

Ep.2.37 - Josh Freeney

Mon, Oct 17, 2022 10:12AM 26:24

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

michigan, people, game, technology, museum, muskegon, yeti, students, grand rapids public, companies, bit, called, metaverse, talent, tools, leveraging, big, thinking, learning, created

SPEAKERS

Announcer, Ed Clemente, Josh Freeney

- A** Announcer 00:01
Welcome to The Michigan Opportunity, an economic development podcast featuring candid conversations with business leaders across Michigan. You'll hear firsthand accounts from Michigan business leaders and innovators about how the state is driving job growth and business investment, supporting a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem, building vibrant communities and helping to attract and retain one of the most diverse and significant workforces in the nation.
- E** Ed Clemente 00:29
Hello, I'm your host today Ed Clemente, and we're fortunate to have Josh Freeney, he's partner, Yeti CGA. Welcome to the show, Josh.
- J** Josh Freeney 00:37
Hi, thanks for having me.
- E** Ed Clemente 00:38
Oh, my pleasure, in fact, I come to you actually, through a recommendation of a previous guest, Dale Robertson, who you mentioned a little bit more from, I actually should say when we had him on before for the Grand Rapids Public Museum. But also I should mention, too, that another David Eisler, former president of Ferris State, also recommended you as well. So anyway, welcome to the show, Josh.
- J** Josh Freeney 01:04
Thank you. Thank you.

E

Ed Clemente 01:05

It's alright, you come with good pedigree already. So it's, and you're like a lot of sort of entrepreneurs we've had on the show previously, because it's really hard to define exactly everything you do sometimes. And that, seems like that's part of the challenge of when you're involved in so much gig economy kind of things. You're doing a lot of different things. But what do you kind of tell people if you meet him at an event for the first time and they don't know much about you?

J

Josh Freaney 01:34

Well, I always say I accidentally ended up with a company, because I was actually a teacher. So I was a teacher who was doing some advising at Ferris State. And I was noticing that some students were needing some extra assistance, kind of making that bridge from the academic side over into the marketplace. And so we created an after school program called Yeti that kind of has gotten out of hand over the last 12 years. So basically, that's the story, helping kids get jobs.

E

Ed Clemente 02:02

And we'll get into a little bit more about sort of hard stuff you're doing a little bit more but, let's talk a little bit about your background. You're talking to us from Grand Rapids right now, correct? [Yeah, that's correct.] And did you grow up there where you from originally?

J

Josh Freaney 02:15

Actually, I grew up in Muskegon and moved to Grand Rapids right around junior high, and I've been here ever since. At Ferris what did you teach? So I was teaching digital animation in game design, because I knew how to build game engines from scratch, which was a really weird skill set, you know, 20 years ago.

E

Ed Clemente 02:33

Yeah. And I know you say that as if everybody was into it but I think that that is so fascinating, that, you know, at an institution, like you don't really think of universities as being that much into it. But obviously, they are right, nowadays.

J

Josh Freaney 02:49

Oh, yeah. They were they were pretty cutting edge at the time because it was it was it was kind of new. I think it's a lot more commonplace. Now in game engines, is a specific type of technology usually thought of, to make video games, but now it's being used for healthcare,

defense, even in industry, like when we're when we're hearing terms like digital twin, a lot of those things are built with game engines.

E

Ed Clemente 03:11

Is that the same as modeling or is that different?

J

Josh Freaney 03:14

Its similar actually. A lot of a lot of models, so when you're thinking of like artistic modeling, those assets would be created outside of the game engine and then brought in to the game engine. But when you're thinking of system modeling, that modeling a lot of times is done in the game engine. And many of the CAD tools and really exciting kind of design products that are used out there by a lot of Michigan companies have their roots in game engine technology.

E

Ed Clemente 03:39

So this sounds dumb, because I'm not much of a gamer, but when you say game, you're using it almost more as a verb necessarily than a noun, right? Like, it's not like you're actually there playing games, it's just the sort of like format that people have learned how to extrapolate sort of like into the metaverse or whatever, right?

J

Josh Freaney 04:00

Yeah, you're exactly right. I always tell the story of the first two gentlemen who were were making, ended up making a video game, we all call it Tennis for Two, it was Pong, right? It didn't really become a game until the one guy beat the other guy. And then he stood up and left the room because he got mad. So game is a verb. And I've heard it I prefer to think of it as it's kind of a technology construct that lets you integrate a lot of really complicated things together. It's pretty easy to glue two things together. But if you need to glue 20 things together, a game engine's pretty good glue. And if you really think of the word game as being game theory, or how people make decisions, this is why this game technology or game theory technology has invaded so many critical infrastructure points in society like medicine, like defense, like manufacturing.

E

Ed Clemente 04:51

You know, this is once again, I'm not an expert in your field, but it sort of reminds me of like NASA, where NASA was primarily meant to be a way to get to the moon or space. But all the other side industries that it created along the way, have actually spawned other industries and actually complemented existing fields too, right?

J

Josh Freaney 05:13

Yeah, that's totally right. For some reason, as humans, when we try to do really hard stuff, sometimes really exciting technologies come out the side. A perfectly good example is like Slack, which is a tool that a lot of businesses use now. That was actually a game studio attempting to make a video game and the chat capability in that video game was so good that they started commercializing it.

E Ed Clemente 05:34

Yeah, and in fact, why don't you tell people, Slack is sort of huge and I don't know much about it, but I hear it all the time. Kind of what is like the definition of Slack what the company does.

J Josh Freaney 05:44

So Slack is a real time communication tool, kind of like what you would do when you're when you're chatting or SMS over your phone. But it's really designed to let teams inside of a company work together. So other variations is like Microsoft Teams, doing some of these other pieces, but it's really more text base, and you're able to send media to each other. I think especially over the last two years, a lot of hybrid or remote companies are leveraging tools like this to keep productivity high.

E Ed Clemente 06:10

So it has much better graphic capacity, right?

J Josh Freaney 06:13

Well, it's more about conversation tracking, and then the but the ability to embed media like you know, HD video and audio and share images back and fort. It lets you work like you're in the same room, even when you're at a distance.

E Ed Clemente 06:26

Now, I gotta make sure I don't go too far down this rabbit hole, but I love this stuff. Ah, so by the way, our engineer, Kyle, you just met, he also is a graduate of Ferris and so am I. So we're sort of fired up about your Ferris connections. And what sort of, is there anything else, like how did you then the sort of the Yeti thing came out? We understood how it came out of students, but then now you've morphed sort of into the Grand Rapids Public Museum, so is that a separate thing altogether?

J Josh Freaney 07:01

So the real high level story there is I don't think I paid myself for the first three years of Yeti because it was really the resources were going towards students. And we were working with a department head there at the time named Ward, who's also my partner, now at Yeti CGI. And

he, he was able to leverage his kind of Rolodex and we ended up pulling in some big customers. So early on, we were working on some of the big games at the time with Zynga, like Farmville, a lot of those things that really launched Facebook. So for the first few years, we didn't really pay attention to a lot of things. We're just getting students kind of paid work. About five years in, though some weird stuff started to happen that some of those students that went out into the world, different parts of Michigan, but also out to the coasts, they started coming back. So we kind of call those our ringers and they would, they would show back up because they wanted to live in Michigan, they had family back here, they really appreciated everything that they got from an environment here. And at that point in time, we started doing some more serious projects. And it was closely around that time that we did a pretty serious R&D project with Google around AR. It was it was a multi-year engagement and it was kind of like the most cutting edge stuff on the planet. And we had gotten that gig because a year before we had done the ViewMaster product with Mattel and National Geographic and that was also partnered with Google. This was before they had Google Cardboard, if you remember the old, like VR headsets that you'd put your phone into. So imagine trying to do VR on like an iPhone five. And you know, for kids, it was it was a pretty complicated time. And when what happened is we kind of made a name for ourselves in this new immersive content field, and started getting calls from all over the world. And what we found out, is right here in West Michigan, we really had some of the leaders in this field and had some talent that was highly sought after from a global standpoint. And kind of the rest was history. So how it leads to the museum is as we were figuring some of this stuff out, a lot of tools and processes were created along the way. And that got folded out into a nonprofit called Casual Simulation and open sourced because all those tools, we felt like since they were built by Michigan students, they should be made available to everyone for free and and so now, those tools are being leveraged in partnership with organizations like the Grand Rapids Public Museum primarily, to really get them into the hands of as many students as possible.

E

Ed Clemente 09:31

Yeah, and I mean, this is just for my benefit, but when you say AR that's augmented reality, and when you say VR, that's virtual reality.

J

Josh Freaney 09:40

Yeah, you got it. And then in the layman's version of that is virtual reality is going to the internet and augmented reality is bringing the internet into the room with you.

E

Ed Clemente 09:49

So you create your own avatar kind of thing.

J

Josh Freaney 09:52

That's right, you're kind of adding stuff to the room around you or you're teleporting yourself into some some other room that that is totally virtual.

A

Announcer 10:01

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E

Ed Clemente 10:17

Why don't you break down a little bit more about what you're doing with the museum? Because I know when we had Dale on, he talked a little bit about how you're trying to balance out between being actually in the museum, but also seeing the potential of sort of the exhibits there too, right? Because you're logging some of them aren't you?

J

Josh Freaney 10:37

Yeah, absolutely. And I mean, I still consider myself an educator first. And the museum, Grand Rapids Public Museum is some of the finest educators around and the teams and the leadership that they have there, allows them to be really innovative with programming and content. One of the things I didn't know until I started working with them is that they had, they had this program called Digital Me, which, you know, they have some really amazing people that participate on some of their committees. And really about a decade ago or more, they had a vision for what you know, the future of education could look like. So I came in there, and found that a lot of the things that I was pitching they were already about. And that allowed me to kind of just kind of show up with the tools, and then with the pedagogy and the philosophy and you know, the rest was history. And really, what that centers around is being much more hyper-personalized to the individual's needs when they're learning, and also using whatever devices and equipment that person has, and thinking about what step they're at, and how to get them to their next step. So it's a really non-batched approach to education that's pretty interesting.

E

Ed Clemente 11:49

Yeah. And I think you and I have had a side conversation about how the field of education is changing anyway. And COVID sort of accelerated some of these things, right?

J

Josh Freaney 11:57

Yeah, I think so quite a bit. I have to confess, I sounded that a little bit crazier three years ago, but now my conversations are a little bit smoother.

E

Ed Clemente 12:06

Yeah, and it is impacting everything from K through 12, through college universities too, it's moving faster. But the one thing I think I would take out of what you just said, is that not only are you looking at it from sort of a teaching perspective, but it's a real big group that you're

thinking of teaching, which is everything from maybe K through 12, right? But then also sort of higher ed, or I think the sort of digital nomad angle of how when you said, people, you found out the talent was here already. And obviously talent is a huge thing for the state and the MEDC. I think that's fascinating that how the talent was here, maybe before was even being recruited. But do you think it was, which was it mainly just the setting of Michigan that made it attractive? Or do you think these were mainly people that were here and just came back, like a couple of the students you mentioned?

J Josh Freaney 13:04

You know, it's, kind of interesting but as much as maybe we consider ourselves late adopters, in some ways, we're early adopters of a lot of technology and process. And when you look at the history of platforms and technologies that have come out of Michigan, from the automobile, to the multiplex cinema, to even kind of big box store thinking and direct to consumer shipping, a lot of these kind of systemic approaches to enterprise and industry come from the Midwest, and specifically Michigan. So I think that young people here grow up with a lot of stories about people who change the rules and, and invent new ways of doing things. And I think they're naturally attracted to the type of platforms that let them practice that. That's one thing to go back to your previous point, with the museum that I really like about them is they don't really have borders and they're not specifically only focused on kids. I mean, like, I use the museum, I have children, but my wife and I used to go there before we even had kids because that you could almost think of that place as a record of every time people change the rules. So there's kind of like a thought that I have that sometimes a place like that is really good at inspiring entrepreneurialism. And I think we've got a lot of those types of resources in Michigan, that that make people think bigger and think about creating new patterns and systems.

E Ed Clemente 14:21

I would say mine is like the Henry Ford Museum, Greenfield Village. I mean, there's nothing but sort of innovation at that place of how Henry Ford did different things, but people built on his designs or he took other people's designs and like the moving you know, assembly line or something like that. And and honestly, all of innovation is built on the shoulders of others. Really not too many things are that unique but unique to you maybe

J Josh Freaney 14:24

No, that totally accurate.

E Ed Clemente 14:27

Yeah, and so I'm gonna just do this but you didn't tell me to but on your website, you list all the stuff you're company kinda does, I think it's Yeti mainly, but you can stop me, but it's a long list. Revisualisation and concept development, game and puzzle design, platform and system, gamification, user interface, and experience design development, rapid prototyping and idea-

proofing, technical support and consulting, content creation and production management, tool and system development delivery, streamlined remote production, reactive product iterations, proven scalable production teams, cross platform cost savings. You do all those things.

J Josh Freeney 15:43

You know, like I said, for the first five years, a student would walk in and I'd say, what do you want to be when you grow up? And whatever they said, I'd go find that work. So we found ourselves in a lot of interesting, interesting rooms. And if you really thought of Yeti, it's more of a think tank masquerading as a game studio. Because a lot of times we get brought in to work on really, really hard problems in complex industries. And it's, it's really a lot of change management that comes along with that. So it's, it's more complex than just, you know, making some software.

E Ed Clemente 16:15

You know, and I have totally violated all my questions I sent you, but that's okay, this is the way I wanted the conversation to go. But you also, do you have any other partners you wanted to mention or other groups your work with beyond just like we said, Ferris and the university, I mean the museum?

J Josh Freeney 16:32

Yeah, I just joined The Right Place Tech Council, and I've been meeting so many other companies around and I gotta say, for the last 10 years, my head has been down so I probably wasn't doing as good of a job as I could have been reaching out to other organizations. But since I've been a part of that, there's been a lot more collaboration with a number of these other groups. So like we've done a lot of collaboration with with a company called Carnivaly. They've done all of the world-class work that we've done a lot of the complex customers. And in addition to that, we do a lot of work with Twistthink, and many other companies around town. So every time I'm turning around, I'm seeing kind of like this explosion of talent and capability happening in Michigan. And a lot of this work is coming in from outside Michigan so it's, it's kind of impressive to see it feels like overnight, we kind of went from, you know, figuring this out like everyone else to actually being kind of a place where people come to because of our problem solving ability.

E Ed Clemente 17:31

And we should give out a shout out to Randy Thelen and his team at The Right Place. You mentioned the lady's name that sort of handles this. I forgot who she is that works for them. [Jen Wangler.] Yes, I'd like to get them on the show someday to talk a little bit more of the macro what you guys do over there?

J Josh Freeney 17:46

You absolutely should because help, help pulling together a... I think a rhythm and a dance that

you absolutely should because he's, he's pulling together a, I think a rhythm and a dance that everyone can step to. And and he's got a really nice way of of describing how this could all move forward. So I'm definitely a subscriber to where he's trying to take things.

E

Ed Clemente 18:02

Oh, I said she is there she as well?

J

Josh Freaney 18:04

Oh, I'm sorry, I was talking was talking about Randy. [Randy, too, right. And then she's.] Jen is where the rubber hits you.

E

Ed Clemente 18:12

Well, she would seem like it'd be more interesting. I've had Randy on before. So Randy, he's had his moment of sunshine, so we need to spread the sunshine. So, um, but he was a great guest too, he's a friend. So yeah, so last couple of questions, even though I think you've already answered a big chunk of it. But maybe you still have a few more about what additional things you know, do you see on the horizon? Obviously, things like blockchain and you know, vertical integration for Michigan somewhat, but is there other things you see happening?

J

Josh Freaney 18:47

Yeah, I think the biggest thing to understand is why I'm still in the talent business. And that's how I think of Yeti as a talent producer, is we still have a deficit of, of workers who understand these complex technologies. And that could be really scary, except realizing these technologies come out every single week. So there's no time to build expertise, what we actually need is this amazingly talented workforce, who's capable of learning new things. So everything that I'm working on right now is, is around trying to create practice opportunities for people to develop those skills. That's what we're doing with the museum. And I think about it this way, if the internet is is is made out of web servers, right, and a web server is a computer in someone else's room. So when you're logging onto your email, or using a website or doing a search, you're using a computer in someone else's space. And I think that the last 10 years have been really good for mobile phones and everything to turning us into like consumers of this content. But I think in order to start actually, you know, taking a part in in leveraging this technology to do amazing things, we need to become authors. I'm super passionate right now about trying to get students, people, workers, understanding how web technologies work and that includes the shift from web to to web three. And all of those paradigm changes, you can think of it as this huge opportunity because when the technology changes, the experts aren't the experts anymore. And the person who can learn it fast is the new expert. So as technology speeds up, we've got all of this opportunity for people to jump into new roles, create new solutions and so I think we need to spend a little bit more time having people have that mindset. But that's kind of everything I'm working on right now.

E

Ed Clemente 20:34

So let me paraphrase a little bit there, you're looking more at immersion like if you were to, like, say, you're gonna learn a new language, rather than have to translate it everytime, they only speak to you in that language so you have to sort of like a baptism by fire. Right? It's part of it? Go ahead.

J

Josh Freaney 20:52

I think that's right. And I think I think trends like project-based learning and, and even enterprise participating a little bit more in in classrooms. And we see the success with internship programs and apprenticeship programs. I think that could even be broken down more like I listened to the last podcast or a podcast from a while ago, with Brittney from Atomic Object and she was she was talking about atomizing things. And I love I love their mindset, because it's the same thing, if we could atomize the big problems that companies are facing and turn them down into smaller projects that could be brought into the classroom or into educational settings, kids could be practicing that type of stuff at a much younger age than you know, before they get into the marketplace. A little bit, yeah. And that's, I mean, if you if you take anything from this #authorship, we need our young people, and people practicing authoring web content because when we use it, we're kind of like, you know, playing in someone else's sandbox. And really, the next big transformational changes are going to come from, you know, new sandboxes being created.

E

Ed Clemente 21:33

And I think I would paraphrase one more thing you said then, rather than being an actor in the play, you want them to be the playwright. Yeah, and I think you just answered my other question is, but maybe you could, you might have a more specific answer, but what advice would you give your 17 year old self?

J

Josh Freaney 22:12

Oh, man? Well, I had a really good mom who was a career counselor, and she she gave me a lot of advice. And she told me at that age to try a lot of things before I settled on anything, right? So I did a lot of small jobs and I found out a lot of things I didn't want to do. But the the biggest advice that I would recommend is everything that I have accomplished has been because of growing a team and investing in someone else. And so I have grown this phrase that's kind of like, there's no such thing as technology, there's only technologists, and so it comes down to a human relationship problem. And this is why I spend so much time investing in young people and in people and growing this talent and skill set. So, you know, I'd smack myself across the head and say, like, yeah, it's a people problem don't get so hung up on the tech for a decade. So that that would be where I would go.

E

Ed Clemente 23:07

Well, that's for if we're all worried about the robots taking us over. That's a good statement [That's right] because the humans will always have some control, hopefully, in the system as we move forward. But is there any, you know, I just one last question but I also want to make

we move forward. But is there any, you know, I got one last question but I also want to make sure because I know you've prepared for this. Is there anything else you wanted to mention? Before we get to the last question, like any other highlights, you might have wrote down of any projects, you're doing something like that?

J Josh Freenev 23:33

Well, I think the only thing that I would say is I mean, from working with companies like Microsoft and Google, we even did a little bit of stuff with Apple over the last few years. And there's a lot of emerging tech coming out and you'll see it in the news, you'll see it on LinkedIn. The web is kind of going 3D and there's a number of big changes that are coming in all of the know how that we use serving these these giant companies and the really exciting tech, I'd call it the good stuff. We're about to launch a platform from the Grand Rapids Public Museum that makes those types of tools accessible, not only to local students, but also to businesses and other people, because we really want to try to accelerate things. So I don't want to go too far into it, but I would say look for good things coming from the Grand Rapids Public Museum soon.

E Ed Clemente 24:19

Yeah. And also people describe the metaverse as almost being Internet 3.0, right, or the next iteration of it somewhat.

J Josh Freenev 24:26

Yeah, I think I think that that word has been really helpful for people to understand where we're headed. It's, I mean, for me, it's a simple paradigm shift we're going from web pages to web spaces, right? And it's metaverse is probably a term that's kind of like cyberspace where it probably won't age super well. But when we're talking about you know, how different it's going to be than what it is, to go back to your use of verbs will probably go from scrolling to strolling and everything that that means.

E Ed Clemente 24:54

Your very last question is, what's your favorite spot in Michigan? Take Your family or whatever?

J Josh Freenev 25:01

Oh, my goodness. Um,

E Ed Clemente 25:03

You only get one.

J Josh Freaney 25:04

Yeah, so I grew up in Muskegon and the Muskegon State Parks are probably some of my favorite places. And I don't know if I could pick one. But yeah, Muskegon State Park beaches are some of the best in the world. And really that holds a sweet spot for me.

E Ed Clemente 25:20

Okay, your first shout out ever for Muskegon State Park. So that's a good job. Once again, I want to thank Josh Freaney, he's Ppartner Yeti CGI and many other things. But thank you very much, you did a great job today, Josh, and I'm sure a lot of people are going to have questions for you in the future. Keep up the good work. Thanks for doing the show today.

J Josh Freaney 25:40

Yeah, absolutely. And thank you, Ed thank you to the MEDC for making this possible. I'm still digging through all the other podcasts, but I think this is such a valuable resource. So keep up the good work.

E Ed Clemente 25:50

Appreciate it. Join us next week, where I guess is Matthew Asada, he is a Diplomat in Residence for the University of Southern California and he also was a Deputy Commissioner for the US Department of State working on the Dubai 2020 Expo.

A Announcer 26:07

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