

Video game designers call Maryland home



(Courtesy Graphic/Bethesda Softworks)
A character from Bethesda Softworks' award-winning game "Oblivion."

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Bethesda -

When it comes to businesses in Maryland, biotechnology or blue crabs might come to mind, but the state is also an East Coast center for another industry: video games.

Whether it's big developers such as Bethesda Softworks, which makes games including the popular "Oblivion," or video game testing firms like Hunt Valley's Absolute Quality, Maryland boasts more than 80 companies devoted to what the Baltimore County Department of Economic Development calls "interactive technology."

The work spills over into the D.C. area as well.

Electric Sheep Company, originally of D.C., founded the virtual world "Second Life," and Fairfax houses EA Mythic, which will release "Warhammer Online" this year.

"It's just been a historical presence here," said Deborah Solomon, director of Montgomery College's interdisciplinary gaming program. "A lot of the big players started in Maryland."

Those big players include MicroProse Software Inc., one of the major video game companies in the 1980s and 90s. Many MicroProse developers went on to form their own firms, said Josh Johns, marketing director for Hunt Valley's BreakAway Games.

Maryland also attracts developers who start on the West Coast and tire quickly of its housing prices and expenses, said Tim Train, president of Timonium-based Big Huge Games, which makes strategy and role-playing games such as its adaptation of the board game "Settlers of Catan."

Maryland's game developers are well-compensated; Game Developer magazine found its workers average \$71,544 annually, the highest-paid on the East Coast.

Virginia came next, with employees earning \$67,200.

Maryland gaming firms are looking at how to harness their technology for applications beyond entertainment.

Though BreakAway puts out a number of strategy-oriented titles such as "Civilization 3: Conquests," about half its business comes from "serious games," where industries such as the military harness video game technology into practical applications.

"The growth in the industry is going to be in that direction; tools and technology over just games," said Johns, who said the federal government's close presence helps the company immensely.

Educational institutions are capitalizing on the evolving field, Solomon said. Programs like Montgomery College's are appearing elsewhere — the University of Baltimore has a four-year degree in Simulation and Digital Entertainment, and the University of Maryland is also developing a program.

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