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*Pennsylvania is an ideal location for developers*

## **An alternative to California and Canada**

Munich (st) – With its first class universities, strong cohesion of the existing developer scene and significantly lower costs than in California – the US State of Pennsylvania, and in particular the cities of Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, wish to position themselves as a good place for games developers.

Photos: Fotolia

When you think about the games industry in North America, usually the mega publishers on the west coast spring to mind: around Los Angeles, the Bay Area near San Francisco and the high-tech metropolis of Seattle in Washington state. Besides these there are the massively state-subsidized gigantic studios in Canada and of course New York City, where, whatever industry is spoken of they are always in the mix. For a long time there was nothing else; at least not so far – because the politics of locations is no stranger to the USA. One US state where the games industry has discovered it could be a key industry is Pennsylvania.

By population as well as GDP, Pennsylvania occupies place six in the USA. If Pennsylvania were an independent country, many western nations would stack up behind Pennsylvania by international comparison. However, this alone would be unable to entice games firms to locate there in droves. Compared to Canada there are also no generous tax advantages, but Pennsylvania has one major plus: a trained workforce. With a focus on the technical disciplines of computer science and games development, some of the best universities of the USA are located in Pennsylvania: namely in the two largest cities of Pittsburgh and Philadelphia. These cities were also the destination of an international press tour organized by the state, financed by the private association Team Philadelphia Foundation and supported by the location marketing organizations of Pittsburgh Regional Alliance and Select Greater Philadelphia. First stop was Pittsburgh, a city that is not only famous for its twinning with Dortmund in the Ruhr Valley. Pittsburgh is nicknamed the “City of Steel” and until the 1970s it was the largest steel-producing city in the US. Pittsburgh, which has more bridges than Venice, impressively followed industrial decline by transforming into a modern high-tech location. Pittsburgh is best known for companies in the healthcare sector and for research.

Photo Caption: With their skyscrapers, the inner cities of Philadelphia (left and Pittsburgh above) may appear typically American at first glance, but there are many European influences beyond “downtown”

An important educational basis is provided by the numerous universities in the city, two of which are internationally renowned: the University of Pittsburgh and the Carnegie Mellon University (CMU). The former has almost exclusively to thank its reputation on the Medical Center. By contrast the CMU is one of the leading universities for computer science,

engineering and the fine arts. The CMU projects introduced to the journalists quickly made it clear why this is. Examples included ultra-high-definition photos ([www.gigapan.org](http://www.gigapan.org)), the rough digitization of books making use of captchas ([www.reCaptcha.net](http://www.reCaptcha.net)) and the interpretive analysis of pictures, which make it possible to determine the location they were taken and searches for similar pictures without text information, which is currently needed for picture searches, for example by Google. For the world of games, these scientific aspirations are interesting in combination with artistic aspects. Just such a bridge was created by the CMU in 1998 with the establishment of the Entertainment Technology Center (ETC). The idea of a convergence between technology and arts ensued, carried forward by two leading lights of the disciplines: Don Marinelli, Professor of Theatrical Arts, and a large contribution by Randy Pausch, Professor of Computer Science, who has since died of cancer. The course comprises 25 students per annum and the curriculum is exclusively project-oriented. The ETC works closely together on projects with private industry. Indeed, that is the reason why ETC spin-offs often result from former student projects.

ETC – Breeding ground for many spin-offs

In this way Etcetera Edutainment develops learning software for electricians, and Evil Genius Designs makes games that people waiting in a queue can play by cellular phone. Sim Ops Studios created an internet-based games development platform with “Wild Pockets”; Electric Owl Studios pegs a games terminal for kids, which can be used in hospitals and shopping malls, and Schell Games develops classic games for PCs, consoles, handhelds, internet and theme parks; the latter, because company founder Jesse Schell, who teaches at ETC, worked at Disney for many years. One indirect spin-off is SilverTree Media. “The key to our success is our company location in Pittsburgh,” said Tom Smith, Art Director and who together with his brothers, Ben and Nate, are joint founders of SilverTree. “The costs in Pittsburgh are significantly lower than, for example, on the west coast.” This is true for company costs as well as for employee costs of living. Many who graduate from the CMU and the ETC have no wish to relocate elsewhere – or they soon return. This was the case for Tom and Ben Smith, who began their studies in Pittsburgh and concluded them in California. Instead of starting up there, they decided to return to Pittsburgh to found their company. SilverTree now employs 25, and like many that are engaged in Serious Games in Pittsburgh, most have studied in Pittsburgh. As well as a continuous replenishment of qualified technicians and the economic conditions is further advantage of the location: cooperativeness. People know one another well in Pittsburgh, work only a stone’s throw away and when there is pressure from approaching milestones you can rely on your neighbor. That is why SilverTree has already worked as a sub-enterprise in a Schell Games project and vice versa. A similar spirit exists among the developers in Philadelphia, the largest city of Pennsylvania. Only 100 kilometers from New York and 250 kilometers from Washington, “Philly” is often put in the shade by its two large neighbors.

Photo caption: Alice Solomon and Bryan Evans from Select Greater Philadelphia

Photo caption: Cecilia Cagni and Philip Cynar from the Pittsburgh Regional Alliance

The “Penn” in “Philly” is the fourth best university in the USA

Unjustly as it happens, because the metropolitan region of Philadelphia has the fourth largest population in the USA. It was in Philadelphia that the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution were worked out. For its first ten years, Philadelphia was the capital city of the fledgling country, prior to the purpose-built capital in Washington. Just as in Pittsburgh, in Philadelphia education is written in large letters. “Penn”, the University of Pennsylvania, is one of the oldest and best universities in the country. In a recent ranking, the university founded by Benjamin Franklin received joint fourth place, together with Stanford and MIT, after Harvard, Princeton and Yale. It should come as no surprise that the Penn also has an interdisciplinary program that is of interest to games developers as well as to students of other creative disciplines in media studies. They are affiliated with the SIG Center for Computer Graphics, which is part of the School of Engineering, one of the oldest centers of learning for engineers in the USA. Even when you primarily focus on the project selection for Serious Games – including in cooperation with the Center for Autism Research – the SIG purposely seeks proximity to entertainment firms, in order to guarantee the closest possible training to practice. In this respect, the SIG can present a list of companies employing former students, which reads like a who’s who of the American entertainment world: Whether it is Activision or EA, Intel or Microsoft, Pixar, Disney or DreamWorks, ABC or NBC – majors in all entertainment branches have recourse to former Penn students. Apart from Penn, the press tour also included Drexel University, a private university specializing in engineering courses. Despite the monothematic orientation, Drexel is one of the top 100 US universities. In a special tabulation, the video games design course ranked third in the whole of North America.

#### Initiatives for games founded

Here too you can identify success stemming from an interdisciplinary approach. The “RePlay Lab“ is a joint project for subject areas computer science and media design. Probably the best-known student project is “Pulse 2”, a music game that sets a level for any given song. Another pioneering project is “Lazybrains” where a mobile device for measuring the brain’s electrical activity acts as an additional “input device.” Using brain power alone, Lazybrains makes it possible to open doors and move objects around.

Photo caption: Together we are strong! Four protagonists of VGI Philadelphia (from left): Mike Worth (Space Whale Studios), Grant Shonkwiler (AMI), Lou Tranchitella (freelance) and Frank Lee (Drexel Uni.)

Photo caption: Brothers Ben (left) and Tom Smith, founders of SilverTree Media

Photo caption: Jake Witherell, COO of Pittsburgh developers Schell Games, at the “Assembly Gong”

Photo caption: Michael Maas, President and CEO of AMI Entertainment

Other games projects concern themselves with augmented reality, behavior simulation and with location-based gaming. The “RePlay Lab” is run by Dr. Paul Diefenbach (media design) and Dr. Frank Lee (computer science). Lee is also the one who provides a bridge to the games industry. Besides his university duties, he is also engaged by VGI Philadelphia, an initiative for the furtherance of the local games industry, similar to the “GameArea” company in Hessen. The VGI Philly provides a dialog with other developers

and politics. The initiative also demands financial support and tax breaks. In Pennsylvania it is also realized that Canada's rise to prominence in games development stems from the financial investment it was provided. Even when appeals reach sympathetic ears there is still a long way to go before subsidy can be realized. Until then, other projects must be used to help the scene, such as the "Independent Hall" (or "Indy Hall" for short). "You are independent, but not alone", Geoff Di-Masi summarized the most important aspects of the project. In principle Indy Hall is a mixture of clubhouse and city offices for freelancers and start-ups in the media production sector.

"Indy Hall": half clubhouse, half city office

The "Indy-Hall" offers highly modern workspaces, backed up by a complete office infrastructure, including coffee machines, conference rooms and colleagues who bake birthday cakes. You gain access by membership, of which there are several alternatives. Whether you need only one day a week where additional days can be booked, or a full membership with a permanent workplace – the aim is to offer young talent affordable access to modern workstations and form a creative community. The open structure of "Indy Hall" encourages the exchange of business ideas. Often this generates project teams who go their separate ways after the work is completed, or – as has already happened many times – they found a new company together.

Of course, this open culture does not suit everyone "Those who do not want to get involved in joint-ventures or are unable to share for reasons of the secrecy of projects, also generally leave the "Indy Hall" fairly quickly," said DiMasi. Besides the creative and younger scene there are also naturally long-established games businesses. This becomes clear with a visit to the Philly-located branch of AMI Entertainment, a supplier of juke boxes, touch-screen displays and narrowcast TV. The AMI office in Pennsylvania is responsible for the Megatouch games systems of the company. Every year, over 4 billion games players worldwide play on the various devices. Around 80 of the 350 AMI employees worldwide are employed in Pennsylvania, among them Grant Shonkwiler, games programmer and designer. Together with his colleagues he develops games for Megatouch systems and adapts licensed titles from casual suppliers such as Bigfish. Shonkwiler is also one of the founders of VGI Philadelphia and recently became the chairman of the local IGDA Chapter. He explains the cohesion of the developer scene as due to the "Philly attitude". People want to get together, depend on one another and talk. Or as Shonkwiler put it: "We are sad when we are alone." The games industry is not really alone in Pittsburgh. It is no mistake that regional and federal location subsidies helped fund the press tour. "There is truly an unbelievable creativity in the industry, and we hope that we can convince many talented developers to come to Pennsylvania", said Matt Zieger, COO of Team Pennsylvania Foundation.

Photo caption: Emily Skopic and Aaron Tarnow from ETC spin-off Sim Ops Studios/Wild Pockets

Photo caption: Two of the initiators of "Indy Hall" in Philadelphia: Alex Hillmann (left) and Geoff DiMasi

Photo caption: Matt Zieger, COO of Team Pennsylvania Foundation