

Behind The Scenes... IGDA Orange County, CA Chapter Meeting

By Bruce Pechman, The Muscleman of TechnologySM
www.mrbicep.com

January, 2004



International Game Developers Association Starry Night

The Orange County (OC) Chapter of the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) held its January Meeting at the Art Institute of Orange County on January 30, 2004. I had the privilege of covering this stellar event on behalf of Gameworld Industries—thanks to a special invite from Mark Warner, Chapter Leader and CEO of Nexus Entertainment (www.nexusent.com). Nexus, a self-funded company started in 2000 holds plenty of promise. Their current priority is with Project Hardpoint, a revolutionary RTS engine capable of running the future of Real-Time Strategy Games. Check their site, they are looking for talent. On that note, let me give you gaming industry “potentials” one piece of advice if you want to jump start your dream career in the biz—get involved with the IGDA (www.igda.org) and hook up with your local chapter for down to earth mentoring. The IGDA Chapters may provide you with career counseling, evaluate the area in which your skills are best suited, and advise you on schooling and curriculum options. The IGDA organization is a terrific resource and wealth of information for game development newbie’s and veterans alike.



Jay & Mark Lead the OC Chapter



Early Arrivals to the IGDA Event

This was indeed a special night for the OC Chapter. Besides being the first meeting of the year, the guest speakers included ATI and Logitech! Needless to say, I felt a bit giddy driving the seventy mile commute braving the harsh January California chill of 59°. In fact, the only winter storm in sight was the friendly Blizzard Entertainment (www.blizzard.com) team awaiting my arrival. Blizzard’s Jay Vales, co-leader of the OC Chapter, greeted me and informed me about the night’s festivities. Also in attendance from Blizzard were Michelle Elbert, QA Analyst and Lead, along with Ryan Sharpe from QA Test. All three represent a collaborative effort of Blizzard’s QA team (more on that below). Yes, this is the Blizzard of Warcraft, Diablo, and Starcraft fame!



Blizzard's Ryan Sharpe, Michelle Elbert, & Jay Vales

Pre-Game Warm Up

The one thing which really struck me about this chapter is the myriad of talent emanating from the group. The approximately 30 in attendance characterize a cross-section of the present and future of game development. Before things got under way I spoke with some of them. Terrie Denman, a second year student at the Art Institute of Orange County, is very optimistic about landing her dream job in the industry. Terrie is studying Animation and Cinematics and hopes to be working with one of the local gaming studios when she graduates in 2005. For Steve Eaton, a talented illustrator who toils by day in a law firm, it's all about living his dream—"I would just love to work in an industry where I can be creative to do what I love." Glancing at Eaton's sketch pad I see he not only possesses the goods, but I'm flattered by the illustration he has done of me—you go Steve!



Terrie Denman, Art Institute Student



Steve Eaton's Sketch of Me...damn he's good!

An IGDA shining example is Blizzard's Ryan Sharpe. It's not a one way street. The OC Chapter gives back to the community through Ryan's foundation. "The Get-Well Gamers Foundation" which donates Game Boys, PS2's, Xboxes, Super Nintendo and other kinds of video game systems to sick children in hospitals is a most noble cause.

The atmosphere is abuzz as our host Mark Warner announces ATI and Logitech have arrived with enough catered sandwiches and soda to fill the guts of all attendees. Mark also lets a little secret out of the bag. Somebody tonight is going to win the best Video Card on the planet—an ATI 9800XT (\$500 dollar value). Little did we know this would be the catalyst (no, not the drivers silly) that would ignite a giveaway war between ATI and Logitech.

Up Front With Blizzard

Being amongst the Blizzard Quality Assurance (QA) team, I had the rare opportunity to discuss this role from Blizzard's perspective. Ryan and Michelle were quick to point out how the QA role at most game companies is a fantastic starting point for aspiring apprentices. According to Ryan, besides being hands-on, "Within the QA functions you learn about the many areas of game design—you learn how maps work, what a clipping error is, how you define your location, how specific triggers work, you move around a lot and gain invaluable experience for moving up within the company." In short, Ryan sums up the critical need for having a thorough understanding (and appreciation) for of the myriad of disciplines which go into making the game. Michelle, who previously worked for SquareSoft and Interplay, drives the point home by citing examples of how many Producers received their starts in QA, including at Blizzard. Ryan, Jay, and Michelle take great pride and satisfaction in games that ship out the door—they know their contributions help make the game the best they can for Blizzard customers. Michelle concludes, "We love the games that we make; when crunch time comes, everybody in the company contributes to making a quality game, including the receptionist hammering over a copy of the daily build."

ATI's Secret Weapon...ArtX

After some important Chapter news and announcements ATI's Justin Cooney, ISV Technical Evangelist, grabbed center stage. Justin's job is to interface with game developers and ensure they have the resources needed to support ATI's hardware. This may sound like an easy job, but few people living have Justin's technical comprehension of the graphics industry as it relates to gaming. We started out with some dazzling facts and figures you probably didn't know about ATI. ATI started business in 1985 and now employs over 2,200 employees worldwide. Interestingly, Justin acknowledged ATI was known for less than stellar drivers which plagued ATI in earlier years. However Justin stated ATI has reversed that trend with the newly released CATALYST driver suite. Additionally, ATI has made a major commitment to better drivers and the results have been recognized industry-wide. A major force accounting for ATI's recent surge in sales (2003 revenues in excess of US \$1.3 billion) was the acquisition of ArtX in April 2000. ArtX consists of multiple design teams headquartered in Santa Clara, CA. The Santa Clara team was responsible for the 9700 architecture which many of you know not only put ATI on the performance map, but signaled to NVIDIA "we got the ball, and the lead." ArtX is also responsible for the 9800 architecture, and they are currently working on other products upon which Justin could not elaborate. The ATI office in Marlborough, MA is working on many upcoming projects as well. This allows ATI the flexibility to release multiple products (and variants) year in and year out. ATI is a busy company. They designed the current Nintendo GameCube video chip, have an agreement for future Nintendo products, an agreement for future "Xbox" technologies, notebook lines (as in Mobility Radeon), the FireGL line, chips for cable TV set-top boxes, chips for projectors, TVs, PDAs, and cell phones. Where ATI makes its hay is at the OEM level and in the notebook market. Justin concluded with a lengthy Q&A from the audience which left plenty of smiles on many faces.



Cort Soest, 9800XT Grand Prize Winner & Justin

Logitech's Ritche Corpus' Humble Beginnings

Next we had the pleasure of listening to Logitech's Senior Manager of Developer Relations, Ritche Corpus. Ritche smiles over at Justin and declares, "My job is essentially the same as Justin's with a different title." Ritche, like Justin, is well steeped in the industry. Furthermore, Ritche is intimately familiar with gaming graphics having worked at Diamond Multimedia for five years. Ritche helped launch the Monster line, NV-1 and NV-3 (RIVA 128) and lovingly pokes fun at his evangelizing efforts of Quadra Texture Mapping (QTM), not an easy technology to learn or adopt. Growing tired of the graphics side of things, Ritche moved on to the world of audio at Aureal A3D. A long standing patent dispute between Aureal and Creative eventually led to Aureal's demise. Subsequently, Ritche decided to leverage his expertise by working on joysticks and input devices, hence joining Logitech.

Logitech is Game

Logitech, which began as a Swiss company, celebrated its 20th year in business in 2001. Logitech started out with a very clever business model—they bought the patent rights of the original mouse developed at Stanford (for you Trivia fans, that would be Doug Engelbart who invented the mouse in 1963). As you probably deduced, the mainstay at Logitech is the mouse and keyboard group. But Ritche is quick to point out Logitech also owns over 50% of the webcam market crediting help from specialty video internet webcam sites, along with the popularity of Instant Messaging. Logitech made a commitment to jump head first into the gaming arena. Ritche tells the story of how Logitech got started in the console market. Sony approached Logitech because they were so impressed with the steering wheel they made for the PC. "It was the Gran Turismo 3 bunch in Japan which wanted Logitech to somehow make that PC wheel work with the PS2." They only gave Logitech a 3 month window to do it—they did...the Red for the PC side and Blue for the PS2. The second generation Gran Turismo wheel is called the "Driving Force." The latest wheel released in December is the Driving Force Pro featuring a 900 degree turning radius. Sony's close relationship with Logitech as a preferred peripheral supplier continues to this day. Guess who makes the SOCOM headset and Eye Toy? You got it! In addition to the PS2, Logitech also makes wheels and controllers for Xbox and the Cube. Recently, Logitech has been able to integrate their cordless input device expertise into alluring wireless game control devices as well. Ritche talks about the frustrating part of his job—getting innovative game devices to market. "My job is to garner support and approval from developers; without developer support, no matter how great the design is, the product will be useless." Ritche runs out of time, but promises to return to the OC Chapter next month with information on new products.

Grand Finale = Grand Giveaways!

Now the scenario I'm about to describe may not happen at every IGDA Chapter Meeting, but it did happen tonight. The audience seemed maniacal at the conclusion of presentations as they knew some lucky soul would be strolling out with a 9800XT (courtesy of ATI's Justin Cooney). But directly after Cort Soest's name was drawn as the Grand Prize winner, Ritche piped up. "Logitech is not going to be shown up by ATI." With that, Ritche proclaimed he is giving away a Logitech Z-680 500 Watt THX-certified sound system with built-in Dolby Digital sound—a \$399 value. Justin said, "If you do that then I'm giving away a 9600 Pro!" Then Ritchie declared war and proceeded to give away a Logitech camera...the Pocket Digital 130, and an MX700 top-of-the-line cordless mouse. Now that's what I call a great meeting!