

# WE'VE GOT

EA SPORTS AND UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA TEAM UP AND BAM!, THE REGION'S TECH SECTOR HAS A GAME PLAN FOR SUCCESS

# GAME

By Brian Courtney

»» Ted Wilson was the first University of Central Florida football player drafted into the NFL. But the collegiate standout played only as a replacement player in the strike-shortened 1987 season. His real contribution to the league was establishing UCF with NFL scouts who, 10 years later, flocked to Orlando to watch a kid named Daunte Culpepper. A first-round draft choice in 1999, Culpepper today is a superstar. While he's not yet enshrined in Canton, he is immortalized in the Madden NFL Football video game series, the best-selling sports game of all time. Now, thanks to a partnership between Culpepper's alma mater and Madden game producer EA Sports-Tiburon, UCF is again hoping to establish itself as a provider of standout talent — grads headed to the big leagues of digital animation.

The Florida Interactive Entertainment Academy (FIEA), part of the Digital Media Division in UCF's recently opened School of Film and Digital Media, will debut in the fall as the cornerstone of the school's new downtown campus thanks to a unique collaboration with video gaming giant Electronic Arts (EA). The EA Tiburon Studio, which is based in the Orlando suburb of Mait-

land, produces Madden NFL Football, NASCAR Thunder and several other best-selling video game titles.

"This is an investment for the long term," says Ben Noel, vice president and studio chief operating officer at EA Tiburon. "The gaming industry is expanding exponentially and so is the need for quality people. EA employs 5,000 people worldwide and about

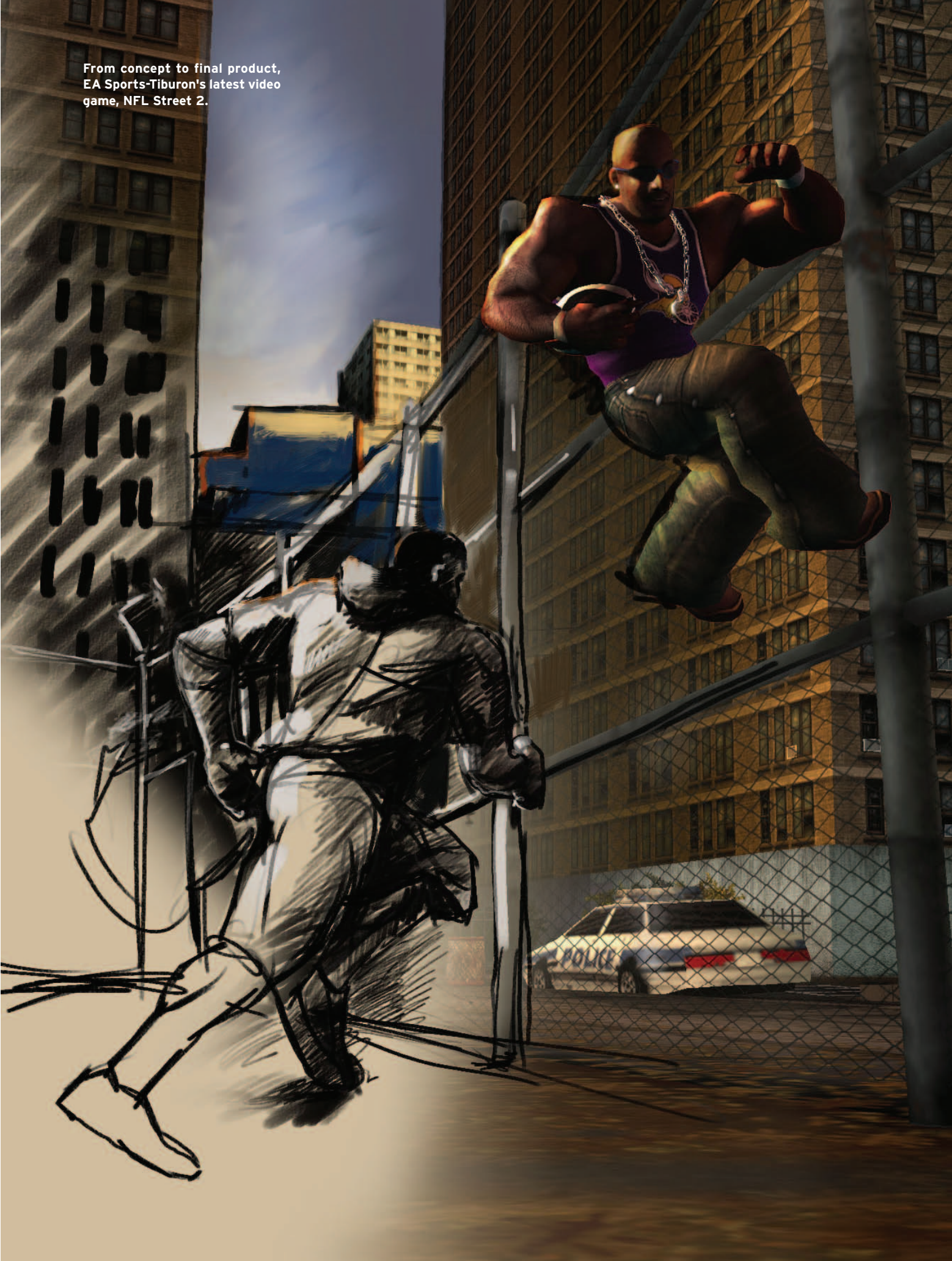
500 here in Orlando. As the industry's largest, we have to resist the urge to recruit from within, because that's just robbing Peter to pay Paul. To grow, we need new talent.

"We can't create talent, but with alliances such as this one with UCF, we can nurture talent, help to direct its care and feeding, so to speak. That will yield skilled people ready to hit the ground running. The students, the school, the digital industry — we all benefit."

The new school was primarily funded by a \$4.2 million grant in the state budget, which was signed by Gov. Jeb Bush in May 2004 after the company and the university joined forces to lay the groundwork and establish credible evidence of the module's viability. In late Fall 2004, the Orlando City Council agreed to lease its vacant Expo Centre to UCF for the fledgling program. UCF will pay the city \$1 a year on a 40-year lease. The sides can agree to renew the lease for two additional 10-year terms, and the university's foundation will have an option to buy the Expo Centre after March 2007.

The city will contribute up to \$4.4 million for building renovations; UCF will fund nearly \$2 million. The School of Film and Digital Media will migrate most of its programs and 1,200 undergraduate students from UCF's main campus to the new downtown facility over a period of years.

From concept to final product,  
EA Sports-Tiburon's latest video  
game, NFL Street 2.





“Just like a few California computer companies grew into the Silicon Valley, I can see [FIEA’s] downtown campus becoming the center of a ‘digital media village’ that is a hub for interactive media.” — Ben Noel, EA Tiburon



“Having a downtown location is more than just a nicety, it’s key to preparing these students for the realities they will face when they enter the workforce,” says Noel. “EA and most of the other gaming companies — as well as the movie and technology industries — we all employ people in major urban areas. Allowing these kids to train in an environment similar to those in which they will work gives them a head start. There won’t be as much culture shock and that will reduce turnover. UCF has already proven this formula by putting its Rosen School of Hospitality on International Drive, smack in the middle of Orlando’s tourist center.”

## GAME ON

Like new video games and software packages, new schools start with the

basics and gradually build, adding new features and user benefits. FIEA will initially function like a Master’s program. Students with undergraduate degrees in computer science,

art, digital media and such will be eligible to enroll. Attending full time, students should complete the program in about 16 months and will receive a graduate certificate. The school is already working on expanding the standards and curriculum into a state-recognized graduate degree.

UCF expects 50 first-semester enrollees and will launch with about 20 faculty and staff, mostly software engineers, artists, programmers and designers — including EA employees. UCF expects the program to grow to about 300 students and will graduate about 100 people each year.

According to Mike Moshell, head of the Digital Media Division of the School of Film and Digital Media, students will work in production teams during an average 60-hour week. About 40 hours of that time will be lab work. The curricula, which EA helped to develop,

GAME IMAGES COURTESY OF EA

will teach design, programming and testing for interactive media. EA also plans to offer internships to students and faculty.

"We think EA is a superb partner because of its deep commitment to training a workforce to create the next generation of interactive entertainment," says Sterling Van Wagenen, graduate program coordinator of the UCF School of Film and Digital Media. "It's certainly going to elevate the quality of what we do in the school, and it's going to be a terrific opportunity for our students."

The school plans to set up a career placement office to help students find jobs after they graduate.

Noel and EA believe that this program will have significant impact well beyond the walls of its classrooms.

"Its very presence will build awareness of the interactive media industry among college advisors and even high-school guidance counselors, and help them to see this business as a legitimate career path for certain types of kids. And that path will only widen as digital media expands into other applications and industries."

He also sees the potential for eventually spinning off courses for use at the high-school level.

"Sixty percent of all Americans play video games and interactive media is now ingrained into our lifestyle. Kids will be interested in it earlier and earlier."

## IT'S SO LIFELIKE

According to Noel, the school will help EA simplify one aspect of their recruiting.

"Hiring new graduates means we don't have to do any 'untraining.' If they've already done an internship here they're going to be familiar with the environment and the process, so they can jump right in. And for the others, they will have lived in this area for at least two years while they're going through the Academy. They'll be comfortable in Central Florida, established. It makes starting a new job that much easier."

Not that EA has ever had any problem convincing potential employees to come to Orlando. Tiburon was founded

# Deep End of the Pool

University of Central Florida's alliance with EA is a great example of industry and education pairing up for the common good, and the outcome will no doubt cause a ripple effect through Central Florida's interactive digital media trade. But UCF is by no means the only institution producing talent.

Orlando's long history as a center for animation, television and movie production, which originated with Disney's arrival in 1971, established the city as the third-largest media center in the United States, behind only New York and Los Angeles. Digital media is a multi-billion-dollar-a-year business in Central Florida. The region's demand drew educators to feed the need for a specialized talent pool and today there are nearly 8,000 students enrolled in digital media programs in the Metro Orlando region.

**Full Sail:** Originally focused on recording arts, Full Sail now offers degree programs in game design & development, digital media and computer animation.

**DAVE School:** The Digital Animation and Visual Effects school, which is based at Universal Studios Florida in Orlando, opened in 2000. It provides practical digital animation skills.

**Ringling School of Art & Design:** Based in nearby Sarasota, RSAD offers specialized four-year Computer Animation and Graphic & Interactive Communication degree programs.

**International Academy of Design & Technology:** With facilities in Tampa and Orlando, IADT provides courses in digital media, including computer animation, digital movie making and digital production.

**Valencia Community College:** Students graduate with Associate's degrees in Digital Media Technology. Courses include multimedia authoring and digital videography.

**Seminole Community College:** SCC offers an associate's degree in Multimedia Technology, with a specialization in Graphic Design and Web Design.

**Daytona Beach Community College:** Working with the region's military and business sectors, DBCC now offers an associate's degree program in Simulation Technology that teaches the basics of modeling and simulation.

by a few people who were working as third-party developers for EA in California. They decided to relocate to Central Florida in the early '90s because it offered a great quality of life at an affordable price. Those same points allow the company to attract qualified people today. EA acquired Tiburon Entertainment in 1998. One of the group's founders, Steve Chiang, remains with the company in Orlando as the operation's general manager.

"We're a content provider," says Noel, "not a manufacturer or fabricator. Our people — their creativity, ingenuity and vision — are our main corporate asset and our largest investment. We've found over the years that Central Florida is highly conducive to growing those

assets. It doesn't matter if we relocate them here or if they're local graduates."

The people at EA predict that the process will get even easier with the maturation of the UCF program. Noel believes that the "clustering effect" will launch the region into prominence within the digital interactive industry.

"Just like a few California computer companies grew into the Silicon Valley, I can see UCF's downtown campus becoming the center of a 'digital media village' that is a hub for interactive media."

Perhaps one day soon, when a graduate of UCF's FIEA is hired to work on the next Madden NFL Football game, he'll add Ted Wilson as an Easter egg on the Washington Redskin's roster. 