



UBISOFT'S GWEN HELIOU ON HIS NEW LIFE IN HALIFAX

By Jennifer Wood | Photographs by Tyler Warren Ellis

NOVA SCOTIA'S DIGITAL GAMING INDUSTRY IS BOOMING RIGHT NOW, ATTRACTING TO THE PROVINCE NOT ONLY A YOUNGER WORKFORCE BUT ALSO SOME OF THE MOST EXPERIENCED TALENTS GLOBALLY.

Born in France, Gwen Heliou has worked for video game empire Ubisoft (which owns *Assassin's Creed*, *Far Cry* and more) for over a decade. He has lived in Montreal, Madrid and Barcelona and is a respected leader in the industry.

In 2015, Gwen moved to Nova Scotia to serve as studio manager for the new Ubisoft Halifax, a mobile game studio. Ubisoft's mobile division is growing and is responsible for some of the company's most successful games to date. *South Park Phone Destroyer*, *Hungry Shark World* and *Hungry Shark Evolution* have been downloaded for play over three hundred million times worldwide. Also, the Ketchapp game series has been downloaded more than 1.25 billion times.

In Nova Scotia, gaming companies are finding the space, freedom and flexibility to create innovative approaches and products, as illustrated by the growth of Ubisoft's 50-strong team since 2015. *The Maritime Edit's* Senior Editor met with Gwen at Ubisoft's stunning Halifax premises to talk about his career and his amazing new life in Nova Scotia.

THE MARITIME EDIT: How does Ubisoft collaborate with other studios in Nova Scotia?

GWEN HELIOU: The Interactive Society of Nova Scotia was created to foster collaboration between the studios located here. We act as a resource for one another to discuss topics like immigration, government programs and human resources.

THE MARITIME EDIT: What advice would you give to someone wishing to start or continue their career in Nova Scotia?

GWEN HELIOU: Young professionals are often willing to forgo their personal lives to focus on their careers, which isn't a healthy thing. Establishing a positive work-life balance early on is good practice and is more possible in collaborative working environments. At Ubisoft we have an award-winning co-op program where our students receive world-class training, and we are often able to offer permanent employment following internships. The opportunities for real experience in a safe and expressive setting are unparalleled. Our environment is appealing to many prospective recruits: it's fancy, it's creative, it's technical. We also hire highly trained professionals, which is an alluring prospect for people who want to launch or further their career, and the gaming industry is booming.

THE MARITIME EDIT: How about those starting a business here?

GWEN HELIOU: Occupancy rates are lower than Toronto and Vancouver, translating to lower costs and more flexibility for businesses looking to establish themselves or grow here. Government programs makes hiring young, creative talent a practical option. It's a no-brainer, really.

We've been able to hire professionals entering the gaming market and train them quickly, which makes my role as a business developer easier. We also have access to many skilled young professionals and talent located here, and we also recruit from abroad. I struggle to find the same appeal elsewhere.

OUR VERY FAVOURABLE LOCATION IN NOVA SCOTIA IS THE ENVY OF OTHER MANAGING DIRECTORS AT UBISOFT.

We spend less time struggling with some of the tedious aspects of operations, which gives us more time to be creative and do what we do best — develop stellar games.

THE MARITIME EDIT: Where are you living?

GWEN HELIOU: We live in the city and we love it — it's a 10-minute bike ride to work! I've learned that you can choose where you want to live based on your lifestyle, and you can purchase a home here. This type of freedom is what we convey when hiring people from abroad or other provinces. Home ownership or attractive rental space is out of reach for many who live in busier cities like Toronto or even Montreal. But buying a home here is a viable option; it is so easy. We have realized that recruits who want or have a family and want to be homeowners are a good fit. You can have a fantastic standard of living here, and the outdoor and active options are everywhere. While these attributes can be especially attractive to families, we still have incredible young talent joining us all the time.

NSBI WORKS WITH PEOPLE LIKE GWEN, AT GAME-CHANGING COMPANIES LIKE UBISOFT, TO REALIZE THE BENEFITS OF WORKING, LIVING, AND PLAYING IN NOVA SCOTIA.

THE MARITIME EDIT: How do you spend your time when you are not developing the next mobile game or overseeing Ubisoft's Halifax operations?

GWEN HELIOU: In Nova Scotia kids can live and play outdoors. It has been a refreshing transition. My wife, the kids and I enjoy canoeing, camping, skiing, snowboarding and cycling. The first time we took our kids cycling on the Salt Marsh Trail they told us it was the best day of their lives! I am also a huge fan of the restaurants Ratinaud (which pays a fantastic homage to my French roots) and EDNA.

THE MARITIME EDIT: Have you found any noticeable differences in the professional culture in Nova Scotia compared to other cities where you have worked?

GWEN HELIOU: The willingness to collaborate is obvious, which is a Canadian way of operating and doing business. Recruiters are always scouting for creative people who can perform well in a team-focused environment; it's a given that teamwork and collaboration accomplish greater results. Some games require huge teams, and that involves extensive coordination. Creativity and teamwork are the foundation of our success, and this is what makes our Canadian studios so attractive.



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