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Prince Edward Island's Video Game Industry Showing Signs of Making Some Serious Noise

Adam Perry can't wait to get to work on making play for others.
"Like, I wake up and go like 'yeeheee, time to go make some magic,'' said the 25-year-old resident of Stratford.

Perry's workplace is a small studio in the Atlantic Technology Centre (ATC) in Charlottetown. He is a graphic artist for Telos Productions Inc., one of five companies on P.E.I. working solely in the video game industry.

Perry is quick to point out that this industry, with a global market of about $30 billion, is not just fun and games. On the Island, it's a serious — and growing — business.

"Making a video game is no easy task and I think that could be a huge misconception that 'oh, it's very fun,''' he said. "Yeah, we play games, but we have to. We have to stay on top of the industry. We have to know what is out there. So we play a lot of games but we work hard at making our own games, too.''

Telos president Sean Yeomans shifted three years ago to video game creation and production after spending years on film and media projects. He expects to more than double his current staff of 12 when two video projects — Shadow of the Panopticon and City of Sinners and Saints — advance to the production stage.

The other Island-based video game businesses, which, like Telos, all work out of the ATC, are planning to expand their workforces as well. The handful of companies cover the full spectrum of video game development, with firms that develop for PCs, gaming consoles and mobile platforms such as cell phones. Specialized companies that support the industry, such as animation studios and game testing labs, are also popping up in the province's capital.

Longtail Studios, an award-winning developer of games and entertainment operating out of offices in New York City and Quebec City, recently set up shop in the Atlantic Technology Centre.
Spokesman Jeffrey Peters said the company is looking to hire 25 people in the first year of operation here, then add up to 30 new employees each year thereafter.

At least 60 are currently making their living in this industry in P.E.I., said John Eden, president of Interactive Media Alliance, an advocate group for the province's fledgling video game industry as well as other interactive media industries. Eden said the workforce is forecast to double in less than a year with foreseeable growth to 500 people in just five years. The challenge will be to find and attract talented workers to ply their trade as producer, programmer, artist, game designer or tester on Prince Edward Island.

"The people are just not out there," said David LeBlanc, chair of the computer science and information technology department at UPEI. "Getting good video game programmers is the hardest (position) to fill within video game companies," he said.

LeBlanc developed the new four-year Specialization in Video Game Programming program for the local university. Early interest is high and LeBlanc expects steady enrolment to be sustained in the coming years.

"I would be very happy if we could provide 20 people a year to the local industry in five years," he said. "I would hope I could do a lot more than that."

Holland College is also set to help meet the video game industry's high demand for skilled labour. A two-year Video Game Art and Design program will begin in September. Almost all 15 spots have been filled in a 20-week introductory course that begins in February.

Kim Horrelt, program manager for Media and Computer Studies at Holland College, which is putting on the program at Holland College, said the new venture is not expected to be a flash in the pan. "We're looking at it as a sustainable program," she said. "We wouldn't get into it if we were just going to offer it for a couple of years."

In November, the federal and P.E.I. governments announced a collective investment of more than $1.3 million for the new video game training and programming at UPEI and Holland College.

The province also offers tax breaks to the industry, including a rebate of up to 52.5 per cent of eligible production labour to game companies expanding their operations to Prince Edward Island.

"The government has really studied the video game industry to understand the needs of a company like ours,'" said Peters in explaining why Longtail Studios chose to expand into P.E.I. "They have been eager to work with us and provided excellent incentives and resources that will help our company grow overall."

Richard Brown, minister of Development and Technology, said the time was right for the province to help nurture the video game industry in P.E.I. He said the province will continue to offer tax incentives, but may move towards seeking some of the royalties on the games as a form of payback.

"I think the public realizes that this is a growing industry and we are in on the ground floor and investment is needed," he said. "Every analysis shows us this is a growth industry."
The video game industry on P.E.I. is already providing good paying jobs. Salary ranges from $40,000 to $70,000 at Telos and boss Yeomans said he plans to add medical and dental coverage for his employees this year as well as explore profit sharing.

At Other Ocean Interactive, some are pulling in more than $75,000, said studio head Deirdre Ayre, with a top salary hovering around $100,000. Other Ocean, which opened in Charlottetown in March of 2006, branched out from Foundation 9 Entertainment, which is the largest independent video game developer in North America. The company has about 30 employees, the majority from Atlantic Canada with a handful from P.E.I. Several, though, come from the United Kingdom and from out west.

Ayre said Other Ocean could easily hire another 15 this year, but conceded that recruiting is a challenge. The company's Web page offers a creative personal pitch to prospective employees by promoting an environment that provides a calming alternative to the rat race of the big cities.

"Housing costs are low (owning a home by 30 is almost a birth right), the miles and miles of waterfront and pristine beaches would make a Floridian cringe with envy and 'commuting' is missing from most people's vocabulary," heralds the site.

Ayre said locals, too, need to see Prince Edward Island as being not just a viable, but also a fertile, ground for the video game industry.

"I think it's important for all Atlantic Canadians to believe in ourselves that we can do this and we are doing this and we are doing this at a world-class level,'" she said.

"We have to be supportive of this industry and of our kids if they are interested in this because it is a real career path."