Siting inside a tiny lab in the back of a building on Market Street, the executive director of Drexel University's Entrepreneurial Game Studio lays out his conundrum. “I feel like we create this fantastic program at Drexel,” says Frank Lee. “But for the students, if they want to work in the game industry, they have to go somewhere else.”
In this case, the game industry doesn’t refer to grooming undergraduates so they may one day assume the mantle of blackjack dealer, but rather training students as video game developers for virtually any medium: a smartphone, a tablet, a computer. Lee, a Drexel professor since 2003, is perhaps best known as the mastermind behind the games of Pong and Tetris played on the Cira Centre’s LED-filled façade by hundreds of people. Tetris, the opening attraction at last year’s Philly Tech Week, garnered international press on its way to being named the world’s largest architectural display by Guinness World Records. Despite the acclaim, cities that dominate the U.S. gaming sector are places like San Francisco, Seattle, Los Angeles, New York City and Austin, where large, “triple-A” gaming studios — the Rockstar Games of the world — employ people by the thousands. Philadelphia, it so happens, is the only major U.S. city without such a studio, which means, according to Lee, his students have to leave if they want a job making video games. “My students go to Microsoft Studios. My students go to Zynga. They go to Insomniac, Dreamworks,” says Lee, who co-founded a Drexel game design program in 2008 with an undergraduate component currently ranked fourth in the nation by The Princeton Review.

So what might convince those students to stick around Philadelphia?

Cue the Entrepreneurial Game Studio (EGS). Founded in the middle of 2013 and kitted out with Apple desktop computers loaded with software, EGS is Drexel’s version of a video game studio and home base for the grand experiment Lee began last fall: Provide interested Drexel undergrads extracurricular courses in game design and development, walk them through the process of incorporating their own game companies, and give them up to 36 weeks to create a mobile video game, the sort people download on their smartphones that are simple enough for small teams on limited budgets to assemble. To help in the effort, Lee has $200,000 — an 18-month grant courtesy of the state’s Department of Community and Economic Development — to license software, purchase hardware and buy whatever else the student-teams might need to make their games. As of February, 33 Drexel undergrads, split among eight teams, are at work. Two have formed limited liability companies; five more are on the way.

“I want to seed lots of little, tiny mobile game companies throughout Philadelphia and cross my fingers and hope one will become Rovio,” says Lee, referring to the Finnish game studio that made Angry Birds, a money-maker. “If we’re able to create a very vibrant, mobile, independent game culture in Philadelphia, a larger company will naturally want to come here … But the core vision of [EGS] is to become a successful incubator where we’re cranking out startups of these game companies.”

Lee is betting that students who have formed companies and released games will stay in Philly after graduating. Over time, a big gaming studio might think there’s too much developer talent to pass up opening an office here, which would help employ more young graduates. Could the creator of the world’s largest video game actually turn Philly into a gaming hub?

“I’d love to stay in Philadelphia,” says 22-year-old Travis Chandler, a game interaction major at Drexel and one of eight EGS students who co-founded Sweet Roll Studio, a company that’s already created one mobile game, with another coming in three months. “But it’s a tough thing. We’re just happy to actually be able to make games.”

Well before Lee drew the attention of the globe by creating Godzilla-size versions of classic arcade games, he was focused on making Philadelphia a serious hub of the U.S. video gaming industry. In 2008, he joined up with the Videogame Growth Initiative (VGI), a local group that
appealed to state lawmakers to offer tax incentives for video game developers. At the time, growing Philadelphia’s gaming scene seemed as obvious as enticing a triple-A gaming studio into relocating. There was hope that a large studio would establish an office in Philadelphia, hire dozens of developers and serve as an anchor to a gaming community.

“There wasn’t much in the way of games in the Philly area,” says Tom Burdak, a 2012 Drexel graduate who took several of Lee’s game development classes and now works at 343 Industries, a video game subsidiary of Microsoft Studios, in Washington state.

While VGI eventually went defunct, the idea it supported lives on. Last month, Republican state Sen. Dominic Pileggi introduced a bill that would expand Pennsylvania’s existing film tax credit to include video game companies. If Pileggi’s legislation passes, Pennsylvania will follow in the footsteps of 21 other states that offer grants and tax rebates to video game companies. Whatever the merits of such tax credits, why states have enacted them is easy to understand: Video games are big business. According to a 2014 report from the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), the U.S. video gaming industry accounted for $15.4 billion in sales in 2013. ESA numbers from 2012 peg the money made by the video game industry in Pennsylvania at $83.1 million and the overall number of employees at 617. In Texas, where video game developers have the chance to snag a piece of $95 million in grants in fiscal year 2014-2015, there are more than 5,000 gaming-industry employees. A government-supported approach to growing Pennsylvania’s video game economy through tax incentives, however, appears unlikely to pass. It has already been tried twice: once by Pileggi during last year’s General Assembly, and once by Democratic state Sen. Daylin Leach in 2011.

“About two years ago, I had the realization that bringing an anchor company is out of my control,” Lee says. “So I wanted to do a bottom-up approach. It’s only possible because of a revolution in the industry, and that’s mobile.”

The introduction of Apple’s App Store in 2008, and the smartphone innovations that followed, changed the face of gaming overnight. Appealing mobile games could be conceived, developed and released by a single person. And mobile games make money: A Gartner report from fall 2013 projects the worldwide mobile gaming market will hit revenues of $22 billion this year. “The viability of the small studio is just going up,” says Tim Ambrogi, the 32-year-old co-founder of Final Form Games, one of 12 indie game studios that work out of the Philly Game Forge, an Old City co-working space for small video game companies just off North Third Street — or, as it’s now known, N3rd (“nerd”) Street.

It’s this market potential that Lee thinks his students can tap into, which is why the students who work out of the EGS have only one task: Make games and ship them to the iOS and Android app stores. The undergrads in the program right now represent two cohorts that applied and were accepted last fall and in January. Every week, all the students come together in an hour-long group meeting to talk shop — game aesthetics, what makes a game playable, different genres of games — and play-test other teams’ video games. At a recent meeting, students were play-testing Malevolence Inc., a two-player mobile game from Sweet Roll Studio where the object is to lay down a series of obstacles (a cartoonish, swinging saw is one) at each level for your opponent to dodge or fall victim to. Students also commit at least 10 hours a week to their EGS video game projects, which is work done on top of their regular schedule of classes, and agree to set aside 10 percent of anything their games make to reinvest back into the EGS program. Additionally, Drexel has plans to rent several desks at the Philly Game Forge, so that
students can work from Old City and begin meeting and talking with the developers already running game studios in Philly. “My hope is that we continue to crank out these student-founded companies. Not all will survive, and many will disband and students will go work for a big game company,” says Lee, who adds he’s “fine” with students going off and having success at big studios elsewhere, although his goal is that student-founded companies stay in Philly and get huge. “I feel like if one of the games from EGS students does relatively well — at least gets $100,000 — that could have a cascading effect of having more students interested in it.”

And if a game developed by an EGS company doesn’t grab the spotlight? The practical knowledge alone could lead to finding paying work in the city after graduating, which was Aaron Chapin’s experience. Although Chapin attended Drexel before EGS was set up, the year he and a group of his friends spent developing their own video game helped land him a job. “While I was going through that process I learned a lot and I met a lot of people, and that was one of the things that let me stay here, because of the connections that I made,” he says. He worked at Philly video game company Burst Online Entertainment before it folded, but the full-time gig gave the 26-year-old Chapin enough experience to cut it as a freelance game developer.

NOOBS: TYLER MYERS, SAVANNAH CARR, CARLY BILLINGS, AND COURTLAND WINSLOW TEST THE JAMESTOWN+ GAME DESIGNED BY THEIR FRIENDS AT THE PHILLY GAME FORGE CO-WORKING SPACE IN OLD CITY. (PHOTO BY HILLARY PETROZZIELLO)
Buried in Lee’s approach, though, is a broader question about the city’s existing, nascent gaming scene: To become a national gaming hub, does Philly need a big game studio, or just a bigger homegrown, independent gaming community of studios and developers?

“We need to foster the people who are already here,” says Will Stallwood, 31, one half of indie game studio and Philly Game Forge member Cipher Prime. “We think the fact that there is no triple-A studio here is what makes it a great place.”

When Stallwood and 30-year-old Dain Saint founded Cipher Prime in 2008, they were one of the first few gaming studios in a Philadelphia indie gaming community that had yet to take shape. Final Form Games’ Ambrogi worked in San Francisco for six years as a programmer on nine different video games at triple-A studios before moving back to Philadelphia in 2009. The move, he says, was prompted by a desire to be closer to family — Ambrogi is a Haverford College graduate — but it was a “terrible business decision.”

“We were disappointed that there was no games scene at all,” says Ambrogi, who runs Final Form Games with his brother.

Slowly, other video game studios began setting up. Ambrogi credits the establishment of the Philly Game Forge in 2013 as “the turning point for having a games scene” in Philadelphia. The
Game Forge now puts on an annual showcase of local studios’ video games. Those local studios, while few in number, represent well on the national stage.

This weekend, Game Forge companies will be displaying four video games at the PAX East independent games showcase in Boston, and one video game produced out of the Game Forge — Jason Marziani's *Soulfill* — became the first Philly-made game to win an award at the international IndieCade festival of independent video games. Of course, fostering the game studios that already exist in Philadelphia doesn’t mean there isn’t room for more small studios, or potentially even a big game studio, says Stallwood. It’s just that now, after nearly half a decade of building a gaming scene up from the grassroots, promoters of video games in Philadelphia are “coming around to the same point — a celebration of what's already here,” he says.

“If a big studio came in, it'd be interesting,” Chapin says. “That would probably help a lot with the brain drain in the city. But it’s not necessary. There's going to be a Philly gaming scene regardless of whether or not that happens.”

Perhaps a big studio would lend some quick national recognition, but there’s a case to be made that Philly already has that: Three Rings, a company that makes online games, is headquartered in San Francisco, owned by SEGA, and operates an office in Philadelphia. In any event, whether a big studio relocates to or opens an office in Philly is out of anyone’s control, which is exactly why Lee has recalibrated and evolved his approach to helping the city become a national hub for video games — by using the Entrepreneurial Game Studio as a mini-factory of sorts for student-created mobile gaming companies.

One could see Lee’s strategy in action when several of his students, including Sweet Roll Studio’s Chandler, attended a recent Dev Night. A Philly Game Forge event held every Thursday, it’s essentially an open house for local studios, game developers, and video game fanatics to drop into the Forge, work on their video games, meet fellow game designers, and play other people's video games, with the added perks of snacks and beer thrown in.

The last Thursday evening in February, the Game Forge was packed. More than 80 people had shown up. They passed out business cards and downed cans of Sly Fox beer. The main attraction was *Jamestown+*, super-sized and projected onto one of the Forge’s blank, white walls. It’s a four-player shooter game being released later this month for the PlayStation 4 console. And it was made by Final Form Games, a two-man shop.

A triple-A studio could employ hundreds in Philly. Or hundreds of smaller video game companies could lure a triple-A studio to Philly. But Lee, it seems, is looking for a third way: Make students into entrepreneurs who launch their own gaming studios.

“I almost want to grow our own,” he says. “That's the only thing where I feel like I can make a meaningful contribution.”

Editor's Note: This story was updated to make clear that Dev Night is a Philly Game Forge event.

Link to original article: http://citypaper.net/cover/a-drexel-professors-plan-to-turn-philadelphia-into-a-national-video-gaming-hub/