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## GAMES

# States Hope Videogame Schools Will Put Them on the Map

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When you think about the videogame industry, Ohio and Louisiana don't usually come to mind. Some ambitious state leaders hope to change that.

Ohio and Louisiana are among a handful of states that officials are trying to turn into videogame-publishing hotbeds. They are launching college programs to train students in game design and dangling tax incentives to game publishers. The idea is to tap into an industry that is growing rapidly, pays high wages and is clamoring for new talent.

The states, which also include Florida and Hawaii, have no illusions about becoming a new Silicon Valley. But officials think they could help publishers like Electronic Arts Inc., Activision Inc. and THQ Inc. meet their needs for talented programmers, animators and artists and, in turn, keep the states' brightest young people from moving away.


### Big Money

The videogame industry chalked up \$7.3 billion in software sales last year, up from \$7 billion in 2003, according to NPD Group Inc., a market researcher. The average annual salary for entry-level videogame programmers is \$54,300, according to a survey to be published in the April issue of Game Developer magazine. More than 100 U.S. universities, art institutes and trade colleges now offer courses or degree programs in videogame design. But relatively few have closely linked their programs to a new economic-development strategy.

At Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland -- a city better known for producing industrial machinery than software -- officials want to turn northeastern Ohio into a hub for videogame publishing by training students in the latest game technology. They hope these highly skilled students will attract game publishers to the region, and that some students will launch their own companies.

Last week, the school dispatched Christian Miller, a 20-year-old computer science major and game junkie, to a big industry conference in San Francisco to spread the word about its fledgling "virtual worlds" training laboratory. The school's computer science and electrical engineering department won a grant last year of \$375,000 from the university administration to start the lab, which will begin training students this fall.

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Mr. Miller, who began programming videogames in his early teens, said his main goal at the annual Game Developers Conference was to make industry connections for Case Western. "I want to give people a better idea of what we're doing," Mr. Miller said. "Cleveland is pretty much nowhere on the game-development map, so it's an important step."

Students at the lab will be expected to create their own games while learning the ropes. And, yes, they will also be expected to spend a lot of time playing videogames, said Marc Buchner, an associate professor who heads the project. "We want students getting their hands dirty, working on specific projects and learning from doing," he said.

### **Luring the Developers**

Game publishers traditionally have hired students from a range of disciplines, including computer science, engineering, graphic design and the liberal arts. Publishers have long tapped schools like Stanford University, Carnegie Mellon University, the University of Michigan and the University of Texas at Austin for talent. "Some of your best people tend to be only a few years out of school," said Miguel Iribarren, vice president of strategic planning at Chicago-based Midway Games Inc., publisher of the popular Mortal Kombat series.

States are particularly interested in making sure they have an ample supply of jobs that interest young people so that college graduates stay close to home.

In Louisiana, State Rep. Steve Scalise plans to introduce a bill that would offer game publishers a tax-incentive program similar to the one the state used to build its film industry. Mr. Scalise, who also spearheaded the state's Motion Picture Incentives Act, said some people who have left the state to work for videogame publishers have told him they would be interested in returning if the industry could grow there.

A few universities in Louisiana, including Tulane, offer courses in videogame development. The nascent Louisiana Game Developers Association in New Orleans, whose members include universities and some tech firms, is urging game publishers to support its efforts to persuade lawmakers to adopt an economic-incentive plan. It also hopes to woo publishers with the state's low cost of living.

Jason Della Rocca, executive director of the International Game Developers Association, a professional society for game creators, said any effort to launch a videogame hub will be difficult if states don't have a combination of educational programs and some existing businesses. "If you just sort of throw some food in the water, it doesn't mean fish will show up that didn't exist there previously," he said.

Still, he expects demand for talented workers to grow in the next two years, when game-console makers Microsoft Corp., Nintendo Co. and Sony Corp. roll out their latest machines. "These games are not built by robots," said Mr. Della Rocca. "Each project takes upward of 100 or 200 specialized, highly skilled staff ... For a lot of the large studios, the most important asset is the talent. To a large extent, the studios will follow the talent." His group estimates that about 100,000 people work in the nation's videogame industry.

### **Help From a Giant**

In Orlando, Fla., officials at the University of Central Florida had key industry support as they persuaded the state legislature to approve a \$4.2 million grant to build the Florida Interactive

Entertainment Academy, which will open this fall. The state university had the backing of No. 1 videogame publisher Electronic Arts, which is based in California but employs 450 people at a game studio in Maitland, Fla. EA helped develop the academy's curriculum, donated some gear and will offer internship programs.

The intensive program is aimed at students who already have undergraduate degrees. Students will be taught by professional game designers, including Tom Carbone, a lead software developer for EA's popular Madden NFL games. Participants can pick courses based on their interests, though everyone is required to take a class on "improvisational acting," designed to help students explore their creative sides.

A videogame education doesn't come cheap at UCF: Tuition for the 16-month program is \$39,500 -- that compares with \$2,982 for a year of undergraduate tuition for Florida residents, and \$15,488 for nonresidents.

"It's absolutely relevant to our future [in Florida] that there is a source of local talent," Steve Seabolt, an EA vice president, said of the academy. The company also has invested \$8 million in an interactive entertainment program at the University of Southern California.

In addition to sending graduates to EA, UCF hopes students will try to start their own companies, and it hopes other publishers will want to locate in the area. "I don't want to say we're teaching entrepreneurship, but certainly we're trying to instill the spirit of self-reliance," said Chris Murray, the academy's associate director.

At the University of Hawaii in Manoa, officials last year launched the Academy for Creative Media after raising about \$500,000 in grants and donations and receiving \$350,000 through the reallocation of university funds. The school is offering courses such as "computer game production" and "3D character animation" to more than 100 students from various majors. Academic leaders, as well as game companies with operations in Hawaii such as Blue Planet Software Inc. and Backbone Entertainment, recently called on lawmakers to increase support for the industry. One proposal is for the state to offer companies generous tax credits for technology investment and research available under an existing law. The efforts could "wean us off a little bit from the monoculture of tourism," said Kaveh Kardan, chief technologist at the academy.

Mr. Kardan, a Canadian, hopes that Hawaii will build a success story in the videogame business akin to Montreal's. Montreal, which had little game-development activity 15 years ago, has become a stronghold in part through aggressive economic incentives. EA opened a studio in Montreal a year ago, and Ubisoft Entertainment SA, a large French videogame publisher, also operates there. "When those companies did set something up, a lot of former Montrealers on the West Coast said, 'Hey, let's go back home,' and that is very encouraging," he said. "In Canada, we used to complain about the brain drain. We have the same thing in Hawaii."

The videogame industry is enthusiastic about the burgeoning efforts by communities to churn out legions of top-notch videogame developers. But Mr. Seabolt, the EA executive, offered a note of caution about their ability to place many students in jobs. "The hard reality of it is that these kids really do need to kind of be rocket scientists," he said. "So, it's not just, I got my degree in computer science, but it's that I was in a fabulous program and was the top... of the class."

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