

THE Splash

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The face of new technology

Visionary CEO Luke Richey of
Liberty Lake's Gravity Jack plans to
change the way you view the world.

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Making leaps and bounds

Liberty Lake startup rises with new technology

By Kelly Moore
SPLASH STAFF WRITER

Through a new technology spearheaded by Liberty Lake startup Gravity Jack, the company's leaders say one day your car windshield will be just a big heads-up display, on which virtual street signs and directions pop up.

"It may seem futuristic, but that future is right around the corner," COO Mitch Williams said.

The young firm strives to be a one-stop shop for its clients — designing websites and apps, writing software, consulting on high technology for businesses and offering full-service network solutions. However, the heart of the company hinges on augmented reality (AR). The website explains it as "viewing the world in an enhanced way."

In the two years since its inception, Gravity Jack has grown from its five founding members into a multi-million dollar concern with 40 employees.

The brainchild of a local entrepreneur, co-founder and CEO Luke Richey, competes in the high-tech business sector for recruits from around the world making strides in new product development.

"I've been developing software since I was a kid, and I've been an entrepreneur since kindergarten," Richey said. "I love business and technology and have a passion about startups."

Following school at Eastern Washington University (where he studied mathematics, business and computer science), Richey started Creation Software Inc., where he worked on projects for clients like IBM, Hewlett-Packard, NASDAQ and NASA. From there, he moved on to start The Pacific Index, PC Open and then Tometa Software Inc. All these led to the birth of Gravity Jack in early November 2009.

"I had just finished my contract at a company that had acquired one of my startups and wanted to do something big," Richey said. "This was the biggest thing I could come up with within a two-week period."

The tip of an iceberg

Richey said he had a clear vision of augmented reality as the cornerstone of future computing but didn't fully grasp the breadth of his own startup.

"I still can't fully grasp how things have



SPLASH PHOTO BY KELLY MOORE

Employees in the tight Gravity Jack office provide client services designing websites and apps, writing software, and offering full-service network solutions — all while further developing Augmented Reality software. The company plans to triple its office space by the end of the month.

taken off because the growth has been staggering. ... Right now, we are just seeing the tip of an iceberg," he said.

Williams explained AR as overlaying an object, video or data into a scene viewed in real time from a smart phone or any mobile computing device with a camera. The device is used to scan symbols, similar in function to the square quick-response (QR) codes that are increasingly found on advertisements and can be scanned to bring up a website or other information.

In augmented reality, those codes are symbols called fiduciary codes. When scanned, an interactive feature pops on screen. When the code on the back of Richey's business card is scanned, a little 3-D version of the company founder pops up and walks around on the screen.

"Since we're doing augmented reality, we have a lot of people wanting to come work for us since it's a new technology and not very known around other places," Williams said. "We've looked outside of the Spokane area and, yeah, we've definitely collected some great minds."

As an example, Williams mentioned the

ON THE COVER

SUBMITTED PHOTO

Gravity Jack co-founder and CEO Luke Richey launched the company in 2009 in a drive to take his entrepreneurial efforts to the next level. Growth has since elevated operations to a multi-million dollar concern with 40 employees.

director of development holds a doctorate in computational astrophysics.

With few competitors worldwide, Gravity Jack is paving the road for the future of its business sector as it goes. In Gravity Jack's early days, Richey said his biggest hurdle was getting people to grasp the vision of technology that didn't exist yet.

Now his team is developing beyond fiduciary codes to recognize natural features like faces. Clients can watch a demo where an iPad recognizes a specific picture of Lady Gaga and immediately pulls up her music video on screen.

While the development team at Gravity Jack works to fine-tune AR capabilities, Williams said researchers are currently working to develop contacts or glasses compatible with the technology.

"We are in front of people I never thought I would meet and blowing their minds with the first phase of our technology — and they haven't even seen the cool stuff yet," Richey said.

All that and a bag of potato chips

While the Gravity Jack culture has at-

Local heritage keeps Gravity Jack rooted

Gravity Jack Co-Founder and Director of Sales Terry Hoy said a guiding factor in the business is keeping it local.

While the many recruits come from around the world, co-founder and CEO Luke Richey is a 5-year resident of Liberty Lake. His family fell in love with idea of lake living after a visit to McCall, Idaho and 30 days later they had a house on the lake.

"It just makes sense for us to be in Liberty Lake," said COO Mitch Williams, smiling. "This is the area, and technology is here. This building alone has dark fiber running into it. We definitely wanted to keep it in this area, and we've been able to do that so far."

Williams grew up in Liberty Lake, and is the son of Telect CEO Wayne Williams, whom Richey calls a mentor. The Williams family history in the high-tech business sector goes back another generation to Bill and Judi Williams, who founded Telect, a telecommunications equipment manufacturer.

As Gravity Jack expands, Mitch Williams said they may eventually branch out to additional locations, but headquarters will always be in Liberty Lake.

"I never plan to leave," Richey said. "Liberty Lake is the best place to live on the planet — you just need a trip to Maui in February to offset winter."

tracted big-time talent, company leaders insist the employees don't come with egos to match.

"Everybody enjoys each other and we all have a great time together, yet everyone is there to work," Williams said. "We've been fortunate not to hire any prima donnas as far as thinking that they're all that and a bag of potato chips. We've got people that are at a genius level and not treating you any different than they are. They speak in terms you can understand."

Richey said the business culture at Gravity Jack is attributed to a unique balance of chemistry, culture and communication.

"I have worked hard to make those cornerstones of our company culture," Richey said. "The result is we have some of the brightest minds in the world working with us that proudly call themselves nerds."

Typically, the packed office is quiet with programmers plugged into headphones while working, but in the blur of business growth and groundbreaking developments, they still find time to have fun.

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The group celebrated the company's second birthday Nov. 1 in true AR-style. The cake prompted two candles to pop up when scanned with an iPad, and the founders proceeded to literally blow out the virtual candles on the screen.

Vice President and Director of Sales Terry Hoy also said Richey's love for all things Marvel Comics gets everyone in the office a day off anytime a new action hero movie comes out. The whole gang fieldtrips to the theater, then winds down with drinks and hot wings.

Richey said new hires routinely send him thank you e-mails mentioning they had no idea how meaningful and fun their work would be.

And when they aren't working, they don't slow down either. Richey holds a membership with the United States Parachute Association and the American Motorcyclist

Association. He also counts snowboarding and rock climbing as hobbies, and pretty much anything else that involves gravity or speed.

"As long as I have known I would be a businessman, I also knew I loved adrenaline, and my wrecked big wheel can attest to that," Richey said.

Hoy, also a Gravity Jack co-founder, bills himself as the hardest working bass player in show business and says he "rocks like there's no tomorrow" in a local band.

Both Richey and Hoy, close-knit friends as well as business partners, also say they find balance and guidance through their shared Christian faith.

"All you have to do is talk to anyone at our company, and the passion for what we are doing bleeds through," Richey said. "Our team is passionate and fervent about life, about their beliefs and work."

A vision for the future

When the company first moved into

space at Liberty Lake's Tierpoint Building, the few employees shared about 400 square feet.

"I said I can keep the lights on and the doors open as long as (Richey) had the vision," Hoy said.

Hoy said his goal now is to top \$100 million annual revenue in the coming years.

And the space has expanded right along with revenues. The company currently crams into 2,000 square feet, and by the end of the month they'll be moved to a larger 6,000-square-foot space nearby, at 23505 E. Appleway.

The move includes an overhauled renovation of the available space in the office building. The plan is to continue to keep all aspects of the business working closely together with the entire development floor, the administrative offices and a conference room all under one roof.

In the meantime, the company is working

harder than ever to keep up with its ever-expanding team.

"As far as growing pains go, you feel them, but I feel like we've prepared ourselves as well as we can," Williams said. "We see the consistent growth and don't really see an end to it, so we're always planning out for the next 6 to 10 months."

Amidst the hectic growth, Richey maintains a solid vision for his company's role in the future of AR.

"My vision for the company cross correlates with a vision for society in maintaining an augmented reality world that keeps nefarious things like porn out," Richey said. "In order to have that level of control, we need users — lots of them — and we have a plan to get there. Now that we have product, the execution of that plan is in process."

Basically, he said, he and his team are ready to change the way people view the world.