



IT TAKES A VILLAGE

By
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ORLANDO'S BIRDS-OF-A-FEATHER APPROACH TO BUILDING A WORLD-CLASS CLUSTER OF INTERACTIVE MEDIA COMPANIES IS QUIETLY BECOMING A REALITY.



COURTESY IDEAS



While not as obvious as the sprawling back lots of L.A. or the warren of studios around Rockefeller Center, Orlando is steadily creating its own entertainment axis. With an eye on “global domination” in the realm of entertainment technology, the region known worldwide for its appeal to visitors is also appealing to creative companies that seek a foothold outside the restrictions of those more established markets. A smart strategy since the entertainment baton has been firmly passed to the upstart industry that is the focus of Orlando’s nexus: interactive digital content.



n-Space is the force behind the video game *Hannah Montana The Movie*.

Sure, everyone loves a good movie, but in 2009 interactive games outsold movies at retail, taking 57% of an estimated \$61 billion in worldwide sales according to market research company Media Control GfK International. Granted, that doesn't account for ticket sales at theaters — estimated at \$21 billion worldwide in 2009 by Worldwide Boxoffice — but it also doesn't account for revenue from online games, which reached \$12 billion in the U.S. alone.

Blockbuster movies are still raking it in: James Cameron's *Avatar*, the highest grossing movie of all time, has taken in about \$1 billion to date. But that doesn't bring it even with Activision's *Guitar Hero* series, which had already racked up \$1 billion in sales before the release of *Guitar Hero III*, which added another \$1 billion in sales for the franchise. And a single online game, Blizzard Entertainment's *World of Warcraft*, took in an estimated \$1 billion last year alone.

We have seen the future of entertainment, and it's not at the local cinema.

That future is being created in part here in Orlando. Some of the companies are established and well known: EA Tiburon in Maitland is the home of the *Madden NFL*, *NCAA Football* and *NASCAR* games series. But there are many other players, some large, some small, and collectively they make Orlando a powerhouse not only in

gaming, but in many forms of interactive digital visualization.

Bob Allen, the big idea behind local media/marketing group IDEAS, may be the closest thing we have to institutional memory. He says it all started with the military and the Mouse.

"The evolution of the creative industry in Orlando has some genetics," Allen explains. "We had a native population of artists and crafts people who came here when the theme park industry came. We're in the third or fourth generation of that now." Allen himself came here from California as a teenager and later worked for Disney in California before wrangling a transfer back to Orlando.

Disney's Imagineers, whose job it was to use technology to create "un/real" experiences, collided with another local group with similar goals — the modeling and simulation engineers working for the various military contracting companies that are now part of Lockheed-Martin. The establishment of the precursor to the U.S. Army's Program Executive Office for Simulation, Training and Instrumentation in 1974 cemented Orlando's leading role in the defense simulation business. Currently, PEO STRI executes programs worth more than \$3 billion annually and manages contracts worth \$17.5 billion.

"The simulation folks were very good at the adaptive use of new

technologies, and when those two animals started cross-breeding, we evolved this new, eclectic style [of media creation] that's still in its early stages. Those two groups continue to rub nicely against each other," Allen says.

N-SPACE

One of the best examples of the synergy between defense and digital entertainment is n-Space.

The company was founded in Orlando in 1994 by Dan O'Leary, Sean Purcell and Erick Dyke. The three worked for GE Aerospace (later absorbed by what is now Lockheed-Martin). They got a taste of gaming when the company was contracted by SEGA to improve the game developer's arcade cabinets. As part of the deal, SEGA wanted the company to develop an arcade game.

"I was in simulation, but when I heard this was going on, I weasled my way onto the team and met Sean and Erick," O'Leary recalls.

"We went to Japan and ended up doing about six months worth of work in seven weeks. We were working 100 hour weeks, on the second floor of the SEGA building in Tokyo without air conditioning, but we thought it was great."

Afterwards, the three decided they'd take what they'd learned and create their own development company.

"Very few developers had 3D experience then. Sony was just launching the PlayStation 1, and our experience at Lockheed allowed us to convince Sony to fund us as a start-up and do a game for the launch," O'Leary says.

The relationship went south due to internal politics within Sony, but n-Space quickly moved on to working for other game publishers, releasing *Tiger Shark* and working on the monster hit *Duke Nukem*.

Since then, n-Space has grown to more than 100 employees and will have released 30 game titles by the end of this year. Those include two *Rugrats* games done entirely by n-Space, two

Duke Nukem games, a clutch of *Mary-Kate and Ashley* games and more recently, a *Hannah Montana The Movie* game, four *Call of Duty* titles and, last September, *The Ultimate Alliance* game for Marvel.

"We like Orlando because we all lived here. I've lived here all of my life except for the five years I was in school at Auburn University," O'Leary says. "The schools here are a great resource — the University of Central Florida, Full Sail, DAVE School. I think we've hired the bulk of the graduates from the Florida Interactive Entertainment Academy (FIEA) and we have some graduates from the Ringling College of Art and Design (in Sarasota)."

Attracting talent hasn't been a problem. "People come to work with us because they're attracted to the lifestyle. We're a family company. A lot

of people in this business, especially coming from California, have bounced around from project to project. We have a lot of people with more than five years with us and several with more than 10 years. They're attracted by that stability and we think it gives us an advantage. Our teams have been together and worked together for a long time."

HELIOS

Another gaming company with roots in defense is Helios Interactive, founded by Ravé Mehta.

The University of Central Florida graduate is the son of Vipin Mehta, founder of Mehta Group, a prominent engineering and construction management firm with a 30-year history. Mehta followed his father into the family business, working on high-profile projects locally — including the original Amway

Arena, the Orange County Courthouse, Orange County Convention Center and Orlando International Airport — and nationally.

In 1998, Mehta took a leave of absence and became a partner in Modis Technologies, a virtual reality software firm co-founded with a friend



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The brainchild of Ravé Mehta, Helios Interactive is one of the region's most successful local gaming companies.



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who had left INTEL. They focused on 3D simulations for the military and were soon supplying the Department of Defense with training simulations today known as “serious games.”

“We built a training simulator that taught mechanics how to change

a tank tread,” he recalls. “So instead of having to buy 50 physical tanks for them to practice on — and break — they used our software and bought one tank, allowing them to train more mechanics at a lower cost.

“Back then 33.6K baud modems were the norm, and we were delivering virtual reality in a gaming environment over the Internet,” Mehta recalls.

Mehta rejoined the family firm and diversified it, adding entertainment to the portfolio and, ultimately, acquired a development group from Vancouver, B.C. that had a unique toolset for creating 3D games that required fewer developers and fewer hours than the industry’s standard tools.

The toolset became a game design and production engine called GameCore, and Helios is simultaneously rolling out versions for individual users for less than \$100, a full-featured version for developers and a customized version, VizSimEx, for military and commercial applications. Though he’s excited about GameCore, Mehta’s passionate about the company’s browser plug-in called WEB3D, which will allow anyone with the plug-in to view 3D interactive content on the web. Online games like *World of Warcraft* already stream 3D through the web, but you have to buy and install each game’s proprietary engine on your PC first. Like Flash or Adobe Reader, the plug-in will enable users to see and interact with 3D content from many producers.

In December, Mehta converted its office building — which is located in Winter Park across the street from Full

Sail University and just a few miles west of UCF — into the state’s first 3D digital technologies incubator. Already IMI Labs, ZeeGee Games and the Digital Media Alliance of Florida, an industry trade group, have moved into the incubator.

“Having a number of 3D developers together in one place means all can benefit from each other’s interaction, industry knowledge and experience,” Mehta says.

IMI LABS

One of the Helios incubator’s first tenants is IMI Labs and its subsidiary, ZeeGee Games. Dustin Clingman, CEO of IMI Labs, is also coordinator for the Orlando chapter of the International Game Developers Association.

Clingman started the predecessor to ZeeGee, Zeitgeist Games, in 2001.

“Primarily we’ve been doing work for Sun Microsystems and SAP, building out virtual worlds,” he says. “We’re small, about 15 people, but eager to grow over the next couple of years to 40-50.”

Clingman is a local resident who began working in development and, when the time came to strike out on his own, Orlando was the logical place.

“We did advergaming for companies including Proctor & Gamble, the WE television network and *National Lampoon*,” he explains.

Clingman joined fellow developer Shawn Kendall who founded IMI, and they rebranded Zeitgeist as ZeeGee with a primary focus on 3D development.

“Virtual worlds are going to become ubiquitous throughout the web. It’s going to grow as a collaboration tool as well as entertainment. I expect many colleges to offer courses taught online in virtual worlds,” he says.

IDEAS

Bob Allen firmly believes in the power of place, which is why he recently moved his firm to the burgeoning Creative Village in downtown Orlando.

The concept, promoted by Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer, was to bring creative

CREATIVE CONVERGENCE

Digital Media Alliance Florida (DMAF) is a non-profit association of companies and professionals from the digital and interactive media, entertainment, arts, animation, effects and simulation communities working together to develop, grow and promote the digital media and interactive entertainment industry throughout the state of Florida.

Headquartered in Orlando, DMAF facilitates collaboration and partnerships among the digital media industry and government, educational, creative and financial organizations to strengthen the industry and workforce for global competition.

Its objectives also include helping to ensure availability of a world-class workforce, encouraging dialogue on industry issues, presenting seminars and industry networking opportunities, advocating and lobbying government on behalf of industry, as well as many others.

For more information, visit www.dmaflorida.org/dmaf.

companies into downtown, to use their energy to boost the revitalization his administration has fostered. The key piece was the transformation of the former Orlando Expo Center across from the Amway Arena. It now houses the Florida Interactive Entertainment Academy — which is UCF’s graduate school for interactive media — and the House of Moves, the nation’s premiere motion capture studio.

According to Allen, moving downtown felt like a risk, but has turned out to be richly rewarding.

“This is a real place with real people doing real things,” he says. “Being

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downtown has a vitality to it that creative enterprises need. My team is so happy here. They can ride their bikes to work.”

Having other creatives to interact with is an obvious boon to IDEAS, which is nothing if not eclectic. The company’s core competency is storytelling — whether that’s for a company or for a feature film or a book or website — and it puts its work into all of those media. Allen says that being in Orlando has fostered diversity.

“There’s a dogged intrepid spirit around creativity here. Back in the 1970s there was always someone starting a new coffeehouse for musicians or a theater for performers. There’s always been that push to bootstrap opportunities.

“The community here evolved under the pressure of natural selection. Creatives here had to be clever and resourceful for us to pursue our passions and stay in business. That made us more robust and resilient compared to places where creatives are locked into one form factor like movies or advertising.

“This is a good time in history to be light on your feet, to be flexible — adaptive — about how you do things, and even about what you do.

“My daughter goes to an arts school

and spent the last week singing in the chorus of *Carmen* at the Mad Cow Theater with the Orlando Philharmonic. Backstage, I overheard a young man from UCF talking to the kids, telling them he’d made a movie here for \$30,000. He used local talent, did the post production here, just out there bravely doing it. That’s an example of what’s so cool here.”

Not being in New York or L.A. hasn’t hurt IDEAS when it comes to getting hired by companies across the country.

“Ninety percent of the time, being from Orlando is a positive. When we’re pitching original episodic TV or some

other high profile entertainment project, there’s still some residual market stereotyping. It’s not so much a negative about Orlando, it’s that some people feel that no place other than Los Angeles is the right place. But it comes up less and less.

“The community here is not just film-



Bob Allen

COURTESY IDEAS

makers, not just web developers. We have that, but we have more. I like the tendency of this community not to have silos. We might be working on a resort in Mexico and we might need to pull in a dancer. And we have them here. Nobody says, ‘That’s weird. Why do you need a dancer?’

“Our work is so diverse — healthcare, defense, entertainment — that what we see is hunger for innovation. No one is saying ‘what’s your address.’ In most of those markets, Orlando is perceived as growing and thriving,” he explains. “We wouldn’t be who we are if we hadn’t done it here.”



Local media/marketing group IDEAS promotes everything from feature films to books to Web sites.

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