

Major electronics game company expanding to Salt Lake City

Summit » Decision highlights maturing of Utah's digital media industry.

By Tom Harvey
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Electronic Arts, one of the leading producers of digital games, says it is expanding its Utah studio and moving it into a larger office in downtown Salt Lake City to start on a "groundbreaking" new project.

That announcement comes just days before a summit of the Utah's digital media industry that is being billed as a representing the maturity of the industry that has long roots here.

Electronic Arts Executive Producer Ben Bell said the company would be hiring for the new Salt Lake City office. It currently has an office in Bountiful; a spokesperson said she would not immediately say whether that office will remain.

"Salt Lake City already has a strong game development community and the base of talent here is deep," Bell said in a written question-and-answer session provided by the company. "Historically, the game development scene in Salt Lake goes back several decades, and now there are hundreds of people in the region working on games."

He declined to provide information on the new project.

Companies that make video games, create animation, movies and other media, employ over 475 people directly and over 1,575 Utahns indirectly, according to a report by the Utah Economic Development Corporation of Utah. Though relatively small in numbers, Utah is the fourth largest state per capita for the number of multimedia artists and animators, according to the report.

Those types of numbers are part of the reason that Grow Utah Ventures has organized the Push Button Summit 2010 on March 9-10. The sponsors, a group that promotes economic development in Utah, hopes to bring together the industry for a chance to hear advice from panel members and to hobnob with fellow practitioners of the electronic arts.

"There's a lot of momentum here, said T. Craig Bott, president and CEO of Grow Utah Ventures. "We think we can get more momentum and more success. With a summit like this, one of our objectives is to begin to recognize among ourselves the significance of this industry."

Headlining the summit are John Warnock, the founder of Adobe Systems, and Ian McKerlich, director of mobile Internet and content for T-Mobile.

The presence of Warnock is a reminder that the growth of digital media has a history in Utah. Warnock graduated from the University of Utah in 1969 with a Ph.D. in electrical engineering. That era also spawned the creation of Evans & Sutherland, a pioneering company in computer graphics started by university faculty members. The U.'s Tom Stockham created the field of digital recording.

Besides Adobe Systems, graduates went on to found Pixar Animation Studios, Silicon Graphics and WordPerfect.

Now, Brigham Young University has a strong animation program, which has won four student Academy Awards and nine student Emmys, The University of Utah teaches game development, as well as computer

engineering, while other state schools also turn out graduates with skills of use to the digital media industry.

Utah is home to some 60 digital media and film companies, including the expanding office of Electronic Arts and Disney Interactive Studios.

While Utah has a vibrant sector, its wages lag the national mean salary. Film and video editors make only about 60 percent of the national mean, while artists and illustrators make nearly 88 percent.

But the wages and a lower cost of living may be one reason Electronic Arts is expanding and moving its operations in Utah. The company last year announced plans to lay off 1,500 people. Electronic Arts CEO John Riccitiello was quoted in December as saying the company was looking to have a presence in lower-cost areas outside of California.

Bell said that a team of experienced developers from the company's Sims Studio in Redwood Shores, Calif., are moving to Salt Lake City to kick off a new project and that the company would be hiring for "key positions."

"Some of the talent will come from EA's Salt Lake Studio," he said. "We are also looking for new talent from university programs as the project gains momentum, so we will have a great blend of people from different backgrounds."

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Pushbutton 2010 Summit

What » Keynote speeches, panel discussions and movies about digital media

When » March 9-10

Where » Rose Wagner Theater, 138 W. Broadway, Salt Lake City

Information » www.pushbuttonsummit.com

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