

Brock 2.0

The founders of FourGrounds Media are examples of Niagara's new entrepreneurs of interactive media.

By Samantha Craggs

If Mike Gillespie, Adrian Thiessen and Kristin Nater had wanted jobs in their fields five years ago, they would have had no choice but to be on the first bus out of Niagara.

Interactive media jobs for students with Film Studies degrees were scarce in Niagara, which has for generations had an economy rooted in manufacturing.

The trio is trained in the theoretical and technical side of film and video. Jobs using that knowledge have traditionally been in Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver, says Nater (BA '07), who is currently earning a master's in Film Studies and Popular Culture at Brock.

But that was before.

Last year, they founded FourGrounds Media, which does web video marketing, videography and film production from its headquarters in downtown St. Catharines. Their work has appeared on Silver City screens in Halton through their narrative ads for the Region's Clean Air Policy Campaign. They also produced a series of fire prevention videos for the Ontario Municipal Fire Prevention Officers' Association, Niagara division. It is the first campaign of its kind aimed at post-secondary students.

The company's success has been possible, they say, because of efforts to grow an interactive and new media sector in Niagara.

"It's been a matter of being in the right place at the right time with the right people," says Gillespie, a Brock student. "There's the potential for any area to do what Niagara is doing, but the Niagara region has specifically made a conscious effort to shift and gear toward this type of industry."

Brock has been at the forefront of that shift. In 2008, it helped form nGen, an interactive media business incubator with four flourishing tenants in its location at One St. Paul St. The incubator is a partnership between Brock, Interactive Ontario, the Niagara Economic Development Corporation, Niagara College, the City of St. Catharines, the Niagara



Photo: Bob Tymczynsyn

The founders of FourGrounds Media — from left, Mike Gillespie, Adrian Thiessen and Kristen Nater — say they exist in Niagara because of new efforts to make the area an interactive media hub.

Enterprise Agency and Silicon Knights, a St. Catharines game design company founded by Denis Dyack (BPhEd '90, BSc '90).

The incubator provides office space, guidance and support to four companies who network with each other daily. FourGrounds is an inaugural nGen

company, as is Furi Enterprises, a technology consulting company run by current Brock student Thomas Madej. Other tenants are Morro Images and Dragon Chess, which has John Bachynski (BA '03) and Andrew Cheeseman at the helm.

An inaugural nGen project also has a strong Brock link. A Brock team is developing a War of 1812 education game, which uses simulations, role-playing and strategy to teach students about Canadian history

and military conflict. The project is based on prototypes created by students in the Brock University Interactive Arts and Science Program.

The companies and projects are gaining steam. FourGrounds alone employs as many as 15 people for larger projects. Other nGen projects, like the Niagara College social entertainment site Noise in Niagara (noiseinniagara.com), show that Niagara has the makings of being the next Silicon Valley North, says Jeff Chesebrough (BA '98), nGen's

executive director.

The dream is not as unreachable as one might imagine. A 2007 feasibility study conducted by Millier Dickinson Blais Inc. shows that interactive media accounts for more than 3,000 businesses, 32,000 jobs and more than \$7 billion in gross revenues in Canada. More than 90 per cent of Ontario companies surveyed had the same or higher revenues from the year before. Fifty-five per cent of the revenue was generated by fee-

for-service activities, with the remainder derived by creating intellectual property. Twenty-seven per cent of those companies had trouble filling skilled employee positions, most notably programmers and creative designers.

"This shows that we have the components. We have the talent," Chesebrough says.

What makes Niagara special is "tapping into Brock and Niagara College, where there are competitive programs in the field," he said. "We have a lot of people pulling in the right direction."

The FourGrounds team is now among them. Thiessen, 23, is from Quispamsis, N.B. He has been business minded since he collected and resold golf balls that flew from a golf course near his house.

Gillespie, 27, produced a closed-circuit animated show for his school as a high school student in Unionville. Nater, 27, of Port Colborne, is a founder of Brock TV (brocktv.ca), an online television network in its fifth year. Gillespie is still Brock TV's executive director.

FourGrounds will stay in Niagara, Thiessen says.

"The opportunity is here right now to transition between the manufacturing industry and digital media technology," he says. "You don't need to be in a big city to operate in the area of digital communication."

FourGrounds received the first Nitsopoulos Family Entrepreneurship Award this year, an honour given by former trustee Angelo Nitsopoulos to recent Brock graduates starting businesses in Niagara. FourGrounds receives \$10,000 to support new business expenses and advice from Brock's Business Advisory Council.

The new award is just one more reason the interactive media industry will continue to grow in Niagara.

"We joke that here we are, three film students with an entrepreneurial business award," says Thiessen. "It's just one more check on the list of things we're trying to accomplish in this area."

"It's been a matter of being in the right place at the right time with the right people."

— Mike Gillespie



Photo: Bob Tymczynski

"There are a lot of start-ups here — a lot of young companies — so we're pulling in the right direction," says Jeff Chesebrough, Brock alumnus and executive director of the Niagara Interactive Media Generator (nGen).