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Has Apple hit the sweet spot on price with its Mac mini and iPod shuffle?

- Yes, they'll sell tons of both
- Mac mini will be the star
- iPod shuffle will cream the market
- No one will want a Mac mini
- No one will want a flash iPod
- Don't know

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Macworld Features

The game is afoot

Nick Spence plays a round of Amju Super Golf with independent Mac game developer, Jason Colman.

By Nick Spence

Jason Colman is a busy man, juggling family life and business from an East London base, while plotting a 3D world of polygonal cute but slightly creepy creatures.

Colman quit his job in the 2D world to pursue an obsession sparked in the 1980s, as a child growing up surrounded by arcade classics such as Asteroids. He spent many happy hours in dingy, dodgy amusement arcades, saving the world from scrolling Martian attacks during what is now seen as the golden age of video games.

The introduction of home computers, such as the Sinclair ZX81 and Spectrum, saw Colman progress from playing games to writing them. A late 1990s moment of nostalgia found him updating his game programming skills, resulting in the first [Amju](#) game. Released in February 2003, it proved successful enough for him to continue his gaming exploits and eventually set up his own business. It's a move that's initially unlikely to swell his bank balance, as much of the product is given away free as shareware. Setting up a business is fraught with dangers, never more so when the target audience is small in size and stature. How many five year olds do you know with disposable income?

Mainstream studios split the workload of a game between tens or even hundreds of staff, but that's rarely an option for indie game developers. For his games, Colman has developed the code, designed the models and artwork, and written the impossibly catchy music. While latest release Amju Super Golf 2.2 is designed to be a family-oriented game, enjoyed by small and big kids alike, it also has psychedelic undertones.

Amju is on a golf vacation with her sister Marin in a world that resembles a cross between The Magic Roundabout and The Prisoner. There are switches to find, doorways to open, and moving platforms to jump on, all while attempting to hit larger than life animals on the head. Hardly golf, as we know it. Amju Super Golf is also deceptively addictive; hours flew by as we made our way around the 36 varied holes available. Try before you buy and you will be hooked.

Colman is aware of the hard work ahead to establish his particular brand of colourful chaos, especially on a platform that has often been accused of neglecting gaming. However, Aaron Fothergill, managing director and lead coder at award-winning Mac only games developer [Strange Flavour](#), is upbeat about the future of Mac gaming.

"Indie Games developers on the Mac are the best place to find a game that's actually fun, has a novel concept and is really going to annoy your Windows-using friends because they can't get it on their machine. While the original Mac-games scene is still quite small, there's a strong group of independent developers coming up with great stuff," he says.

"As well as titles like our Airburst Extreme and ToySight Gold that are written specifically for the Mac, there are some very cool indie developers such as DanLabs and some great developer communities like [iDevGames.com](#) that encourage new Mac games by running their annual uDevGames competition, which this year introduced around 30 new games to the Mac," he adds.

"One very cool aspect of most independent Mac game developers is that they will actually listen to feedback. It's not unusual to see a previously released shareware or commercial indie title gaining new features, game modes and tweaks throughout its lifetime."

Colman nods approvingly, budding new talent can be found sprouting at iDevGames.com and uDevGames, the annual Mac indie game development competition. He adds that indie developers of all varieties can be found at [www.indiegamer.com](#), the major indie game development forum on the Internet.

What can Amju Games offer players a large software house cannot?

With a teeny little shareware company, the customer gets to talk to the actual person or people who made that game. They can ask for features in the next release, for new levels, for all kinds of add-ons. It's great, so long as they don't ask for their money back. I'm kidding.

You have already had some positive feedback from gamers young and old alike?

That's right – and best of all is when people tell me they love to play one of my games with their kids.



Your games are aimed at children. Macs are popular in classrooms, why do you think that is?

Believe it or not, I've actually visited several schools recently, and I loved seeing the little children working away on their Macs. I wish Bill Gates could have been there.

Can you retain that popularity later in life when young adults buy their first computer?

I think we can see Apple's marketing strategy here. It's like giving away crack to small children. Awesome.

Mainstream game releases are sometimes neglected on the Mac, why do you think that is?

Apple has been trying to tell people for years that Macs and games go together, and word is finally getting out that the Mac is a great gaming platform. I suppose some companies look at the Mac market and decide it's too small to bother with, compared to the Wintel market.

And does this adversely affect the Mac indie game market?

It makes Mac indie game developers go all tingly. We know Mac users would like to play games on their computers, if only someone would give them such an opportunity. Check out the game downloads on the Apple Web site, and you'll find a horde of games that haven't come off a studio production line, but are labours of love for the people who created them.

MacSoft has just released Atari Arcade Classics for Mac OS X. A Commodore 64 TV joystick proved a popular Christmas present. Retro gaming appears to be back in vogue.

Classic games are like classic movies, or music, or paintings – people will still love them decades after they were made. Maybe even centuries after! The most awesome thing a game developer can do is create a classic, and I believe it's totally still possible. It's always down to one or two people to come up with the core of a great game, and so with a lot of game development in the hands of hi-tech sweatshops, it's up to indies more than ever.

Mac indie game developers appear to be kindred spirits rather than rivals. It seems like a community.

You're right, but actually it goes beyond Mac game developers. Indies of all flavours are part of the community, where information is shared and there is a lot of support. We love each other.

Do you feel any temptation to scrap development of Mac games for Windows-only titles and a potentially bigger market?

I could do that, but 95 per cent of my customers are Mac users. I have a couple of theories. The main one is that it's a lot easier to tell Mac people about your software. Windows users really have a tough time trying to find software - mainly because it's all floating around in a vast sea of crap. Also, Macs are so kid-friendly, and I make kids' games. Ok, it's not much of a theory. Anyway, personally I wouldn't scrap either platform because I think cross-platform development is cool. I'm a bit of a geek.

What advice would you give other potential Mac indie game developers?

I'd say, "Come on! There are little kids at school working on Macs!" I've seen them.

Bottom line: Can you make a living developing shareware with the emphasis on try before you buy?

Now this is the kind of thing a lot of people want to know, especially if they just re-mortgaged their house to start a shareware company. The answer is yes, absolutely. Shareware is a mature, respectable way of marketing your software. Having said that, don't re-mortgage your house or do anything stupid like that.

Finally were do you see Amju Games in five years?

I'm going to keep writing games, so in five years there should be a veritable heap of Amju Games.

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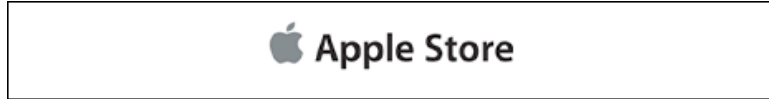
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