

Keeping the well topped up

Innovation hub moves to quell concerns over a lack of new “creative tech” start-ups in the capital

Greg Hurrell

In December, Wellington hosted the Australasian premiere of *Avatar: Fire and Ash*, a film largely made in the capital.

Two universities run creative technology schools, and the city's gaming development industry is hot property.

But despite Wellington's strengths, some in the industry worry about a dearth of new “creative tech” start-ups coming through.

Wellington innovation hub Creative HQ is trying to address that by running a pre-accelerator programme for the creative tech sector.

The term “creative tech” can be fluid but it transcends disciplines across art, design, computing and writing, and encompasses film, music, and gaming.

Creative HQ's annual climate tech and fintech accelerator programmes have become a feature of New Zealand's start-up space. Now it has dipped a toe into creative technology. The first pre-accelerator included 11 people and wrapped up in late April.

Creative HQ head of marketing Chloe Narain said both Massey and Victoria universities had played a major part in getting it off the ground.

“It's a condensed programme designed to help founders at the idea stage validate, research and test their concepts, alongside a crash course in starting a business. Our main accelerators are longer, more intensive and focused on growth rather than getting started.”

Narain said they would evaluate its potential for a larger three-month programme along the lines of the climate and financial tech accelerators.

Tan Huynh is Creative HQ's senior innovation specialist. He said Wellington had a hotbed of creative tech companies, with some now in business for several decades. However, new ventures were thin on the ground.

Local game developer PikPok was founded nearly three decades ago, has more than 200 staff and has something like 500 million downloads of its games. Some of its staff had gone on to form their own companies.

“We need that ecosystem to be able to support the new wave of organisations,” Huynh said.

Those entrepreneurs could emerge from existing creative tech companies or from students graduating from Massey and VUW's creative programmes.

Huynh said it saw the need for a programme to turn ideas in someone's head into new ventures.

“When you ask why now, it's because we're not seeing enough of that.”

Huynh said last year's *Avatar* premiere showed the depth of talent in Wellington and was a reason for optimism.

Even then, director James Cameron warned against complacency.

As reported by RNZ, he said New Zealand needed more young people in training programmes to safeguard the continued success of its screen sector.



Massey College of Creative Arts students in one of the production suites.

Photo / Massey University

Wellington isn't short of training opportunities. The Massey University College of Creative Arts can trace its roots to 1886, when the Wellington School of Design opened.

More recently, Victoria University has opened its Miramar Creative Centre, offering postgraduate courses in live film-making, animation and film-focused music.

As Huynh suggested, there is a need to harness the talent emerging from that training in more directions.

Colm Kearney, Creative HQ general manager for the start-ups and tech sector, said Massey had some of the best post-production facilities in the country and an excellent sound studio. It also has a 4K cinema.

“They have the students in there doing these courses, the talent of the future. And in Wellington, you have amazing companies that these folks

3D-stylised animation, and that's what we wanted to bring here,” Parker said.

The company is also creating its own IP, starting with animation *Kyōryū*. It's set in a post-apocalyptic Japan where “genetically re-engineered dinosaurs have survived humans and become the dominant species”.

“We came together to create Floating Rock because we wanted to create our own content. At the time [nobody] was hiring, so we're like, why not hire ourselves and see what happens?”

It's one thing to go from being a scientist to running a business. It's probably harder to go from making creative content to worrying about payroll and filing GST returns. Parker said juggling both roles had led her close to burnout and she had to

said the students' real strength was their technical and creative abilities. That isn't as obvious as it might seem.

“I think the world has led us to believe that those are two different types of people, those are two different brains. But science is creative, science is problem-solving, [and] technology is problem-solving. These things are inherently creative.”

Along the way, subject divisions were blurring.

“Our curriculum is evolving to make it easier to take a coding class and a painting class at the same time and to have the same lecturer teach this and that. It's all leading to what role can people with these kinds of creative skill sets play in society?”

“We're problem-solvers and thinkers, and we don't really care if we're using a pencil or paint or a computer to do that.”

it's super difficult to do. Floating Rock is an outlier. They are very tenacious and they just did it.”

There were a few small studios around but there could be more that generated original IP for export.

“That's the big picture. I want to see a culture of independent filmmaking and creator culture where we start to develop an alumni base.”

Instead, the centre's best graduates went into the service sector, locking up that talent in the big players.

Syed pointed to places such as France and the US, where creatives at Disney and DreamWorks taught university classes in the evening.

“That knowledge is constantly disseminated. We need that to start happening [here].”

(Some local creative tech workers do teach part-time at the Massey school.)

Both Johnson and Syed said the sector suffered from gaps in available funding, but they had different takes on the issue.

Johnson said the college tended to fall between two stools.

“When you're going for the more specific science tech, you're not quite enough of an engineer to be funded as an engineer.”

On the other hand, organisations such as Creative NZ were set up to fund the creative output of the technology, rather than the technology or systems themselves. Neither funding model was wrong, but some new thinking could drive innovation in creative tech, she said.

Syed said NZ On Air and Creative NZ were both geared towards mid- and later-career artists.

“Early career people have no choice but to plug into the service sector or leave the country.”

Coming from California, she had seen what happens when too much money is thrown around the education system. “That leads to obvious levels of corruption. Our problem is the opposite. We don't have enough money, and therefore, our innovation is stymied. We have this weird culture where industry doesn't give to education.”

Syed wanted New Zealand's film festivals to include a student category and was trying to convince film societies to screen student films.

“You get some really intelligent, usually young people. They're working on a thing but they're not always considering entrepreneurship.”

Colm Kearney, Creative HQ

can go into and work in.”

The new creative tech pre-accelerator programme aimed to encourage entrepreneurship by taking ideas and building new businesses. That depended on connecting people and mashing together the creative, technical and entrepreneurial skills out there.

“You get some really intelligent, usually young people. They're working on a thing but they're not always considering entrepreneurship.”

“The ambition here is, you can actually get people over that hurdle from like, I'm coding something in my venture' into 'actually I'm going to build a business,’” Kearney said.

Stephanie Parker is the Canadian-born co-founder of Floating Rock, an animation and video effects studio. Set up in 2020, it's considered one of Wellington's creative tech success stories, producing content for film, advertising and gaming.

“Wellington's been quite good for us because there is not a lot of

concentrate on the business.

“I had always been an animator, it's something I'm quite passionate about. I was a bit lost, because what am I if I'm not an animator?”

That existential crisis seems to be over.

“I'm a proud co-founder of a really cool little studio that's creating ripples of excitement globally.”

Sitting on a hill in Wellington's former Dominion Museum, Massey University's College of Creative Arts defies any brief summary. It includes screen arts, music and technology (together), fine arts, fashion and photography.

Its design school, which includes industrial design, is ranked second in Asia Pacific in the international Red Dot Design ranking for the third year in a row.

The college is a place where music is composed, musical instruments are designed and students learn how to write software code for music technology.

Head of school Bridget Johnson