

Charting

SUCCESS

By Steve Blount

WINTER PARK-BASED FULL SAIL IS A MAJOR PORT FOR THOSE SETTING SAIL FOR 'NEW MEDIA' PROFESSIONS.



Ambitious techies with sights set on making the A-list say Orlando is a must-stop on their journey to success. Why? Central Florida has something rare and valuable: one of the top "new media" schools in the country, turning out star programmers, renderers and designers. Since Full Sail opened its doors in 1979, many of its 20,000 graduates have gone on to work at the highest levels of filmmaking, music, entertainment and — more recently — video game development and virtual reality simulation.



To prove the point, Tammy Gilbert, vice president and director of Career Development at Full Sail, recites some impressive stats: Full Sail graduates have worked on the Grammy-winning album-of-the-year 12 out of the last 12 years; the top-grossing U.S. music tours in each of the past five years (Madonna, the Rolling Stones, Paul McCartney, U2 and Tina Turner); two Oscar-nominated films in 2005 (*I, ROBOT* and *The Incredibles*); and dozens of industry-leading video games, including EA Games' *Madden NFL Football* series.

Other graduates work for Central Florida's defense contractors, including Harris Corporation. Their accomplishments are even more technically advanced, but also a lot less public.

PHOTO COURTESY OF FULL SAIL

Tony Sakson, a recent Computer Animation graduate, is a 3-D renderer at Harris working on nautical simulation models for the federal government. He says Full Sail's approach is anything but traditional.

"I was a [print] advertising production manager in Atlantic City and had been studying animation, but realized I couldn't do it on my own," he says. "I researched schools across the country. Full Sail offered a diverse computer animation program in an intense, technical and dynamic environment — I got more hands-on computer lab time than most people get attending a traditional four-year school."

An accredited, degree-granting college, Full Sail offers accelerated associate's and bachelor's programs in computer animation, digital arts & design, and game design & development, along with its film, entertainment business and music production degrees.

The programs have not gone unrecognized. *Rolling Stone* magazine named Full Sail one of the country's five best music programs, along with the University of Southern California, Berklee College of Music, Oberlin College and The Julliard School. And, *Electronic Gaming* ranked Full Sail among the five best "new media" schools, while *Shift* magazine put it at number three — right behind New York University and MIT.

How did a private school in Central Florida become a media and technology powerhouse? By design, of course.

"Students go to school here on a professional basis, attending classes eight to ten hours daily," Gilbert explains. "And the school runs [twenty-four/seven], enabling students to finish an associate's degree in twelve months and a bachelor's in twenty-one."

The technology students use is impressive, too — exactly what they'll encounter when they walk onto a professional film set or into a black lab at a defense contractor. In addition to full-scale recording studios and film stages, the 91-acre campus has room after room filled with high-end computers. To walk into a lab stocked

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— MIGUEL MOLINARI, FULL SAIL GRAD & DESIGNER AT ELECTRONIC ARTS TIBURON

full with 80 Mac G5s, along with Hewlett-Packard x4000s and x8000s, and realize it's just one of 11 similarly equipped labs, explains how Sakson got so much seat time in less than two years.

SWIMMING WITH TALENT

While the entertainment industry has known about Full Sail for years, players in Central Florida's booming high tech industry are believers, too.

Don Quitter moved to Orlando from Silicon Valley in 2004 to launch Commercial Training Solutions (CTS), a company that provides training simulation solutions to the mining, drilling and construction industries. He's capitalized on the talent attracted by Orlando's world-leading visual simulation industry.

A number of Quitter's workers came from Full Sail's video game development program. They create virtual reality solutions that train workers about the equipment and procedures they'll use in high-risk jobs like drilling and mining.

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— DON QUITTER, COMMERCIAL TRAINING SOLUTIONS

"We're focused on commercializing the technology, and I see Orlando playing a major role in that," he says. "I couldn't have started and grown this company in Silicon Valley. Full Sail and others have created an environment where I can have personnel readily available."

Those personnel include Full Sail's faculty, because the school encourages its teachers to stay on the cutting edge.

"We want our instructors to stay current," Gilbert emphasizes. "We make it possible for them to keep working in the industry."

The synergy between real work and

class work is an enormous benefit to students.

"When I met Dave Arneson [Full Sail course director and co-creator of *Dungeons & Dragons*], that was huge," notes Miguel Molinari. "It was like meeting Michael Jordan. I thought, 'Wow, he's just a regular [guy].' It made me feel like I could do it, too."

And Molinari has done it. After graduating from Full Sail in 1999, he went on to Electronic Arts Tiburon, the Orlando design studio for EA Games. Molinari worked on the interfaces for *Madden NFL 2002-2004*, and moved up to interface designer for the 2005 and 2006 versions of the industry-leading game and cultural phenomenon.

The demands of the outside world came as no surprise to Molinari.

"I graduated knowing exactly what to expect at a gaming company. The program provides training in all aspects of game design — developing story, characters, levels, intensive C++ programming, asset management (art,

music, packaging) and an eight-week final project to assemble a working game prototype."

Molinari isn't alone: most recently, six Full Sail alumni — five programmers and an artist — worked on the recently released *Quake IV*. And three more — two gameplay programmers and a sound programmer — are among the crew behind Insomniac's popular video game *Ratchet & Clank: Up Your Arsenal*.

These are just a few of those A-list-seeking techies who navigated their journey successfully. Thanks in no small part to Full Sail. 