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Sticking to the GamePlan: PEI aims to be Atlantic Canada's video game hotbed

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When it comes to growing its video game sector, Prince Edward Island's interactive media association and provincial government have lofty goals. But judging from the testimonial of the president of an international video game developer that just opened a new operation on the island, these targets certainly seem attainable.

"The attitude, the motivation and the reactivity of the people on PEI is tremendous," says Gerard Guillemot, president of game developer Longtail Studios, which has offices in New York, Quebec City, and now Charlottetown. "They have really studied the video game industry. They took the time to understand what our needs are and how they could make the conditions for a video game company to settle there."

A little over a year ago Longtail decided to establish a studio in Atlantic Canada, and Guillemot, who was one of the founders of Ubisoft Entertainment, says after consultations with a number of the Atlantic provinces it quickly became clear that PEI's focus on video game production made it the obvious choice. And with news that an existing game developer on the island is spinning off its business to add a game testing and quality assurance company to the island's video game cluster - the addition of the two companies will eventually double the sector's workforce from 60 to 120 - PEI's strength in the video game industry is becoming evident.

"Our feeling is really the more the merrier," says Mark Sandiford, president of Beachwalker Films Inc. and a founding member of PEI's fledgling Interactive Media Association. "What we want to see is a really vibrant game development sector here, and whether somebody comes from off-island or is developed here, really it's all contributing to the vibrancy of the industry here."

In fact, the addition of the two companies is directly in line with the IMA's long term goal of adding one home-grown and one imported video game company to the island each year for the next 10 years. The provincial government's goals are perhaps more ambitious; it wants to add 500 new jobs in video games over the next five years.

"We're pretty bullish on the whole thing," says Scott MacDonald, director of investment at the provincial crown agency Technology PEI. "We're quickly becoming an alternative to Montreal and Vancouver. That being said we are always quick to point out that we know we will never be either one of those locations in terms of the size and scope of our sector, but we think we certainly will be the choice for eastern Canada."

Technology PEI is the driving force behind making the island province Atlantic Canada's premiere destination for video game developers. It has been running GamePlan [1], the province's strategic economic initiative to grow its game sector for several years. MacDonald employed the GamePlan tactics when pursuing Longtail, including offering space alongside other video game companies in the Atlantic Technology Centre as well as touting the province's Innovation and Development Tax Credit that provides game studios with a rebate of up to 52.5% of eligible production labour.

MacDonald says the island developed its video game strategy about five years ago after an extensive analysis of the province's technology sector revealed that it was competing in the same IT arenas as all of the other Atlantic provinces. "We wanted to differentiate ourselves from an economic development standpoint in the technology sector, and we were aware that there was no one really in Atlantic Canada that was focusing on games," he adds.

The province also found that history had also set it up to specialize in games. Sandiford points to the fact that PEI has never had the vibrant film and television industries of its neighbouring provinces as one of the reasons it was able to concentrate completely on new media. "One of the things that you really need in a place like PEI is

companies and projects that roll one into another, so that you've got something else for the workforce to do when one project wraps up," he says. "So the game industry and animation work out really well this way, whereas film and television never really did."

That old media don't interfere with the development of new media on PEI was not lost on Guillemot. "Discussions with other provinces were not progressing that fast because in many cases their media programs come from the movie side," he says. "And a movie is very different from a video game. It's not done at all the same way and the programs are not adaptive."

Since the University of Prince Edward Island and Holland College both have video game programs there is a ready supply of employees. But Guillemot adds that Longtail has also received applications from native Atlantic Canadians who have had to move to the traditional gaming hotbeds of Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal to pursue careers in video games and are now eager to return to the east coast. He says that the provinces existing game companies were excited about Longtail's arrival, and the 100 to 150 employees it hopes to accumulate over the next 5 years or so, because it adds to their literal community of likeminded people.

Of course, this is exactly what the province, with its population of only 140,000, had hoped for. "In 10 years time we may have a labour crisis," says MacDonald. "We're always looking for sectors that are attractive for young people to move into the province, as well as keep young people here. So in a roundabout way we were looking at trying to find a sector that was very much attractive to growing the local population and we thought that games hit the mark quite well."

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Links:

[1] <http://www.gameplan.ca/index.html>