An Oregon game maker on what makes Oregon special

Peter Lund, of SuperGenius, and chair of the Oregon Games Organization lays out why he is bullish on Oregon’s place in the future of virtual and augmented reality.

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We’ve entered the age of holograms. Remember Tony Stark building his suit in “Iron Man,” or for those who remember life before 1990, the Enterprise holodeck?

We’re pretty much there, and Oregon’s virtual and mixed reality development scene is attracting a lot of attention. It’s easy to see why folks are looking around — the virtual and mixed reality markets are projected to be worth $150 billion by 2020.

We’re at the brink of the newest tech gold rush, and companies from video games to healthcare to the automotive industry are looking for the best places to develop for platforms like the Oculus Rift and Microsoft’s Hololens.

When entertaining business friends from out of town, I’m often asked what makes Oregon special. It’s not a rhetorical question — after visiting for a day or so, people realize that we’ve got something good going on here.
I answer by ticking off the normal talking points:

“People here are really collaborative!”
“It’s a craft community — people make things they’re proud of!”
Of Portland: “It’s a small town — everyone knows each other so there’s no room for jerks.”

All of that is true, but it doesn’t paint the whole picture. Yes, people here are friendly and dedicated. Yes, we play in our Cascadian wonderland and laugh in the face of rain. But why?

When I sat down to write, I reviewed my stock response. I still don’t have the answer, but I do have a better one. I think what makes us special is that we’re particularly good and conscientious builders.

Over the decades, Oregonians have painstakingly created a place where we want to live. We build with other people in mind, because we know a great community or product means that your friends, neighbors and customers are happy too.

We do this so much that we’ve changed the calculus of capitalism — from community planning meetings to conference room negotiations, I have time and again seen people and groups make decisions that seem, from a competition perspective, counterintuitive. Contacts are shared, business is referred, concessions are made, all because the participants know that the end result will be that much better.

We trust that good will to be returned, and it almost always is.

In my industry, we build worlds. Day after day, Oregon’s developers expertly transmute ideas into digital reality, from AAA video games to life-saving training simulations. The hardware platforms emerging in the virtual and mixed reality space are the most exciting tools we’ve ever seen, and Oregon is uniquely placed to develop for them.

Here’s why.
Oregon enjoys a unique development landscape. Most of our studios are independent, and their origin stories are often similar — companies founded by Bay Area refugees and migrants from the north escaping the Seattle Freeze. They came here to escape the vicious schedules of the large development houses to start companies focused on the important things — the craft of excellent engineering and beautiful design. Most of our studios pay the rent by selling their services to the big developers, and they’ve survived by being very good at delivering excellent product on time and on budget. We shift art styles and development environment as we move from project to project, so Oregon’s development community is particularly flexible and skilled.

Developing in Oregon is, on average, at least 20 percent cheaper than building the same product in Seattle or San Francisco. Labor incentives passed this session by the Oregon Legislature mean we can compete with heavily subsidized markets in places like Montreal and Texas. Quite simply, Oregon is the best development deal on the West Coast.

Our workforce pipeline is unique. For years we’ve worked with the K-12 system to universities to make sure that Oregon students can pursue careers in games and digital media. Last year, Microsoft offered a Hololens research and development grant. It was extremely competitive. The winners were: UC Berkeley, Carnegie Mellon, Dartmouth, Virginia Tech, and an Oregon team comprised of Clackamas Community College, Oregon Story Board and Intel. Let that sink in for a minute. Right now, Oregon is the only place in the world where you can learn to develop mixed reality applications on Hololens without being accepted to or paying tuition at a Tier 1 research institution. That’s a message that every developer worth her salt needs to hear.

In Douglas Adams’s classic “The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy” (if you haven’t read it, treat yourself) there is a legendary planet called Magrathea. The Magrateans had a unique skill — they built custom planets, and they were so good at it that they became the richest people in the galaxy (before their expensive product crashed the galactic economy).

Oregon is full of world builders too — some of the best around. We’re open
for business. And we promise not to bankrupt the galaxy.