

## »» Is the video-gaming industry the entertainment side of the computer business, or the computer end of the entertainment business?

Let's see: Like the computer business, video gaming hires engineers from the best tech schools to churn out miles of ever-more-complex code. Like the entertainment business, it relies on writers, artists and producers to turn that technological ability into riveting, best-selling recreation. The gaming industry shares a talent pool with GE Aerospace and Lockheed Martin, as well as the Walt Disney Company and Universal Studios. Its CEOs not only have engineering degrees, they have talent agents.

In other words it's neither one business nor the other. It's an animal unto itself: the computer-entertainment business.

And quite a business it is, selling some \$7 billion in products in 2005 and contributing some \$30 billion to the economy overall. It's also one of the fastest-moving industries in this break-neck business era, a niche where "the cheese" is moved so far and so frequently that only the hardest mouse-clickers survive.

Just as its product has evolved over 30 years from the crude graphics of "Pong" to the lifelike grisliness of "Grand Theft Auto" and its ilk, so too has the video-game business transformed from an entrepreneurial

sideshow of the larger economy into the spotlighted center of mainstream business, a place where the computer, entertainment and retail sectors merge to create an economic powerhouse.

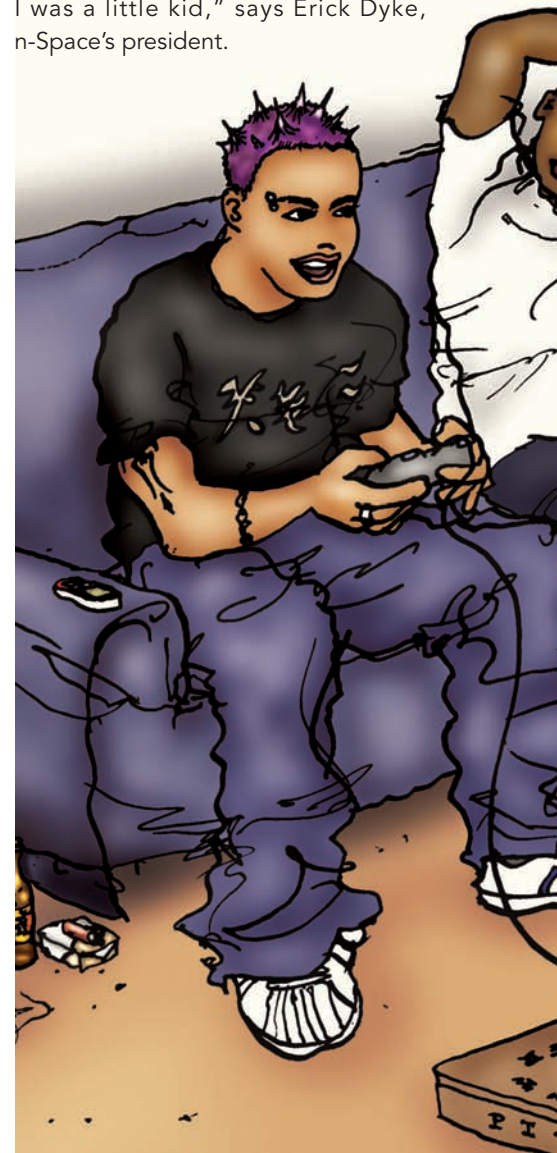
Now, another evolution is taking place in the video game biz. Its long-established hubs — Santa Monica, California; Atlanta, Georgia; and Austin, Texas — are welcoming a fourth member, our own Orlando. In addition to Maitland-based Electronic Arts (EA), the mega-manufacturer of such games as "Madden NFL Football" and "NASCAR Thunder," Orlando also is home to a unique graduate school offering master's degrees in Interactive Entertainment: UCF's Florida Interactive Entertainment Academy (FIEA), launched in August 2005.

And that's not to mention Orlando's longest-standing video-game maker: n-Space, Inc. Started in 1994 by three engineers from Lockheed, the company now employs some 70 engineers, artists, designers and production personnel at its 14,000-square-foot facility in Westwood Plaza near SeaWorld.

Working across various game platforms, including Nintendo Gamecube and Sony Playstation, n-Space has created its own games (including the spirit-and-demon fantasy "Geist") along with

games based on well-known movies, TV shows and comic books. "Rugrats Studio Tour," "Mary-Kate & Ashley: Sweet Sixteen," and "Die Hard Trilogy 2" are among the 12 projects n-Space has released thus far.

"It's what I wanted to do since I was a little kid," says Erick Dyke, n-Space's president.



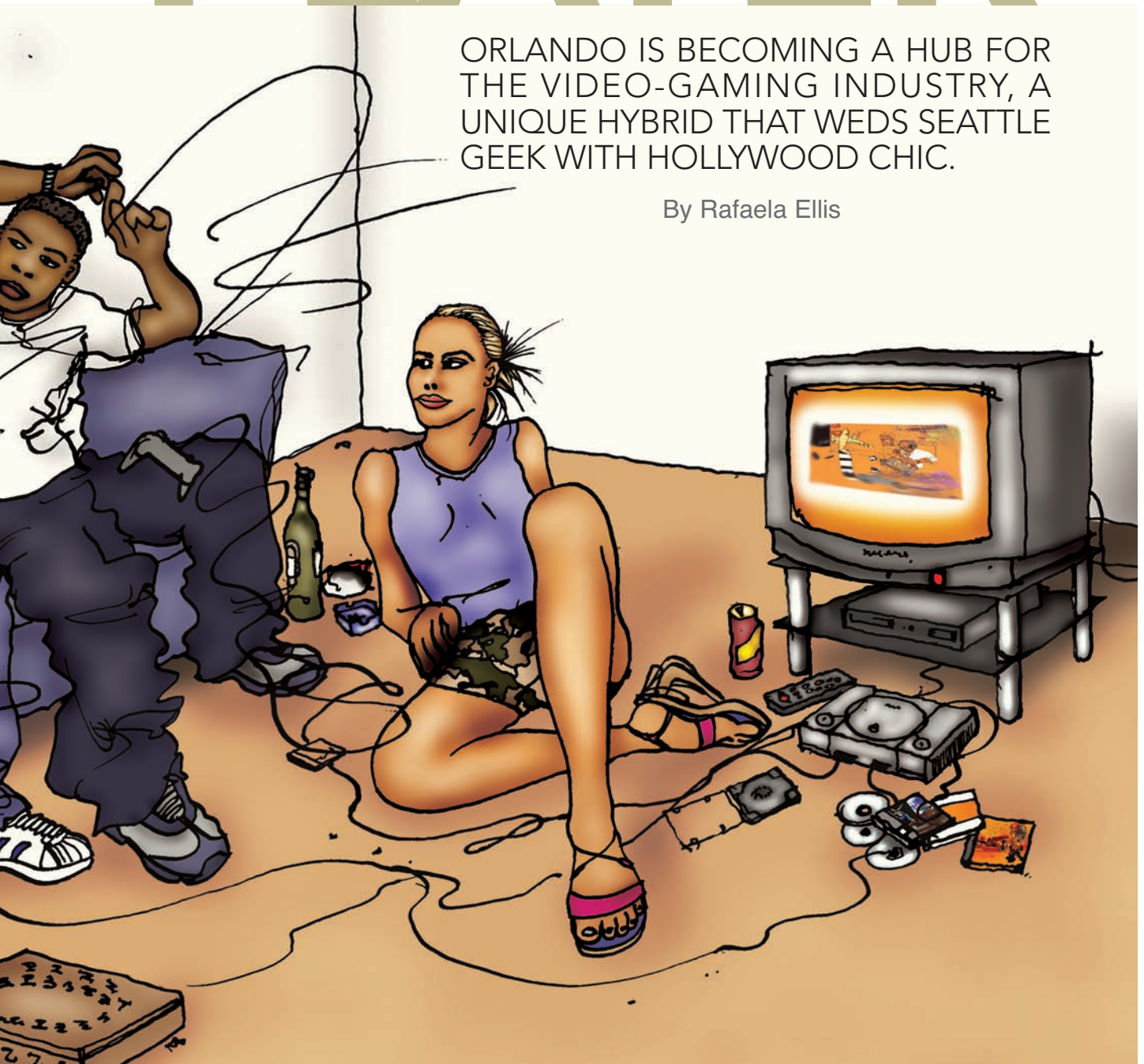
**"When we started making games, a game took seven people 10 or 11 months and cost just under a million dollars. Now, we have projects with 40 people that run for two years, with a just-getting-in-the-door budget of \$5 million."**

— Erick Dyke

# MAJOR PLAYER

ORLANDO IS BECOMING A HUB FOR THE VIDEO-GAMING INDUSTRY, A UNIQUE HYBRID THAT WEDS SEATTLE GEEK WITH HOLLYWOOD CHIC.

By Rafaela Ellis





**FIEA programming student Jennie Gritton.**

## GAME WARRIORS

The birth of n-Space is itself a tale of how quickly things morph in the gaming biz. Dyke, a 1991 engineering graduate from Michigan Tech, originally came to Florida to work on military projects for GE Aerospace in Daytona Beach. But then the company got a contract from the game maker Sega, and Dyke and his colleagues were thrust into the video game racket.

"That sort of got me into the business," Dyke says. "And then that was bought out by Martin Marietta and then Lockheed, and after they ended their relationship with Sega I wanted to keep making games. So I and a couple of people left and started n-Space."

Working from a small rental in Grand National Plaza, the group discovered that in addition to the technical know-how to create games, they needed to begin building the rela-



**"Geist" and "Rugrats" video games are just two popular titles by n-Space.**



the material on which games are based have caught on to Orlando's benefits — "They like the fact that we're in Florida because we have a

less-expensive cost of doing business," Dyke says — the next step is to further develop the region's tech-savvy, creative workforce.

Dyke is optimistic that Orlando's efforts to create a high-tech creative

tionships that are so vital in the gaming business, which relies heavily on licensing agreements and intellectual property sharing. Enter Interactive Studio Management (ISM), a pioneering video-game talent agency headquartered in California. In 1996, the agency recruited n-Space as its first-ever client, and the next year helped n-Space put its first game, "Tigershark," on store shelves.

"Their efforts have directly impacted our worldwide sales and contributed to our impressive longevity in an industry where independent developers are a rarity," Dyke told *Game News* in an article celebrating ISM's 10th anniversary.

## THE COMING WORLD

Now Dyke and company, along with a roster of local and regional political and business types, are preparing for the future of gaming by working to make Orlando as attractive as possible to the young, hip engineers and artists who take video games from concept to reality.

While the California companies who publish

village adjacent to UCF's FIEA in downtown Orlando will be a catalyst to attracting talent to drive this industry, although he notes that the gaming industry has changed since he and his cohorts left their comfortable — and well-paying — engineering jobs to start up n-Space.

"Our business is really tough right now," he says. "When we started mak-

# A Squishy Hero to the Rescue

**What's green, amorphous, and out to save his colorful subterranean world?**

**Why The Blob, of course, the hero of a video game created at the University of Central Florida's Florida Interactive Entertainment Academy (FIEA), a graduate school for gamers that opened in August 2005 in downtown Orlando.**

Created over two semesters by a team of 12 FIEA students, "The Blob" is the latest manifestation of FIEA's goal of creating a class of game producers, artists and programmers ready to take Orlando to the next level as a gaming hub.

"The video-game industry will hire a person a day for the next ten years," says Benjamin Noel, executive director of FIEA. "How do we maintain that? Orlando was not known as a hotbed of video-game talent; 70 percent [of game-making talent] was coming from out of state."

So Noel, a former senior manager at video-game giant Electronic Arts (EA) in Maitland, joined with UCF, the city of Orlando and the Florida Governor's office to place a new graduate school for game developers at the center of a planned downtown "creative village" aimed at attracting the young, hip talent that gaming relies on.

"The city and the mayor are very focused on bringing these jobs here, having people living here, working here at high tech jobs," Noel says.

The hope is that once students graduate from FIEA — or from other local engineering and art programs — they will be tempted to stick around Orlando to enjoy downtown's mixed-use housing, nightlife, and the high-paying tech jobs that support them.

So far, it seems to be working, Noel says. "We set up a studio environment, and we're doing things the right way. We bet that if we built it and funded it and brought in the right faculty, the kids will show up. And they have."

Successes like "The Blob" should make it even easier to attract the best students, Noel says. Already "gold mastered" — the term for putting the final product on master disk — and with packaging designed and ready to be manufactured, the game has garnered positive attention in gaming competitions and will be entered in the Game Developers Conference at the upcoming national Student Gaming Competition.

"The stars are lining up," Noel says of the synergy between the school and the game manufacturers in the area. "We want to have the best facility in the best place to live and work."

a company that exists," he says.

With n-Space, EA, and a host of military-simulation concerns hungry for qualified workers, such advice should be easy to follow.

"Right now, it's become a lot easier to find local talent and to find people interested in living and working here," he says. "The business is maturing." x



PHOTOS COURTESY OF FIEA

ing games, a game took seven people 10 or 11 months and cost just under a million dollars. Now, we have projects with 40 people that run for two years, with a just-getting-in-the-door budget of \$5 million."

That makes it harder for young engineers to run their own companies out of a garage, as the legendary tech wizards of the past generation did.

Nevertheless, Dyke says, Orlando still offers plenty of opportunities for recent graduates.

"My advice is to find a good job at