

Canada gets in game with eye on education

By John Gaudiosi

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VANCOUVER -- British Columbia has been a hotbed of Hollywood and TV production for years, but it also has quietly grown into one of the world's largest homes to video game development. To help bolster talent in the region, the Canadian government is working with such gamemakers as Electronic Arts, Disney Interactive, Vivendi Games and Radical, as well as Sun Microsystems and Microsoft, to create the world's first Digital Media program at the Great Northern Way Campus in Vancouver.

"We looked at all of the programs in North America, as well as abroad, when designing this MBA program," says Dr. Gerri Sinclair, head of the program. "Our students are coming through this program with a senior role in the game industry. We have cross-disciplinary masters from computer engineering/math, film/screenwriting/drama, and psychology/English."

The program launches in September with an inaugural class of 25 students from the U.S., Canada and countries as far-reaching as Egypt, India and China. Sinclair said the goal is to have 100 students annually by 2010.

EA, a large backer of game development at USC and UCLA, has given the GNW program \$1 million as part of the company's global educational and talent-development effort. The grant includes an endowment and multiple scholarships. In addition, EA will provide students with paid internships at the company's development studios, offer student mentoring programs, and supply teachers and lecturers from its executive ranks.

Students in the program will receive a master's degree bearing the seal of Vancouver's four major postsecondary institutions: University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser University, British Columbia Institute of Technology and the Emily Carr Institute of Art + Design. Sinclair says the cross-university diploma is a first of its kind.

During the two-year program, students will work in teams -- just as they eventually will in the real world -- to create three different, industry-funded projects.

"We create teams that focus on everything from art, technology, design and sound to the business and marketing of making games," Sinclair says. "The industry has been telling us this is what they want. It's no longer one person who makes a game today. It's a collaboration."

EA Worldwide Studios president Paul Lee says that thanks to the gradual focus of more North American universities on game development, there are plenty of programs feeding the industry.

"We need to broaden the awareness of the game industry, and that's only done through education, whether its at USC or GNW," says Lee, whose company

employs more than 2,000 gamemakers in Canada and has development studios in Vancouver, Burnaby and Montreal. "We want to help create people that will bring passion to games and help facilitate the next big idea."

The video game sector is experiencing unprecedented growth thanks to one such idea: Nintendo's Wii. As the industry gains powerful tools such as Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 to play with and the audience expands into the mass market, new gaming experiences will be crucial.

"To create the next generation of entertainment, we need the next generation of talent," Lee says. "It is imperative for tomorrow's creative leaders, designers and producers to acquire an education with both depth and breadth in order to achieve success in our ever-growing industry."

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