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Incubator nurtures local digital gaming Industry is on the rise in Manitoba

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On the cutting edge / Brian T.D.Bowman

WHAT cutting edge industry do you think is likely to experience exponential growth in the coming years? If you have played Guitar Heroes or read Carolin Vesely's recent *Free Press* article about how the Wii video game console is keeping seniors active, you probably guessed correctly that the digital gaming industry is on the rise.

Long gone are the days when video games were reserved for teenagers playing Pacman and Space Invaders. Today, the digital gaming industry has crept into nearly every segment of society.

Seniors are using the Wii console to bowl, play tennis and shoot a round of golf. Doctors are using digital games to help them hone their operating skills in a virtual environment. And, of course, entertainment games are being enjoyed by people of all ages.

According to the Entertainment Software Association of Canada, the average age of gamers in Canada is 39. Four out of 10 Canadian households own a video game console or handheld game system. Annual revenues for Canadian developers and publishers are estimated at \$1.5 billion to \$2 billion and Canada's video gaming industry employs 9,000 people, in virtually every province.

While there are many successful local gaming companies, Manitoba still has a ways to go to nurture a thriving industry. There are, however, encouraging signs and genuine reason for optimism here.

Canada's first interactive digital gaming business incubator, Fortune Cat Games Studio, had its official opening in downtown Winnipeg last month. It really is an exciting initiative that should assist in developing more local gaming companies to compete and succeed internationally.

Fortune Cat Games Studio is a not-for-profit organization that leverages public funds and private sector involvement to assist selected gaming companies to commercialize their products. The three companies being incubated at the studio have national and international gaming experts to mentor them in the development of their products.

The studio is designed to encourage collaboration and entrepreneurship by housing the companies under one roof to collaborate and share services such as rent and business counseling.

It should be said that the studio has been made possible with the financial support of the province, the federal government and the city. All levels of government should be commended for demonstrating a commitment to supporting the digital gaming industry.

Speaking at the official opening of the studio, Science, Technology, Energy & Mines Minister Jim Rondeau acknowledged that "we know a big part of Manitoba's economic future will be the development of cutting edge technology. The digital industry in Manitoba has already established its importance to our economy with more than 230 digital media companies in operation in the province, a growth rate of 1,850 per cent during the last three years."

Rondeau said, "Investing in the digital media sector translates into keeping highly skilled labour in

Manitoba." I agree with Rondeau and applaud his commitment to the local industry.

Through the collective efforts of the studio and of individual local businesses, let's hope that Manitoba's digital gamers become better positioned to share in the enormous global economic pie being created.

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