

The joy of sticking

How Georgia's videogame industry is growing

With an estimated average age among players of 33, the videogame development industry is maturing along with its users, and Georgia is increasing its level of play. *Game Developer Magazine* recently ranked Georgia 4th in the country in terms of state-sponsored incentive compensation for videogame development.

Numerous colleges across the state from Savannah College of Art & Design, Georgia Institute of Technology, DeVry University and the Art Institute of Atlanta offer courses on video games. One of the leaders in the field is Dr. Ian Bogost an author, videogame designer, critic, researcher, and professor at Georgia Tech. He recently taught an introductory class in Computational Media, a seminar on the Atari Video Computer System, a class on Game Design and Analysis, and one on problems in Videogame Adaptation and Translation. Each of the classes requires a workload of reading, critiques, programming, and writing.

Many graduates in the field will likely pack up their knowledge and head to areas known for more lucrative careers - California, Seattle, and North Carolina for example. But the state is trying to retain graduates, and reasons for them to remain are on the rise. According to Bogost, "Many students go to the big companies with the intention of padding their resumes and then moving on after a couple of years." He believes the focus "needs to be on not just how to keep them here, but also how to get them to come back."

Locally Clinton Lowe, CEO of C. Allen Lowe and Associates, and co-founder and chairman of the Georgia Game Developers Association, (GGDA) now has more

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than 85 members, and a mailing list reaching over 400 gaming professionals and students.

Jason Della Rocca, executive director of the International Game Developers Association, says the GGDA is the "first and only known state-based non-profit trade association for video games in the United States," and that provides a boost for the Georgia gaming industry.

Lowe pays close attention to the number of gamers at work within the state, which he estimates at 2,000 at 71 video game companies. One of the more high profile is Blue Heat in Midtown, a mobile game studio that has created games for national brands like Major League Baseball, EA Sports, and Sony Pictures.

Two international gaming companies recently selected Georgia as their base of North American operations. One is China-based CDC Games, which recently decided to open a North American office in Atlanta. The company's website describes their main game, Yulgang, as "China's "first free-to-play, pay-for-merchandise" massive multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG). If you aren't familiar with the acronym, *PC Magazine* defines it as "a role playing game on the computer played by many people." The game is continually ongoing, and allows players to leave and later re-join the game. Key factors in the company's decision to open an Atlanta office included the availability of college interns and an international airport. The Georgia Entertainment Investment Act that provides tax incentives was also a draw. "Georgia is making significant efforts to sharpen its competitive edge in digital entertainment with meaningful legislation," Lowe says.

Another overseas company that has taken notice of the state is CCP, a well-known game developer in Iceland. Last year Georgia-based White Wolf Publishing merged with the company, and opened the new CCP North American headquarters in Stone Mountain. CCP is a leader in the massively multiplayer online game (MMOG) industry with their popular game, EVE Online. *PC Magazine* character-

izes MMOG as when, "People log on, join the action and leave whenever they wish, but the game continues like new soldiers replenishing fatigued troops on the battlefield."

CCP North America lists its current subscription base at more than 190,000 players in more than 200 countries. Their data found that 40% of all EVE Online players are located in the United States. "CCP is excited to be at the epicenter of the U.S. online gaming industry," says Mike Tinney, president of CCP North America. "We look forward to expanding our CCP North American team and player base over the course of this year."



A scene from Persuasive Games' "Disaffected!"

With that said, CCP North America plans to hire approximately 100 employees for their development and design departments.

An additional sign of an expanding industry is the success of the inaugural SIEGE (Southern Interactive Entertainment and Game Expo) event that Lowe co-chaired with Andrew Greenberg, in partnership with the GGDA. SIEGE drew a crowd of 240 attendees. The state supported the event, and Lowe says Bill Thompson, [deputy commissioner of the Georgia Film, Video & Music Office], "played an instrumental role in raising awareness of GGDA and breathing life into SIEGE." The expo is slated to become an annual event. Sponsors for next year's event have already contacted Lowe, who is hoping the expo will become "the premier interactive digital entertainment trade show in the Southeast."

Gaming is a complex industry with a follow-

ing of devoted developers, designers, and of course players. Many people trace their passion back to childhood, including both Lowe and Bogost. Lowe "started on the Odyssey II, which played three different Pong-like games." He received a "Commodore Vic20," and his father "taught me how to type sample programs from the user's guide onto the TV screen." Gaming has also been a fixture in Bogost's life since childhood when he grew up playing early arcades and home consoles.

That early training shaped the future of gaming companies across the state. In addition to his academic career, Bogost is a lead designer at Persuasive Games, one of several game developers in the state. The company produces games that tackle social and political issues. An example of one of the games is *Disaffected!*, described as a "videogame parody of the Kinko's copy store, a source of frustration from its patrons."

Some games are created through commissions, and some are independently created. A couple of the games have garnered national attention. "We've published games in media outlets like *The New York Times* and CNN.com, game portals like Shockwave.com, and on our own."

Hi-Rez Studios is a locally based company in Alpharetta founded in 2005. CEO Erez Goren's foray into the industry began in high school with the creation of his first computer game. His team has been working toward the completion of an MMORPG spy game called *Global Agenda* over the past two years. The website describes the game which is set on 22nd century Earth, as "an invisible war fought not with armies, but with elite teams of highly trained and well-equipped special agents, where technology is a race, knowledge is power, and everyone has an agenda."

With several studios located in Georgia, and more business relocating here, there could continue to be an influx in the gaming industry. Lowe points to "the presence of other digital entertainment industries such as film and television, and our \$1.2 billion music industry certainly help attract and retain human capital." AB