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Talent traction

Video games, special effects and animation fire away thanks to homegrown artists and technical wizards

■ by Joel McKay

Whether helping sports fantasies come true, injecting a little action into life with first-person shooters or inviting audiences to visit magical realms, designers and animators are working hard to bring a little make-believe to reality.

It's all happening right here in Vancouver.

"The film, TV, animation and video-game industries work together more now than we ever have before, and that's important because we're attracting a similar talent base to British Columbia and we have a common interest in maintaining that talent base," explains Colin Macrae, director of communications for video-game designer Electronic Arts Inc. (EA).

Known as a top destination for filming movies, Vancouver is home to gaming, special-effects and animation too.

This cluster, which also includes wireless and mobile companies, employs some 22,000 persons and generates \$3 billion in annual revenue, according to DigiBC, the Digital Media + Wireless Association of BC.

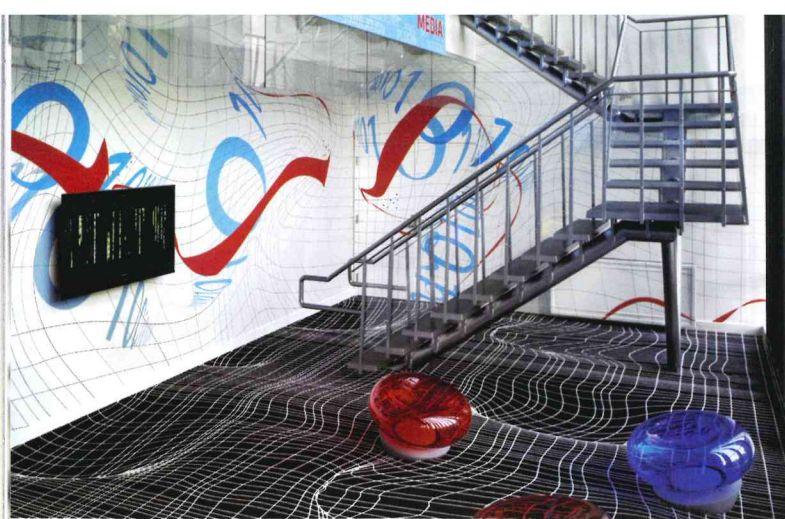
The province boasts a variety of world-class creative companies, including game giants EA and Ubisoft Entertainment, Disney Online Studios Canada Inc., digital-animation studio Rainmaker Entertainment Inc., Next Level Games Inc., Digital Domain and Blue Castle Games.

Macrae says the cluster has come of age, with companies collaborating on its long-term maintenance and development.

DigiBC itself is one example of such collaboration.



Tax credits, talent and a favourable time zone attracted Aly Jetha (left) and Shabnam Rezaei (right) of Big Bad Boo Studios to B.C.



The Centre for Digital Media, Vancouver

Another is the BC Screen-Based Media Industry Human Resources Committee, created in 2009 to ensure a steady supply of workers for the sector.

"We're all competitors first and foremost, but we also recognize that if we're living and working in the same market, we've got a common interest in the broad economics of doing business here and retaining the best talent," says Macrae.

The collaboration has paid off.

In 2010, the provincial government introduced tax credits for film and interactive digital media that recognized the "convergence" taking place among B.C.'s film, television, video-game and animation sectors.

The tax measures included:

- a credit of 17.5 per cent for qualifying labour costs in video-game development;
- an increase from 25 to 33 per cent in the Production Services Tax Credit for game development;
- an increase from 15 to 17.5 per cent in the Digital Animation and Visual Effects Tax Credit; and
- an increase in the qualified B.C. labour expenditures cap from 48 to 60 per cent of production costs.

Macrae believes the credits will help gaming maintain B.C.'s reputation as a strong jurisdiction for creative industries and stymie the outflow of jobs that has plagued the sector for the last few years.

The company behind such hits as *FIFA Soccer 11* and *Medal of Honor*, EA reduced its workforce in 2009 because of the global recession.



Rainmaker Entertainment CEO Warren Franklin says Vancouver's animation, gaming and special-effects cluster catches the eyes of Hollywood heavyweights

Still employing some 1,200 persons at its Burnaby facility, EA isn't the only game developer that has cut back recently.

In January, Disney shut down its Vancouver studio Propaganda Games, which had recently released *Tron: Evolution*.

"The [challenges] particular to our industry [have] been the competition and the increased economic incentives from other jurisdictions in North America through tax-credit programs that have encouraged jobs and investment," says Macrae.

He believes that B.C.'s new tax program will take some time to yield results for the industry.

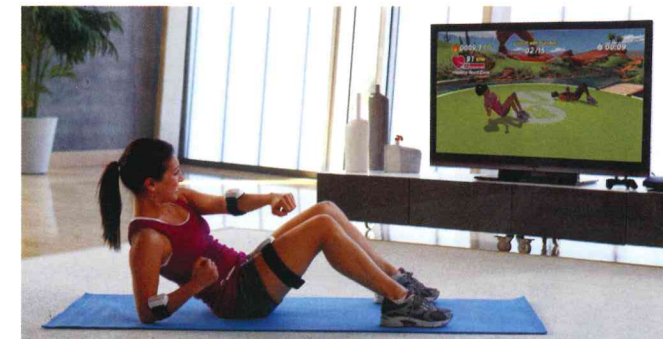
Meanwhile, visual effects and animation are growing steadily.

The province's recently introduced harmonized sales tax (HST) hasn't only re-ignited film and helped special-effects companies get more business; it has also saved animators some serious coin.

"I was a big supporter of the HST," says Warren Franklin, chief executive officer of Rainmaker Entertainment Inc. "We spend millions of dollars every year on equipment, and to be able to build the business and switch to the HST has created big savings for us."

Rainmaker banks on local talent to make the most of its projects.

Franklin, who has supervised visual effects for more than 25 feature films including *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, originally came to Vancouver because of the city's world-class production artists and animators.



EA Sports Active 2

"If you talk to any of the companies that have moved up here, if you look at why we're here, it's about the talent," he says.

He explains that the Masters of Digital Media Program at the Centre for Digital Media feeds local companies with a steady stream of highly trained employees.

The program represents a partnership among the University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser University, Emily Carr University of Art + Design and the British Columbia Institute of Technology.

Shabnam Rezaei is managing director of Big Bad Boo Studios. She says that although Toronto has better access to TV studios, she and husband Aly Jetha founded their studio in Vancouver in 2005 because of the West Coast's talent base.



Aazim Khan (left), animation and FX artist at Next Level Games, which produces *Mario Strikers Charged*, *Punch Out!!* and *Captain America - Super Soldier* (below)



Since its creation, Big Bad Boo has opened offices in New York and Los Angeles and has developed a number of cartoons that educate children on multiculturalism.

Its latest series, *1001 Nights*, was nominated in 2010 for four Leo Awards, which celebrate B.C.'s film and TV industry.

"For animation, special effects, spot production, music composition, voice-over talent ... Vancouver is the place to be," says Rezaei.

She adds that Vancouver has the three "Ts" for industry success: tax credits, talent and a time zone in line with Hollywood's.

Franklin agrees: "If someone calls me up and says, 'I'd like to have lunch tomorrow in Los Angeles,' I can do that."

Yet not every business meeting happens in L.A. these days. Macrae says B.C. itself has become such a magnet for talent that people world-wide are drawn to work here.

And that's what will sustain the industry in the long term, he says.

"We have a phrase here: 'Great people like to work with great people,'" Macrae says. "We employ so many of the most passionate and most talented developers in the world, and those people end up becoming a draw as well." ■

Leading with Connections

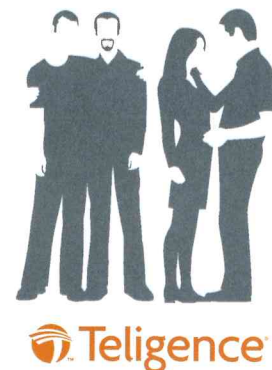


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ever and however they want. We deliver our brands on leading-edge technology with quality, stability and scalability in mind so wholesale customers can take full advantage of our platform for their social networking needs.

Teligence is proud to have a culture that celebrates the diversity of our

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