

How NASA Launched Florida's **MASSIVE TECHNOLOGY BOOM**



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The technology miracle that is modern-day

Florida has deep roots in the aerospace and outer space industries of the 1960s. The gaming, software, augmented reality, and virtual reality companies that dot the Florida landscape owe everything to the likes of NASA and Lockheed Martin.

Though we're not flying to the moon (or beyond) any time soon, Florida's space and defense economy remains as strong as ever.

From Cape Canaveral's Space Coast to Orlando's National Cyber Range, the federal government contracts with Florida companies to keep the country safe from outer space to cyberspace, an effort amounting to approximately \$80 billion in annual spending and accounting for nearly 10 percent of the state's economy.

These industries, in turn, have spawned a broad range of new technology companies. Florida has become a hotbed of everything from artificial intelligence to computer-generated imagery.

"We all share a common DNA," says Daryl Holt,

vice president and head of worldwide operations for Maitland-based EA Sports. "That type of work grew the modeling, simulation, and training (MS&T) landscape and continually evolved with things like the creative landscape that comes from theme parks and gaming." According to Orlando's National Center for Simulation, around 30,000 people are currently employed in Florida in the MS&T field.

Electronic Arts played a critical role in developing Florida's modern day technological landscape. Founded as Tiburon Studios in 1994, EA has built a massive business with an array of popular video games led by the massively successful Madden Football franchise.

"In 2002 there were about 200 video game developers in Orlando," recalls Benjamin Noel, executive director of the Florida Interactive Entertainment Academy (FIEA) at the University of Central Florida (UCF). Today there are approximately 1,100, including 500 FIEA graduates.

But the tools acquired at UCF are applicable beyond gaming. "Obviously theme parks are using virtual reality, so the roller coasters don't need to have two acres of land," says Noel. "They just need a little bit of space, some hydraulics, and a cool video."

Augmented Reality arguably has even more upside, with startups like Plantation-based Magic Leap whipping the world into a frenzy over its in-development product that promises to project objects onto the everyday world.

Companies like Aventura-based Nearpod may make an even bigger dent with software that lets students interact with course material like never before. Founded five years ago, Nearpod boasts a classroom VR platform that nearly six million students have used and was first put to the test in Florida. One big reason Nearpod came to Florida was that the Miami-Dade school system was an early tech adopter. For instance, when Apple launched the iPad, some district schools started buying tablets for every student. "We were very lucky to be here," says Nearpod co-founder and CEO Guido Kovalskys. Earlier this year, seeking a better talent pool and a lower cost of doing business, Nearpod boldly moved its management team from Silicon Valley to Florida. "We know it's a risky one," says Kovalskys. "But we think it's the right one for us." ■

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