Game App Developer in Her 80s Opens ICT World for Fellow Seniors

At the Apple Worldwide Developers Conference (WWDC) in June 2017, Wakamiya talked with Apple CEO Tim Cook about the relationship between seniors and ICT.

"Apple CEO Tim Cook gave me a friendly hug, saying, 'You really inspire me.' I told him, 'I want you to make the iPhone more user-friendly for seniors.' People in Silicon Valley are passionate over gender and ethnic diversity, but have you overlooked the senior women like me?"

Eighty-three-year-old iPhone game app developer Masako Wakamiya exudes cheerfulness. "Curiosity makes me jump quickly to try new things," she says. "I don't make walls to shut out unknown worlds."

Personal computers were becoming popular when Wakamiya retired from a major bank at the age of 60. Sensing computers' great possibilities, she lost no time in purchasing one for herself. As she started to use her computer, Wakamiya discovered that she could encounter and interact with a wide variety of people. "At the age of 60 my world expanded—I got wings!" Wanting to share the world of computers with seniors, Wakamiya got involved in activities that included hosting a personal computer class for them.

It always seemed to Wakamiya that few smartphone games were designed with seniors in mind. But she was over 80 when she got the idea of developing iPhone game apps herself. "I wanted to make games that would allow us seniors to defeat even young people on the basis of our knowledge—games that are different from the 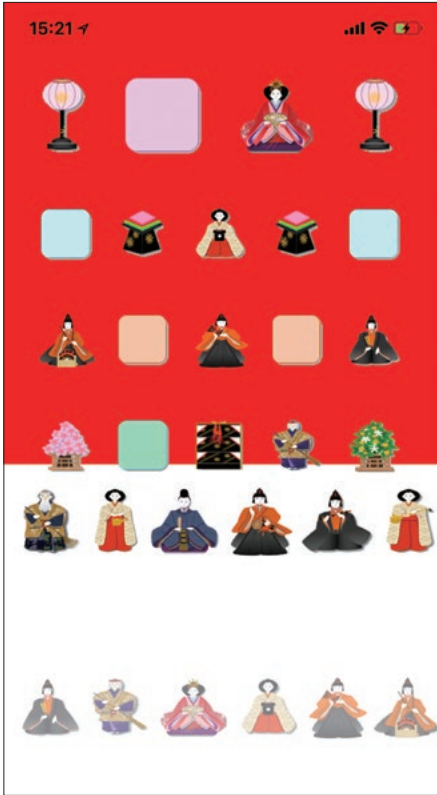competitive ones that require quick reflexes. I bought several specialized books to try programming on my own. At first, I struggled with programming languages for app development and my lack of English. However, when I didn't understand something, I put my social skills to use, asking many people for advice through the Internet. After about five months, I completed "*hinadan*," a game in which players arrange the traditional *hina* (dolls) displayed for the Japanese Doll Festival in their proper order on the stair-like *dan* (display shelves)."

When *hinadan* came out in February 2017, response exceeded anything she had imagined. Articles appeared in one Japanese newspaper after another, and CNN introduced Wakamiya and her game in the United States. She was invited to the Apple Worldwide Developers Conference (WWDC) in San Jose, California in June 2017 as a special guest and introduced as "the oldest developer." The day before the conference, Wakamiya had the opportunity to talk with Apple CEO Tim Cook. She also gave the keynote speech at the United Nations Headquarters in New York for a February 2018 conference on digital technology and the elderly. "With ICT [Information and Communication Technology] literacy, seniors can create their own space, and by using social networking systems, they can expand interactions with family members, friends and foreigners who live far away. This makes me really happy."

Confronted with an aging society and decrease in the number of people in the labor force, the Japanese government is seeking to implement a "Human Resources Development Revolution." Wakamiya is seen as a role model and has been selected as one of the experts to participate on the "Council for Designing 100-Year Life Society" that is considering practical measures for transforming, as did Wakamiya, aging into opportunity.

Wakamiya's interest now lies in the evolution of AI. "Some people are afraid of being deprived of work, but we must find new jobs and participate in society in new ways. I am looking forward to what the future society will be like," she states, eyes shining with irrepressible curiosity.

The *hinadan* game app Wakamiya created requires players to use their knowledge of Japan's traditional *Hinamatsuri* (Doll Festival) to arrange dolls each in their correct position on a four-level display stage. "To make it easier for seniors to play, I did not use slides and swipes, but made it possible to move a doll with just a tap," she explained. The number of downloads now exceeds 80,000.

Seniors learn hands-on at Wakamiya's computer class.

Masako Wakamiya

Wakamiya was born in Tokyo in 1935. She is vice chair of the senior generation website "Mellow Club" that she helped create in 1999, director of the NPO Broadband School Association, and active in promoting the usage of digital devices by seniors. As an expert on the Japanese government's "Council for Designing 100-Year Life Society" held from 2017, she is involved in policymaking to support learning after mandatory retirement.