

Fun and Games in FUKUOKA

The city of Fukuoka, where many game companies are based, aspires to become a Mecca for the global game industry.

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THE Japanese city of Fukuoka has been getting a lot of attention recently. Fukuoka ranked seventh in a survey of the “World’s Top 25 Most Livable Cities” published in the June 2016 edition of the British information magazine *MONOCLE* (Tokyo ranked first, followed by Berlin in second place.) Enchanted by the laid back lifestyle, many people relocate to Fukuoka. As the average age among Japanese people rises, city, town, and village populations continue to fall. Yet the nation’s 2015 census showed that Fukuoka’s population grew by 5.1% between 2010 and 2015, the fastest pace of any major Japanese city. Fukuoka’s population now exceeds 1.5 million, making it Japan’s fifth largest city by population.

In addition to its growing population, Fukuoka can boast a rising number of entrepreneurs. A report by the Fukuoka Asian Urban Research Center released in July of this year found that the ratio of new to existing businesses (the startup ratio) for the city grew by about 7%, the fastest pace among major Japanese cities. In this increasingly dynamic business environment, one sector experiencing exceptional growth in recent years has been the game industry.

“Fukuoka is a fairly stress-free community,” says Akihiro Hino, president and CEO of LEVEL-5 Inc. “City services are close by, so it’s easy to work and live here. You don’t have to stand for hours on a crowded commuter train to get to work. It’s only a short way from the city center to the airport. There are lots of things to do, and the food is good. It’s basically the ideal place for creative work.”

Launched in Fukuoka in 1998, LEVEL-5 is a typical Japanese game company with many popular video



Akihiro Hino, president and CEO of LEVEL-5 Inc. with characters from “YO-KAI WATCH.”
Photo: Yuichi Itabashi

games on the market. One example is the “YO-KAI WATCH” series. Since its release, cumulative total domestic and overseas shipments of the video game have topped 13.5 million units (including the download version), and in Japan the product has become a social sensation with an animated TV show, comic books, movies, and toys.

In addition to LEVEL-5, many other game makers are based in Fukuoka producing numerous hit titles. These companies include Ganbarion, creator of “One Piece: Unlimited Adventure,” and CyberConnect2, creator of “Naruto Shippuden: Ultimate Ninja.” As game companies in Fukuoka continue to garner critical and commercial acclaim, many game industry professionals have migrated to the city. About half of the 280 employees working at LEVEL-5’s headquarters are from outside Fukuoka Prefecture or the Kyushu region.

One body playing a major role in furthering the Fukuoka game industry is the Fukuoka Game Industry Promotion Agency, where Hino serves as chairman. The Agency was founded in 2006 by the

Fukuoka City Government, Kyushu University, and Game Factory's Friendship (GFF), an association comprised mainly of Fukuoka's game companies. The Agency engages in various job training and recruiting activities, such as sponsoring job fairs for jobseekers hoping to work in the game industry, arranging internships, and holding game contests.

"Recently, government officers have gained a much better understanding of the game industry, which is now publicly recognized as an important sector," says Hino. "The Fukuoka game industry is still developing. I encourage creators to develop ever more interesting games that people all over the world can enjoy."

Japanese companies have created a variety of games that have gained popularity worldwide. For example, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe created quite a stir after appearing at the closing ceremony of the Rio de Janeiro Olympics this summer dressed as the game character Mario from "Super Mario Brothers."

and the game "Pokémon GO," based on the "Pokémon" series, is creating a sensation worldwide. Last year LEVEL-5 established LEVEL-5 abby in the United States as a base for cross-media development overseas. In this context, YO-KAI WATCH characters are now as popular among elementary school children in South Korea and European countries like France and Spain, as they are in Japan. Localized versions of the animated TV show are now broadcast in more than a hundred countries.

"We didn't create YO-KAI WATCH with overseas markets in mind. It just seems that people around the world have become enamored of the kind of supernatural beings or Yo-kai that are unique to Japanese culture," says Hino. "Like Disney, our aim is always to create products that will become popular among people all over the world. We also hope to ensure that Fukuoka will become the Hollywood of the game industry, a place where game specialists gather from all over the world." 



"YO-KAI WATCH" ©LEVEL-5/WVP