

**JOSH TSUI**  
**Robomodo – Chicago, IL**

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*Transcription:*

**00:00:28**

**A.D. Brazauskas [AD]:** I am A.D. Brazauskas with Josh Tsui -

**Josh Tsui [JT]:** Tsui [pronounced Soo-way]

**AD:** Sorry

**JT:** No no no, nobody ever gets it right the first time.

**AD:** So do you have any questions for me before we begin?

**JT:** I'm sure I'll have some later, but alright, go ahead.

**AD:** It's November 9th 2016, 10AM. So what is your current job title?

**JT:** I am president and co-founder of Robomodo, a video game development house in Chicago.

**AD:** Alright. So I know earlier you got into arcades, do you still spend time in arcades?

**JT:** Believe it or not, yeah. The arcades that I'm at nowadays mostly are these family fun center type places, because I have kids, so you've got these Dave & Buster's type places. So I guess they're called arcades, but recently I have been hanging out more at some of these barcades popping up lately, they're basically craft beer and classic arcade machines. Then there's an arcade out in Brookfield called the Galloping Ghost Arcade, and I've been there a lot because I've been shooting my documentary there. I believe it's actually the largest arcade in the world, I think they have over 400 arcade machines there. It's like a museum of classic arcade games. If you ever get a chance, you can go check that out.

**AD:** When you were young, what attracted you to the arcade atmosphere?

**JT:** The thing about arcades back then was There were couple different reasons why I really liked arcades, and one was that it was almost a safe haven for a kid to go to that their parents never went to. It's a kind of like a playground in some ways, but it's almost like a video playground. I would go to arcade and play a bunch of different games there, and I was left alone. I got to socialize with my friends, we played games together, and it seemed almost like a

no-adult area, which was really cool. I think the other reason why I really liked arcades is that the games were just really powerful compared to what you would have at home [at the time]. A lot of people will talk about the games that they played on their Nintendo or on their Atari 2600, and I hated those machines because those games were usually ports of arcade games that we played in the arcade that were much better on an arcade machine. Back then, video games were crafted to be in one cabinet with a very specific control to them. They were super fun to play, and they were very focused, and they were a lot more powerful in terms of how fast they were and how the graphics worked.

**00:03:42**

**AD:** I was wondering, because I did read an article that you were a bit of an arcade snob at the time?

**JT:** Yeah, because like I said, back then the machines were made to play one game, so they were super optimized. A game like *Robotron*, that was done here in Chicago, it would have what seemed like hundreds of enemies onscreen. You would never be able to see something like that on a home system like the Atari 2600. But the thing is you go to the arcade, and you play this thing, and it's fast and furious. You end up in a pool of sweat when you're done playing it, and nothing could beat that. So yeah, I was a total arcade snob. My brothers actually managed this gigantic arcade out in California. It was basically like a Mark Twain book that had three floors of arcade games. And they were a lot older than me, so when they would babysit me, they'd just give me a sack of tokens and let me go nuts in the arcade for like 8 hours a day. So that kind of fed into my arcade snobbery. I never bought a home system until the Colecovision, because that was the closest thing to an arcade machine that you could get at home. They had an incredible port of *Donkey Kong* and *Zaxxon*, and that sold me on that. But after that, I never bought another console again until the first XBox, and that's only because my company was making an XBox game.

**AD:** You mentioned hanging out with friends and socializing, were you involved with any specific gaming communities at the time?

**JT:** There may have been, but not in my circle. My circle was basically me and my friends, who would go to the playground together, go skateboarding together, or go to an arcade together. So it wasn't like we only went to the arcade and just hung out there, it was part of this

circuit of things that we did [together]. Back then there weren't as many head-to-head games, so you would play a game, and you would switch off from one player to the next, so it was more of a turn-based thing. There wasn't any real organization back then.

**AD:** We kind of went over some violent games, were there any games that stood out in serious violence to you back then?

**JT:** What era are you talking [about]? Overall, in general?

**AD:** More when you were younger.

**JT:** Boy, when I was younger... That's a good question. You know, it's ironic, I never really thought about it, but I think the ones that had any violence, it was so abstract that you didn't really think of it as violence. So let's say in a game like *Robotron*, where you're just trying to destroy as many robots as possible, if the robots get ahold of the family that you're trying to save, they either get killed or they get turned into mutants. That's about the level of violence you're gonna get. The resolution was so low back then, it wasn't like things were gritty, realistic or anything like that. So if you think about the themes, yeah, it can be violent, but you just never thought about it that way. Your whole thing was "I want to get as high of a score as possible". It wasn't about the violence. Obviously that changed later on, as games got more and more detailed and such. But especially in the 80's, it just really wasn't a part of the game design.

**AD:** Did your parents ever think of video games being violent?

**JT:** You know what, no, I don't think so. Because in the 80's, it really wasn't an issue, so they didn't think much about it. Now with that said, I think they might have been very different than other parents, because they let me pursue a lot of the things I loved as a kid without any judgement. I used to collect comic books, and there was some violent content in [comic books back then], but my parents were just happy I was reading. You know what I mean? I'd go skateboarding, and the skateboarding community is not [made of] the most sane people around, but they were happy that I was outside playing. I think it was one of those things where if I did it to excess, they might have said something. I was kind of a latch-key kid, so as long as I got my homework done and my grades were fine and I got home safely, they didn't care what I did.

**AD:** We're gonna move into like the early career

**JT:** Sure

**AD:** You said you lived in California?

**JT:** Yeah, so I grew up in California, ironically a suburb called Arcadia right outside of Pasadena in LA county. I grew up there all the way up until high school, then my family moved to Michigan and I ended up in Chicago.'

**AD:** Was there anything [specific] that brought you to Chicago?

**JT:** Yeah, I loved games, but back then nobody thought of games as a career. It was just something that was magically made by elves and unicorns somewhere, you had no idea how games were made. Seriously, so I wanted to get into filmmaking, just because I was coming from southern California. I didn't want to move too far away from my family, and I saw that there were some schools in Chicago that taught film. So I ended up going to Columbia College Chicago to study filmmaking, and I did that for 4 years. What kind of got me into video games was the last year I was there, they started building up the computer graphics lab. I was always fascinated by computer graphics, especially after watching the first *Tron*, it was always in my head to see what that was about. I got into digitizing video for computer graphics, trying to see if there was anything I could do with the two different mediums.

**AD:** Did you have any prior work experience with video?

**JT:** I did take a lot of film video courses, I did a lot of short films, so that kind of was a nice segue to getting into computer graphics. That little bit of experience toward the end of my academic career is what kind of led me into my first game job.

**AD:** When did you get your first job in the game industry?

**JT:** I had graduated from Columbia College [Chicago]- what year was that? I wanna say 1991. That's a [really] long time ago now that I think about it. My first job was actually at Northwestern University at this research institute doing UI (user interface) work, and [at that time] a friend of mine had gotten a job at Midway games working on this crazy shooting game called *Revolution X* that starred Aerosmith. Back then the first *Mortal Kombat* had just come out, they were starting on the second one, and *Revolution X* was also being done -- all three of

those games were using digitizing techniques, which was basically putting an actor in front of a green screen, digitizing them into sprites, and putting them into the game. [My friend] recommended that they interview me for a possible artist's position because I actually had experience with that process. Most of the artists up until that point were more illustrators than they were video people, so they wanted to bring more video people in.

So I came in, I interviewed I think 7-9 times over the course of a year because they just did not know what to do with me. I was so different from everybody else that they hired -- again, they were all illustrators, and here I come, not an illustrator, I know film and video, and they just weren't sure what to do. In the meantime during that year, I ended up getting married, and literally the day I came back from my honeymoon I get a phone call saying that they wanted to hire me.

So right off the bat my wife became what in the industry they call the "video game developer's widow". Basically, I went right to work and she never saw me for many years.

AD: During that time, how would you describe the personality of the coin-op industry?

JT: The personality of the industry itself was very interesting. A lot of people don't realize that there's a whole network of how machines get to the arcade. It's not like the arcade owner or operator goes out, buys a machine, and is open for business. It's this whole network of distributors that you have to deal with. At that time if you went to an arcade, the arcade owner did not own any of the machines, they had to get it from the distributor, and the distributor buys it from the company, such as Midway. It's like this weird organization that almost bordered on Mafia stuff, you know? You just never know where the money was going. So on the business end of things, that was always the strange thing.

As a player, as somebody who goes to an arcade in the 90's, there was a big difference between the 80's and the 90's. In the 80's, everybody was playing arcade games. You had these broad hits such as *Pac Man*, everybody played *Pac Man*, everyone played *Ms. Pac Man*, everybody played *Galaga* and things like that. Nobody was considered a hardcore gamer, everybody played games. So when I would go to my brother's arcade that he managed, you saw young people, older people, couples, and just this broad spectrum of people.

By the time it got to the 90's, it started to become more about hardcore game players, and a little bit of that had to do with [the fact] that there were more options to play games at home.

There was the Super Nintendo at the time, and some other systems, so some of the more casual players might have been playing games at home, whereas more hardcore players went to the arcades.

So arcades kind of got darker. You'd go into an arcade and it wasn't like it was a brightly lit, neon environment where everyone's having fun. You'd go to it, and it's kind of seedy, not smelling the best, it's dark. But people then were generally very respectful of each other, so it wasn't like it was seedy [to the point where] people were getting beat up or anything like that. When you went to an arcade, people respected you. It's kind of like going to a skate park, just the fact that you're there must mean that there's [automatically] some respect towards the games, some respect toward the players. It was just a different crowd, a different personality [than the arcades of the 80's], it was definitely darker, and it was definitely more hardcore, especially in the fighting game community. They'd beat each other up digitally, but then at the end of it, they're all cool with each other.

**00:15:30**

AD: What about Midway? I was reading a Polygon article about it, and it mentioned how it was like the wild west?

JT: The development back then, it was strange. I don't know if all game companies were like this, or if it was just Midway, but it was definitely the wild west. We were all making these very successful games that were generating billions of dollars for people, and usually they were made by three or four people with almost no management. All that mattered was when the game was done, and that we didn't go over budget, and that was pretty much it. At that time there were no game design docs, stuff was being made up as you're going along, and that would never happen now. Even back at Midway in the 90's, once success really started hitting, they started adding more and more management to things. That kind of changed the personality, for better or for worse, of the way that games were made. But in the early days, it was a free for all. We literally had no producers, had no management -- we'd be four people on the team and we'd do a little bit of everything. There were no real official positions, it was a very flat type of management.

AD: How many women worked with Midway at the time?

JT: It was almost zero. It's interesting, it's one of those things where when I look back on it, it's shameful how bad it was. Obviously I'm in the development area, and one of the unique things about Midway was that we had software, but we also had hardware. Because it's an arcade company, we manufacture the big cabinets and everything on top of the software itself. In the hardware area [there were] not a lot of women, from what I remember there may have been two or three, but that was still more than the development area, at least in the early days. It started changing a little bit, but it was still 95% men there. I think the only time you ran into any women on the team was usually in the marketing department. Marketing and sales was almost more 60/40, where it was 60% women and 40% men. So if you look at the overall ecosystem [of Midway], it improves a little bit, but if you're talking about the development, it's completely lopsided.

AD: What kind of difficulties did you face when working at Midway? I remember that in an article you were saying there were some giants in the industry.

JT: Just for myself personally, I always want to keep doing new things and moving up in life. And I think anyone who has any entrepreneurial spirit would want to do that. So I saw Midway as a great entryway into game development, because as an old arcade rat, I was like "whoa, I can't believe this is where these games are made". So I was like, "Well, I'm gonna go in here, thinking I'm only gonna do games for a couple years, because I really wanna do film, that was really what I went to school for." But once I got into it, I really enjoyed doing it. To be in the presence of people like Eugene Jarvis, Mark Trummel -- there were literally some titans of the industry working at this company, and they were some of my heroes when I was younger, playing arcade games, and I found out who made these games. And I'd walk into a room, and these people were there, and Mortal Kombat had just come out, and it was a phenomenal hit.

It was amazing, but the flipside of it was that these personalities ruled the company. When I talk about no management, there was literally no management, so the development teams were the king of the hill. [As such,] the people that were leading these teams such as Jarvis and Trummel and everybody else, they were at the top. So I thought to myself, this is a great place to get some experience, and I rose through the ranks, ultimately becoming an art director at the company on a team there, but I knew that that would be it. There's no way you can go above that, there was definitely a ceiling there. Because of that, the only way I could get beyond that was to break off, either go to a new company that doesn't have this ceiling or start my own



company. And I didn't want to leave Chicago. [That said,] Chicago was kind of a good city for game development, but it's not anywhere near what's going on out west. I knew that if I wanted to keep moving up, I would have to figure out a way to start my own company, and so that's what we ended up doing.

AD: What was your favorite project while working at Midway?

JT: I have favorite projects for different reasons. If push came to shove, I think the first game I made there was my favorite - it was *Wrestlemania* the arcade game - mainly because it was such a goofy game. I'm not a gigantic wrestling fan, but we just decided that with this game, you know what, even if you're not a fan of wrestling you're gonna come in and you're gonna like it because it's just so goofy. We're just gonna put everything but the kitchen sink in there, and just make it as crazy as possible. It almost had no wrestling in it, which was not necessarily a helpful thing, but the fun part of it was that this was the era where the WWF just had a lot of outlandish characters. (Now it's called the WWE, but back then it was called the WWF.) It was just perfect for a video game, because we didn't even have to make up the characters, there were already characters there. So we had characters like Doink the Clown, Bam Bam Bigelow, and Razor Ramon, they're already cartoons, and the cool thing about them was that we were able to bring them into the studio. When we started making the game, we thought we would have to make up these wrestlers by using body doubles and things like that, and the WWF actually allowed the wrestlers to show up at the studio and get digitized. So we spent weeks with these wrestlers, and they were awesome [to work with]. They were super famous at the time [as well], and you have these wrestlers come in, they're [larger] than life, but they're just kind of like normal dudes, just hanging out and stuff. One guy, Bret Hart, he was a huge wrestling superstar but he just wanted to hang out and learn everything there was about making video games. He came in the studio, and after his shoot, he would ask "How do you digitize the sprites? How do you do the cleanup work? How does this work?" because privately, he loved doing illustration. He wanted to be an illustrator, so he was really into it. So that was a lot of fun in that respect, but every game I worked on, there was something about it that I learned that made it super enjoyable. But the *Wrestlemania* game was definitely a lot of fun.

AD: You were Sub-Zero for a little bit, did you have to act out in the games?

JT: I knew that was gonna come up. So in *Mortal Kombat II*, if you play as Sub-Zero all the way to the end, there's an ending story for each of the characters, so Sub-Zero takes his mask

off and there's a giant image of my face on top of Sub-Zero's body. It was funny, because I think that was like within the first couple of weeks I started at Midway. John Tobias, the co-creator of *Mortal Kombat* who eventually became a business partner of mine, came up to me and was like "Hey, can we take a picture of your face for the game?" So I'm like, yeah sure, and I'd just started so I had no idea what the hell was going on, so they took the picture and next thing I know that's the ending to the game. Then in *Mortal Kombat IV*, that was the first *Mortal Kombat* game that was done through 3D graphics. Dave Miketzich was one of the designers there, and he asked to take a picture of my face for Liu Kang for that one. So that was more of a playable character, whereas in *Mortal Kombat II* it was more of an ending type of graphic. The funny thing is that we would do stuff like that all the time, we would put each other in the games, in *NBA Jam* and things like that. Back then, it wasn't a big deal, we just did it to be goofy. It's so weird, because 20 years later I get people asking me, "I didn't realize it was you, I remember when I was a kid playing this", and it would make me really happy but depress me at the same time, because then I feel super old. That was 20 years ago, somebody who was a teenager back then is now in their 30's.

AD: I was looking at the *NBA Jam*, I know how you were like a secret player. Did you ever get to meet the NBA stars?

JT: No, that's the ironic thing. Because in *NBA Jam*, there are too many NBA players in the game, so there's no way they can bring them in for a real life shoot. What they ended up doing, at least on the first *Jam*, was they would go and record NBA games on VHS, and digitize the actual rotation of the heads based on actual gameplay footage and somehow map them into the game themselves. So it was literally one body with hundreds of different heads attached to it.

AD: One more about *Mortal Kombat*, it was one of the first violent games that people publicly bashed, did you feel any of the public resistance against making these games?

JT: The thing is that I didn't personally know. When the arcade games were being made and released, nobody cared about the violence in *Mortal Kombat*. They were in the arcade. It wasn't until the games went to the home systems, and this kind of goes back to what I was talking about earlier about how parents had no idea what kids were playing in the arcades. When it was an arcade only machine, no parents knew, nobody cared. It gets to home, and suddenly the kids are playing in the living room, the parents walk by in the living room and it's like "what the hell is this?!", and that's where the real backlash happened. So we heard about it later on once the

home releases were out, but it didn't really affect anything. Because for us in our minds, it was goofy fun. If you look at the fatalities, and that's what most people are reacting to, they are so cartoonishly over the top that there's no way anybody would take it seriously. Only an adult who doesn't play games would take that seriously, and adults in general don't like anything that kids like. I mean, if you go all the way back to the 50's when adults hated comic books and wanted to censor comic books, it's the same thing. So when kids are playing *Mortal Kombat* and they're doing the fatalities, the kids are not thinking "I'm killing you, I'm ripping your spine out." Their whole thing is "I'm gonna do this secret thing that's gonna humiliate you because it's so damn funny." And that's really the extent of it. Over the years, I think people started realizing that, but at the time it was so shocking that they didn't understand the context of what's going on. They're still making *Mortal Kombat*, they're still doing fatalities, and with better technology, so the fatalities are a little bit more gross than they were before. In my opinion a bit of the charm has worn off, because part of the fun was that it was so goofy, because it was so low-resolution that you kind of had a separation from reality, which made it fun. Once a lot of these video games got more graphic, or got more detailed, now suddenly there's this weird uncanny valley that you have to deal with.

**00:28:39**

AD: There was one game, *Mortal Kombat Special Forces*, that did not come out. Do you think that it could have been a hit?

JT: So I had worked on the original version of that, which never got released, and it was completely different from what got released. What happened was we were about a year, year and a half into production, and that's when me, John Tobias, and couple of others left Midway. So we basically left the game there, and I would say if they'd worked hard enough they could have finished it as-is, but at the same time I think they saw that it was a ton of work, and it was almost better to just kind of redo it. History will kind of prove what was the better way of doing it. It was overly ambitious, so it's one of those things that if it was given enough proper time it might have been fine, but who knows.

AD: Your company's studio Gigante made the game *Tao Feng: Fist of the Lotus*. So how you said that fatalities got more gross, is that why you kept that [element] out of that game?

JT: The thing is, there was a real risk of people thinking that we're basically ripping off *Mortal Kombat*. We were actually asked to put in fatalities, and we were just like "you know what, we don't want to deal with that". We're still friends with the people on the *Mortal Kombat* team, and we just felt like if we did that, then it just gets kinda nasty. Just like any other video game genre, there's plenty of room for more than one fighting game, and our mindset was let's just do another fighting game that complements all the other fighting games that are out there instead of trying to directly compete with *Mortal Kombat*.

AD: Compared with *Mortal Kombat*, there were a lot more women in *Tao Feng*.

JT: I suppose, I mean... I guess you might be right, I think racially it was probably more even, yeah.

AD: Was there any particular reason for that, or was that just the way it happened?

JT: No, I think it's just the way it happened. We did find that players really enjoyed playing a more diverse set of characters. When you're playing a fighting game, it's not likely I'm gonna pick a character just because she's a woman. It's more like, what are her abilities, or what are her weapons. So the gender at that point doesn't even matter. It's like, I'm not playing Jax in *Mortal Kombat* because he's African American, I'm playing because he's got these big ass arms that are gonna crush somebody.

AD: How challenging was it to leave Midway to start your own company?

JT: I mean, mentally we were ready, but there were definitely some challenges. One is that at that time there was basically a non-compete clause that we all signed where we cannot work in video games for a year after we leave the company. There are some companies here in Chicago that still do that, which is just asinine, But we signed it, and we were basically told that it would never hold water in court, but we didn't even want to deal with going to court. So basically we left Midway, and we didn't work on any video game related stuff for a year, and we just took that year to kind of brush up on technology. And we had prepared ourselves knowing that we weren't gonna work for a year. We ended up doing a lot of freelance work, and just getting business meetings set up and everything, then around when the one year hit we started production on *Tao Feng*.

AD: So what happened with Studio Gigante?

JT: So we did *Tao Feng* for Microsoft, and we did *Wrestlemania* for THQ, and then there was a big shift in consoles. The first Xbox was dying out, the Xbox 360 was about to come out, the PS2 was dying out, and the PS3 was about to come out. So anytime that there's a shift in the industry to a new console, publishers stop making new games. And if they do, they do it internally, and we were an external studio. So at that point, nobody's gonna spend money making games with an external studio, they'd rather spend money with their own studios. That was the first time we'd run into that, so suddenly, after working with THQ, we had no game projects, and nobody was hiring out for game projects because we're a work for hire studio. Projects [had] shriveled up, and luckily EA Chicago was hiring because they really needed to get *Fight Night Round 3* done. So our entire team went over to EA, basically doubled their studio, and got their game out on time.

AD: How was working for EA?

JT: EA Chicago was great. I don't know how it is working for EA in general, but EA Chicago felt like studio Gigante, and felt like Midway in that it had a very independent spirit to it. Our general manager Kudo Tsunoda did a great job at insulating us from headquarters, and all the other crazy politics that goes on at the main office. We were very well protected to just be creative. Later on, that might have caused an issue, because we got to the point when things were going badly for EA or just the economy in general where we weren't privy to some information that might have helped things out.

**00:34:23**

AD: What were some games you worked on at EA?

JT: When I was at EA, my first game was *Fight Night Round 3* for the Xbox 360, which is still considered one of the best games ever made. It's a game that I'm super proud to be a part of. A lot of people back then used it as a demo of how great the 360 is, because it was such a realistic game. So that came out, was a huge hit, and then half the team went on to do *Def Jam: Icon*, and the other half worked with me on this Marvel game. It was a Marvel superheroes fighting game, and it was this big ambitious game where superheroes are fighting each other in

cities, everything is destructible, and that was one of those projects where it was just too big for technology at that time to be able to handle.

AD: So when you were working at EA Chicago making that new Marvel game, how did you end up leaving EA?

JT: Well, when I was at EA Chicago, I was talking to some other companies. It wasn't that I didn't enjoy EA Chicago, it was just one of those things where I always like to keep my options open because there was a lot going on in the games industry at the time. I had met some people from Activision, and coming off of *Fight Night* they were wanting to talk to me about possibly forming a team here in Chicago to do some games for Activision. There were no specifics or anything like that. The issue was that, yeah, I could leave EA Chicago, but I don't know if I could pull a whole team off with me. So we were in talks for quite some time kind of informally, and then the financial crisis of 2007-2008 hit, and EA was closing up studios left and right. EA Chicago was one of the most expensive studios per person in EA's portfolio, so they looked at EA Chicago, and even though we had a massive hit with *Fight Night*, *Def Jam: Icon* wasn't received very well, the Marvel game was looking to be unsustainable. For them, if you look at it just in terms of dollars and cents, it just made no sense to keep EA Chicago open. So they basically closed the studio, and Activision contacted me and said "you had all these problems putting a team together, do you think you could put a team together now?" And I was like yeah, absolutely. So I got the team I was working with together and organized them to the point where we kind of packed ourselves up and met with Activision. And they basically said "We want you to work on an Activision project, we have no idea what it is, but it's either gonna be *Guitar Hero*, a *Call of Duty*, or a *Tony Hawk* game, is that cool with you guys?" So we said absolutely, any of those three we'd be more than happy to do. And it ended up being the *Tony Hawk* game, which for me personally is awesome, because being a skateboarding kid growing up in California, it's the dream project.

AD: That Marvel game, did it actually come out then?

JT: It never got released. You can actually find footage of it online, there's some people who ended up with an old dev kit and posted videos up, which freaked me out when I saw it.

AD: I remember I downloaded some game from the Playstation 3 store, and it was like a DC/Marvel game?

JT: Yeah, there've been other fighting games before, but this one was never released.

AD: So when you started working with Activision, that's when you formed Robomodo?

JT: Yeah, so we formed Robomodo from the team that I'd worked with at EA Chicago, and some people that I'd worked with at Midway and studio Gigante. So it's almost like this weird katamari thing where we just collected people that I asked who went along.

AD: With your new company, how important do you think it was to diversify your team?

JT: It was pretty important to do. I definitely could have done better with it [though]. One of the challenges was, because I was taking on the team that I had before, it was only so diversified as we went along. As we grew the team out at Robomodo, for myself personally I wanted to diversify only because I was so tired of seeing the same people all the time. And it helped a lot, our second game that we did was a game called *Tony Hawk: Shred*, which was a vast improvement over our first game. I credit that game being much better, not only because but mostly because we had such a diverse team. We brought in people that weren't necessarily video game developers, they weren't necessarily even gamers, but they came in with their own skills that they were able to apply to things that a strict game developer would not have thought about. Looking back on it, I wish we could have diversified more, but I was pretty proud of the fact that we did push where we could.

AD: So for *Guitar Hero*, were you guys the first people to start making *Guitar Hero*?

JT: No, so Activision had another company doing *Guitar Hero* at the time. We mainly just did the *Tony Hawk* game, so we didn't do the other stuff. We did work with the people who made the *Guitar Hero* guitars to help us make the skateboarding board for the *Tony Hawk* games.

**00:40:15**

AD: You know how you said arcade games had their own controller for a specific game, that's kind of how the guitar was right?

JT: Yeah, and like I said for the *Tony Hawk* game, we actually made a skateboard that kids could stand on to play the game. And for me, that was a direct link to the arcade development. And I thought that was really cool, like wow, we're gonna make a controller that is fine tuned just for this game. Which was awesome, because it brought back that whole arcade feel, it kind of

came full circle in that respect. And our first iteration of it was okay, we definitely needed more time, but our second iteration, because we brought in some different people to look at the hardware and iterate on the code more, I really feel like the second game is where we nailed the feel of it.

AD: I used to play *Tony Hawk* games all the time, but I can't imagine trying to pull it off while standing on a skateboard.

JT: Yeah, and that's the thing, I think that was one of the misfires of those games is that you're dealing with a franchise that people remember really well, so in our mind we were making a game for kids, so a kid could get on the board and play endlessly because they have so much energy. So it tested extremely well with kids. The problem was that when the game came out, the hardcore *Tony Hawk* fans were expecting a *Tony Hawk* game. So they would get the game, and it was an expensive game, and they would play it and they were like "What the hell is this? This is nothing like what we had before." We had people who were very vocal about it, and it's not anybody's fault or anything like that, but it's just one of those things where if the messaging was a little bit more specific to people, to tell them this is a kids' game, it would've been a lot more successful than it was. But anytime you see kids on it, we nailed it in terms of how the kids play it, because that's how we designed it and that's how we fine-tuned the controls. We didn't fine-tune the controls for somebody in their 20's to stand on the board and try to get coordinated with it, because it was just impossible. If you didn't skateboard before, you would have a really hard time with the controllers, whereas a kid would get on it with no fear and start playing it with no problems.

AD: How would you describe a typical day at work at your new company?

JT: Oh man, I mean nowadays it's really just about managing the teams, making sure that everyone is working on the right thing, that things are on the right track and nothing's going off the rails. I've been in game development a long time, and it took me a while to learn this, but my value on a team is more about managing, and making sure that people are not making the same mistakes I did when I was younger. You know what I mean? Nobody wants me to sit there with them and nitpick over every little thing, or work in the code, or work in the graphics and things like that. There are much more talented or younger people with much more energy and more up-to-date aesthetics than I have, and that's their value. My value is just making sure that ultimately, the final package is what we say it's going to be. It's weird, I almost have this



developer's guilt, because I was so into the development of games for so long that I feel guilty if I'm not constantly busy. But the thing is, it's better for me to not be constantly busy and be available to people. So that way, if they asked me "Hey, I'm fine-tuning this, can you give it a try?", my head would be clear enough that I could go [help them out], because I'm not trying to juggle a million things at the same time. So my day-to-day is very different from one day to the next, but my main task is to be a level-headed parent.

AD: Compared to EA and Midway, how would you say your work is different?

JT: Hugely different. I mean, at EA and Midway I was working constantly- not just me, but everybody- we were living in development. We would be there all day working on games, hanging out talking about games, after work playing games, all at the office. And then I'd get home at like midnight. So when I talk about my wife being a video game developer's widow, it was literally that. And then we would hit crunch, where we wouldn't go home for days on end, for months. It's a terrible problem. It's weird because at the time, especially at Midway, I was so into making these games, because I knew that this was a very privileged position to be in, and I really enjoyed being there. So even when I was in crunch mode, I just felt like this is heaven, I'm going to do this for a long time. That was fine when I was younger, but as I got older I realized, this is kind of messed up. It's not sustainable. And I'll say that, when we were at Midway, it wasn't like a mandated thing. It wasn't like someone was forcing me to stay there, I wanted to stay there, I wanted to prove myself and do awesome work. And even at EA, there was some of that too. I think the real issue came when at some companies, they start mandating the crunch. Then it's like, alright, I didn't sign up for this. But to go back to your question, it's vastly different. At EA when we were working on *Fight Night*, that was some of the hardest crunch I'd ever done, and in many ways I think that scarred me for later on. Because after that, it isn't like I've never crunched since then, but it scarred me so much that I consciously tried to make sure that we were not in crunch as much as possible, with varying degrees of success on that.

AD: So at Robomodo, are you kind of like the Tremmel kind of person?

JT: I mean... yeah, it's kind of weird to think about that. Again, it's appropriate. There's nothing worse than for somebody like me to be in the thick of development when I could find somebody who is in the middle to early part of their careers who has more enthusiasm to just dive in and really start crafting something. And maybe a lot of that has to do with the fact that I'm a parent now, and I can see that. A good analogy is that I make a point of not doing my kids'

homework. If my daughter needs help on something, I let her ask me for help, I'm not gonna look over her shoulder constantly and ask "hey, are you sure you're okay", and just harassing her on that stuff. So it's the same thing, my value is much better to kind of sit there and be there for people.

AD: How is the life cycle of a game in less established environments compared to the life cycle at Midway or EA?

JT: Honestly, it's not that different, because the games we make are for a publisher. Midway games is a publisher. So personality wise, it's no different. Like when I was at EA, EA was the publisher, we were the developers, we'd send it off to the publisher and the publisher would go and start selling it. So in many ways it's not any different. I've been fortunate in that I've been in situations where I've been on teams that have a lot of creative control. So whether it was at Midway with the lack of management, EA where we're very protected by management, or Robomodo where it's our own company, we try to avoid situations where everything is mandated to us. We get hired because we're trusted to take over a project, and as long as they see what we're doing and we course correct where necessary and so forth, we're never like hammered down on things.

AD: You're making the documentary, called *Insert Coin*, so what was your motivation behind that?

**00:49:20**

JT: So when I was in Midway, when I started there, again it's like we were talking about, where I knew I was working with titans of the industry, there were a lot of people there that I looked up to. The first *Mortal Kombat* had just come out, and *NBA Jam* was already a runaway hit, it was about to make a billion dollars that year. And this is all from this small group that was back of pinball factory. So when I got there, I thought to myself, this is such a unique situation that even back then, I thought to myself -- I feel like I'm a part of something that's gonna get really big. I always thought to myself that I should remember as much of this as possible. And twenty years later, I was talking to some people, and they talked fondly of the games that were made back then.

One specific thing that had popped up was I talking to somebody, I forgot who it was but it was a younger person, and they talked about *Mortal Kombat*, and then they talked about *NBA Jam*,

almost as a separate thing. And I told him, you realize that these two games, two of the biggest franchises in video game history, they were both made in the same studio by the same group of people. And he looked at me like, “What? I didn't know that.” And I'm like yeah, it's here in Chicago. And he's like “Wait I didn't even know *Mortal Kombat* was made in Chicago”. So that coupled with my own sense of nostalgia, I thought to myself, there are a lot of stories to be told about how these games were made that nobody knows about. So I just thought to myself, I'm gonna write some notes down, maybe there's something here. I talked to some people, and I started getting this narrative going. There was a game called *Nard* that was made in the late 80's, and it turns out that that's the game that sparked the technology that all the games from Midway games in the 90's came off of. That ended up being the catalyst of me wanting to do this documentary. So I started shooting some interview footage just kind of informally with some people, thinking to myself, maybe I'll put a trailer together, see if there's any interest on it. And there was a kickstarter documentary that went up a few years ago that I saw, and it was one of the first kickstarters that I have ever pledged on. I threw them a ton of money, because I really wanted to see this documentary, and I became very friendly with the filmmakers and I told them about my thoughts on Midway games. They basically said, you should try to see if you can this funded. So I put together a kickstarter campaign thinking it wasn't gonna get funded, I just wanted to see if there is any interest. It took a long time to make the trailer, I put it out there, and it just blew up on me. So it's like, alright, that's validation, it's not just me. Because a lot of times I think to myself, maybe I am the only person that thinks this stuff is interesting. Sometimes you end up in an echo chamber, thinking something is important when it really isn't, but the kickstarter really helped validate my thoughts. From there it's like, this is kind of coming full circle for me, because I started out as a film student, I've always wanted to make a film, and here's my opportunity to do this. The timing is great, there is a lot of nostalgia for these games, every twenty years there's this nostalgia for things, and the 90's are the big thing right now. So kind of all the planets aligned, and I thought, now is the time to do it. So I've been working on it ever since.

AD: Why do you think there is so much nostalgia regarding coin op?

**00:53:02**

JT: I think there are a couple different reasons. One is that people are nostalgic for things on like a twenty year life cycle. Ten years ago, people were nostalgic for the 80's. I was nostalgic

for the 80's because that's when I was in high school. A lot of people that are now in their 30's are nostalgic for the 90's because that was when they were in high school. So it was a fun time for them to look back on, and now that they are in mid-30's, maybe they're about to go into a midlife crisis or whatever, but people just naturally do that. I think the other thing is that the video games, especially with mobile, have just blow up lately, even more so than anybody predicted. It's interesting that mobile games are very much like arcade games. It's all about very simple gameplay, you can play whenever you want. They're very short bursts of play, I'm not sitting in front of a console in front of my TV playing a 30 hour game. If I feel like playing *Candy Crush*, I play real quickly here and there. I'd play *Crossy Road*, and *Crossy Road* is basically Frogger. So suddenly you have this generation of people who are not hardcore gamers, but they're all playing games. You go on the El train, everybody is playing a game. They don't consider themselves hardcore gamers, but they are playing a game. So now it shoots back to the 80's again, in that back in the 80's everybody played games. Everybody played *Ms Pac Man*, everybody played *Galaga*, so it's come back full circle. Suddenly you have many people who would never play a PC game, or play *Call of Duty*, or anything like that, wanting to play this stuff again.

AD: So with Insert Coin, who were some of the developers you were able to interview?

JT: There are 4-5 key developers that are pivotal to that era, so you've got Mark Trummel, Eugene Jarvis is the biggest one, George Pitro, and a couple of others who are the main focus because they were the ones who created these mega hits. Then there's a bunch of other developers around them that help support the games. So I'm interviewing a ton of people, I think I have like 12 people already. But the main story is around this... it's an old movie reference, but it is called the "star chamber", it's like these 5 guys that made the games that were the mega hits that propelled the company forward. So I have been talking to them, I have also talking to people who know about the 90's era, and can speak to it not as developers but as people looking at it as a cultural thing, how it impacted pop culture in that era itself. It's a mix different people.

AD: Is anyone you were really excited about?

JT: The main 5 people, definitely. I think one of the things that you'll hear often is how Eugene Jarvis kind of came in and out of Midway games on a constant basis, but every time he was there he left an impression. He basically left Midway halfway through the 90's era, but he

left such an indelible mark that everybody after that was influenced by it. And you see in the narrative of the documentary how he was just pivotal to everything that came out of the studio, both good and bad.

AD: *Insert Coin* is still in production right?

**00:57:05**

JT: It's still in production, yeah. So I shot a ton of footage for the trailer, and I probably would be much further along except that I wanted to do follow up interviews, just to kind of get more in detail, and as that happened, things started to kind of snowball. Because as stories came up, I was like, "Oh shoot, I need to pursue this story, and this one". So I decided to start shooting more, and I'm also shooting in 4K high definition, and I was originally shooting in 1080p, so because of that I'm reshooting a lot of stuff. But I'm almost done shooting all the interviews, and then I start getting into b-roll and editing.

AD: What is your hope for *Insert Coin*?

JT: Oh boy, that's a good question. And the reason I say that is it can go in two different directions. One, it can be a very "inside baseball" thing, where it's so detailed that only people who are really geeky about that era would be into it, and there's a very big temptation to do that. At the same time, I don't want it to be something that only a niche group are gonna really jones over. Because there are really interesting stories, and documentaries need to be interesting and detailed, but really more about interesting so that it can appeal to a broader audience. I want more people to find out about this group and what they were able to pull off. So it can go either way, but one of the things about documentaries is that you don't know what you have until you start editing. You go in with an idea of a story, but once you start interviewing people, you have to be open to let it evolve. And that's what happened with the shooting, because as it evolved, I was like "Oh, shoot, I need to chase different things". So I have a general idea of how it's going to go, but it's not until I get into editing and I start linking things together that I'm gonna see where the real flow is gonna be.

AD: Was there anything in particular you want people to take away from it?

JT: The main thing that I want people to understand is what I was saying, when I was a kid I had no idea who made these games, and all the work involved with it. So what I want to get

across is that games are made by real human beings that work very, very hard to get these games out there. And whether the games are good or bad, I want to put a human face to it, and show the price that is paid to make these things. Like, people don't want to know how hot dogs are made, so here's how a hot dog is made, both good and bad.

AD: What drives you to continue Working in the gaming industry?

JT: People who know me know this inside joke that I've been trying to not do games for over ten years now. Every time I make a game, I say it's the last game I'm gonna make. What ends up happening is, games are so hard to make, and it gets super frustrating, so by the time I'm done with the game, I say I'm never gonna go back and make games again. But it's the curse of being a creative person, creatives always want to do the next thing. So a new challenge will come up, and suddenly it's like, alright, I'm back in. This is too tempting. After EA closed, I really didn't want to make games, but then the *Tony Hawk* project came out, and I was like "Oh, god, I've gotta do that", you know? It's always one thing after another, and it's just the need to create.

AD: Over your 20 years in the industry, what developments or gaming technologies have impressed you the most?

**01:00:56**

JT: I think 3D graphics, definitely. When I started in games, it was still 2D, we were still using sprites and things like that. Seeing 3D graphics evolve to where it's at now is really impressive, especially when you start getting into VR development. That's like, the next big thing. The other thing that I've been really happy to see is that graphics technology, especially 3D graphics, has finally gotten to a point where it's not about ultra-realism. For a long time, the chase was always to make something as realistic as possible, and that was our goal with *Fight Night Round 3*. But now the technology is so great that people are over the realistic stuff, and now it's more about the aesthetics. Now you have games that are not realistic, but are just beautiful. You know, it's kind of like paintings. Paintings used to be about photographic realism, but then it started getting into abstract, and impressionism, and people really wanted to push the medium. So that's where we're at now with 3D graphics, and it's really great to see that, because realism is great, but it's so damn boring. But if somebody puts in this really great aesthetic to a game that just makes you feel [something] as opposed to seeing, that's fantastic.

AD: So what do you think the next frontier will be for coin op, or video games in general?

JT: Well, it's hard to say. I don't want to predict anything, because I'm usually wrong, and then I look like an idiot, because those things are gonna be around for a long time. But I think in the near future, it's definitely gonna be VR arcades, that's already getting huge in China. There's a new *Star Wars* arcade game out there, and it's like a big pod that you sit in, and you feel like you're inside of a *Star Wars* spaceship. It's not VR, it's just this giant screen that envelops you, but I think that stuff is great, because it's like a simulator. So arcade-wise, these big machines are definitely becoming more and more the norm. Eugene Jarvis has his own arcade company, and he makes these gigantic racing simulators that are amazing, so you couple that with the VR technology that's starting to come in, I think that's where it's gonna be. These big, virtual, almost like amusement park rides that you can play at an arcade as opposed to going to Disney World.

AD: Going off of that, I remember reading about something how when VR first came out, they didn't really move into that because there was not much money to be made off of it?

JT: You're talking about like back in the 90's?

AD: Yeah.

JT: Well the idea was there, but the technology wasn't. It was just too premature, you know? It's kind of like the difference between the iPhone and the Apple Newton back in the day. The Newton came out, and it was kind of cool for back then, but the technology wasn't there to make it really great, so nobody cared about it. And VR is the same thing, I remember in the 90's I used to go to what used to be called North Pier here in Chicago, they had a virtuality center, and we would do VR stuff in there. And it was kind of cool, but it's like, am I really gonna pay ten dollars to do this? Whereas now, technology is so far more advanced and perfected that yeah, I would pay ten dollars for that.

**01:04:25**

AD: What recurring challenges have you have seen the game industry face?

JT: I think it depends on if you're talking about games themselves or the development of games, I'm always looking at one or the other.

AD: Games themselves.

JT: I think the challenge they face is that it's still too much. It's not the company's fault, it's not any studio's fault or producer's fault, but the big games that are out there that make a ton of money, at least on the console, are the same games. The genres are really boring, you've got your shooters, it's just - I wouldn't say that there's great innovation out there. You're going to find the innovative games with more indie developers, smaller developers, but then those things are so different that they don't really get a mainstream audience. It's kind of like the difference between, you know, a band can sell out the United Center compared to a indie band might sell out like a small club, or things like that. There's not a huge amount of innovation going on with games right now. That will change eventually, but it's like Hollywood, you're gonna have the big *Transformers* movies that are going to make ton of money, but the more interesting movies are the ones that are smaller.

AD: Have you ever seen the industry fail to take advantage of something happening?

JT: I think the game industry historically, when trying to get a more diverse audience, has failed. Console and PC games from the major publishers, they are not interested in any market that are outside their "core gaming" audience. Trying to bring in older people, younger people, women, just trying to get a more of a niche market has always been a challenge for them. And I don't know that they're necessarily interested in doing that. So one of the bigger issues is that, it's kind of like those chicken and egg things where on the development and things, you don't see that much diversity on the development teams either. If we don't have the development team being more diverse, they are not gonna make games that are more diverse in theme. So where does it begin, and where does it end? I think that's always been a challenge. That said, mobile games, that's where you're seeing a lot more diversity in terms of the themes, in terms of the audience outreach. Everybody has a cell phone, everybody has a smartphone that they can play games on. It's in their best interest to make games that are not necessarily for the hard core video game players.

AD: Have you seen a shift in gender relevance for people working in the industry? Like at Midway there were only [a few]...

JT: I would definitely say it has improved, it is definitely not where it should be, but I'm not gonna to compare it to Midway because Midway was so visible with it at the time, it's not a good



comparison. It's definitely better, I think the rise of schools that teach games, that is gonna help things a lot more. You already see the shift happening because of that, because there are a lot more diverse people that are going to school to study games, and then by time they graduate, they are the ones that are gonna be making the next generation. And that's just starting, so it might be a few years off that you are really gonna start seeing that shift, but I've already seen a little bit that going on. It just depends on if they decide to go for work for a big company, or they go completely independent.

AD: Do you think it would influence the type of games that came out?

JT: I think so. I mean, again, It's this weird chicken and egg thing. Is the audience there to play these games that the developer are trying to make?

AD: Do you think console games have managed to capture some of the appeal of arcade games?

JT: No, I would say that consoles are almost the opposite. Well, I shouldn't say that. In general, if I just talk about it broadly, the big games that are coming from the publishers that get ton of marketing dollars they can spend on them. No, because console games by nature are more long-form. I guess the way to look at it is, it's the difference between watching a movie, like a big Michael Bay movie that has to be big in scope and everything. Compare that to like a TV show. Television right now is awesome, there's a great variety of TV shows out there, they are much smaller scope, and they can get away with it. It's the same thing. Console games always have to be big, because you're paying 60 dollars to play a game, so you're gonna [say], "I want spectacle, I want shit blowing up all over the place" and things like that. Whereas a nice arcade game, where it's like alright, you did a lot of action, but you're done at a specific point, or you end up throwing more quarters [in]. That doesn't play as well on a console, it plays much better on mobile.

AD: I was just thinking like, playing Fallout on an arcade machine, would never work.

TJ: Yeah it would never work, it's a completely different format.

AD: What do you think it will take to diversify the industry successfully?

TJ: I think it comes down to getting more people, more developers from all different walks of life studying game design, coming out of these schools, getting jobs in the industry, and working their way up the ranks. It's weird, especially women, you're gonna to find women mostly in the marketing sales parts of these big companies, but very seldom in development. There's probably a lot of different reasons for it, I can guess that some might be like "I don't think I can". Really it comes down to, if you are talking about in terms of development of games, making more diverse games it's gonna mean making sure that it's not just the same people that are making the games. Whether they come out of school, or they learn about it on their own. They need to get themselves on to these teams to make games, or make their own games and get them out of there. Again, I speak to that in terms of the PC and console games, mobile games are very different. Mobile games definitely have more diversity to it than the other formats.

AD: Do you there's any production as far as arcade games to make new, or reinvented [games]?

TJ: Kind of. There are definitely still arcade games being made. There are less of them, but they're bigger, like the *Star Wars* one I was talking about. Eugene Jarvis is coming out to visit this *Jurassic Park* game that's this big cabinet that you sit in. But there are not that many arcade companies out there anymore.

AD: So, anything you'd like to tell us before we end?

TJ: I don't know. It's interesting to see where games are nowadays, like I said I like the fact that games now, there are so many different ways to play games. Back in the 80's, it was just arcade, and maybe your 2600 console, and that's it. The 90's became the console era, and then came the 2000's. But now suddenly, with the rise of tablets and phones, and all these different ways of playing games, it's getting the point where statistically there is more diversity in people playing games than there ever has been. A lot of times when people say that only men play video games, well no, not really, it's really only on the console end of things you can *maybe* make that argument still. But if you talk about the overall spectrum [of games] and the overall industry, it is way more diverse than that. People somehow, for some reason, they discount mobile games. And they can't, because mobile games actually make more money than all the other formats. It's kind of nice to see that the general audience, that isn't considered core

gamers, are playing ton of games out there. I think that's pushing some diversity moving forward.

AD: Are we at the end?

AH: This is the end.

AD: Thank you for letting us interview you, Josh Tsui.

JT: Tsui. No no, thanks for having me, I love talking about this stuff. [laughs]

**END 01:14:14**