board and support the nationwide impact of the programme without taking on the responsibility of partnering with a school directly. Innovation is a key component to the Digital Schoolhouse programme, and the Red Tier package gives games businesses access to the Digital Schoolhouse community to test and explore their new games and ideas. Artwork can also be hugely inspirational when presenting resources to pupils; so therefore, sponsors are encouraged to contribute artwork that can be converted into creative classroom resources such as jigsaw puzzles, sticker sheets and playing cards, that can be given out to each Digital Schoolhouse pupil across the country.

We want to eradicate the impression that initiatives that make a difference in education - like Digital Schoolhouse - are only open to support from the big guys in games. Every single games company in the UK is going to rely at some point on the talent that is sparked by projects like this and so we've made it accessible for games companies of all sizes to lend their support, vision and input to the programme.

When questioned about what they would like to get out of their computing education, the panel revealed fun in the classroom was a key way to ensure their continued engagement. "If you make a game you need a team – you need art, you need creativity, storytellers, wacky ideas as well" the students understood. Unfortunately, that's not what our classrooms look like yet.

These bridges are slowly being built. The Digital Schoolhouse programme continues to create ever increasing ways to upskill, engage and inspire both students and teachers. The programme currently operates out of 29 schools across the UK and aims to reach at least 15k students and 1700 teachers across the coming academic year. However, it needs continued funding to support its extensive and holistic engagement with schools. Schools don't pay to join the Digital Schoolhouse programme, in these pressing times with increasingly squeezed

school budgets, the financial support that the programme provides is an important part of the support programme.

Your business supporting via Red Tier sponsorship will help us to not only fund more schools across the UK, but also harness much more of the creative innovation that is gained with each new supporting games business. The more links we have between schools and industry, the better the children are being prepared to survive and thrive in their future creative digital lives.

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Warwick Light, UK Managing Director and Vice President of Sony Interactive Entertainment Europe, said: "PlayStation is happy to be partnering with Ukie to bring Digital Schoolhouse to more schools, and even more children, across the UK than ever before."

John Clark, Executive Vice President of Commercial Publishing for SEGA Europe Ltd, said: "SEGA Europe has a history in working with educational organisations in order to help bridge the skills gap in the UK with regards to the video games industry. The partnership with the Digital Schoolhouse Programme is particularly exciting as it aims to engage the next generation of school children, and their teachers, with the new Computing curriculum."

Monica Fogarty, joint Managing Director, Warwickshire County Council, said: "We are delighted to be sponsoring Ukie's Digital Schoolhouse programme to enable this innovative model to be rolled out into four Warwickshire schools. Programming and computing skills are vitally important to the continued growth of the technology sector, and it is essential that we are teaching our young people these key skills in an effective and engaging way. Ukie's Digital Schoolhouse programme is therefore a perfect fit for our area."

PlayStation, SEGA and Warwickshire County Council's backing for Digital Schoolhouse underscores the commitment of the key names within the games industry to help inspire the next generation of tech talent in the UK. To find out more about Digital Schoolhouse and to support the programme, visit www.digitalschoolhouse.org.uk.

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That's why working with the industry is so incredibly important to what we do. The video games industry is the hotbed of innovation, it's the one sector that crosses all diversity categories...simply

put everybody enjoys playing games of some kind. We can harness the power behind that, to bring industry experts together with our classroom expertise to deliver resources and experiences that not just work for students, but help meet industries needs too.