developer.*
The Independent Magazine for Software Professionals

The *.ORG Interview Series
Installment 2: The International Game Developers Association

Interview by Daniel Read
Answers by Jason Della Rocca, Program Director for the IGDA

Introduction

According to it's web site, the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) is "a non-profit membership organization that advocates globally on issues related to digital game creation. The IGDA's mission is to strengthen the international game development community and effect change to benefit that community." The IGDA first came to the attention of **developer.*** through it's recent "open letter" to the gaming industry titled "Quality of Life Issues are Holding Back the Game Industry." The letter makes a powerful statement about problems that today appear to be particularly acute in the gaming industry, but which are familiar to software professionals of all stripes.

Please refer to the "Resources" section below for pointers to more information about the IGDA and its activism related to "quality of life" and other issues.

This interview was conducted via email during November, 2004. We would like to thank Mr. Della Rocca for taking time out of his busy schedule.

The Interview

Daniel Read: I first became aware if the IGDA through your recent open letter titled "Quality of Life Issues are Holding Back the Game Industry." What inspired this letter, and what has the response been like?

Jason Della Rocca: The IGDA's "open letter" was motivated by the recent frenzy of discussion over impassioned testimony about the horrible working conditions within the game industry. While the IGDA had already been advocating on this issue (e.g., releasing a white paper in March 2004), we felt the need to step in and provide a voice for the development community—and at least some sense that there's a better way.

DR: How much power do individual developers have to make a difference in the work/life balance issue? While the IGDA works things at the macro level, what can individuals do at the micro level?

JDR: The balance of power usually favors the employer. Individuals have the power to vote with their feet (i.e., leave a company with poor working conditions and walk over to one that's good). But, the reality is that it's tough to walk out when you barely have time to eat and sleep—you're just too exhausted to look for other options, etc. That said,

developers' passion to create games gets the better of them. Many don't realize that they'd be more productive and do better work if they worked less and had a life and interests outside of games.

DR: Why do game developers need an organization like the IGDA? On which issues and areas do you focus?

JDR: The IGDA serves to unite the international game development community and serve as its voice on issues of debate. We advocate on both internal (e.g., quality of life, diversity, credits, etc.) and external (e.g., censorship, education, etc.) topics. Games are important and the IGDA is here to help game developers, and the industry, succeed in the long run.

DR: Is the organization primarily made up of individual programmers who join on their own accord, or do entire companies become members?

JDR: IGDA members are individual game developers: programmers, artists, designers, producers, musicians, etc. Some studios do pay for memberships for their entire staff via our "affiliation" program, but the studio itself is not a member.

DR: How important are the local chapters and special interest groups?

JDR: The IGDA focuses a great on building community. Chapters and SIGs are the two main "tools" we use to connect developers. In essence, a chapter is a developer community based around geographic proximity (e.g., Montreal, Tokyo, LA), and a SIG is a developer community based around a topic of interest (e.g., AI, writing, QA, etc.). To many members, their local chapter is the face of the IGDA.

DR: What is unique about game development, both from a technical standpoint and otherwise, from other programming disciplines and sectors?

JDR: Oh man, that's a deep question. In short, the need for the end result to be "fun" (however that is defined) sets games apart from most other programming endeavors. You simply cannot code for fun; there's no fun function or object class… Chasing the elusive fun factor implies a much more iterative approach to development. Also, there's the fact that the code must be married to the art, design, story, music, interface, etc, etc. I'd say that games are the most "multi" of all multimedia…

Not coincidentally, it is the elusive fun factor that makes game projects so hard to manage and schedule. In part, this leads to some of the work/life balance issues that plague the industry.

DR: Very little, if any, of the general software development literature mentions game development specifically when discussing tools, processes, methodologies, etc. The assumption underlying most of the literature is that the reader works in business or government. What is this literature missing about game development? Is an article about

design patterns or agile methodologies just as applicable or interesting to the average game developer as it would be to the average business-oriented developer?

JDR: In general, the game industry is way behind in terms of approaching development in a rigorous and disciplined manner. At best, you could call the methodology an "ad hoc" one. It is sad that we're so immature in this regard, still taking the basement hacker/cowboy approach to writing code. A handful of developers are starting to experiment with agile methodologies (e.g., SCRUM, Extreme Programming, etc.), which I think are well suited to the iterative needs of game development.

The game industry has a lot to learn from the wealth of (admittedly non-game specific) knowledge and research that has gone into software engineering.

DR: How many software developers are employed in the gaming industry? Where are they located geographically?

JDR: Nobody really knows! It is like asking how many people make music… But, it is safe to guess that there are well over 100,000 people working on games. They are mostly in North America, Europe, and Asia. But game developers are pretty much everywhere.

DR: Do a lot of game developers tend to work remotely? Are a lot of game companies distributed organizations?

JDR: Despite the fact that we work with bleeding edge technology, most game studios are very centralized. There is a growing trend to outsource/offshore some aspects of production, but for the most part, people are full-time in-house staff. Over time, the game industry will likely adopt a movie-style production approach of per-project contracted freelancers.

DR: Can you tell us more about the Game Developers Choice Awards?

JDR: The Game Developers Choice Awards provide a chance for developers to honor and recognize the games and individuals who have transcended the current state of the art. All the nominees and recipients are awarded solely by other game developers. The IGDA presents the Choice Awards annually at the Game Developers Conference. We're just ramping up for the 2005 edition.

DR: Are there other organizations with which the IGDA collaborates with or shares solidarity?

JDR: The IGDA is a collaborative association that is keen to work with other organizations that help foster the development community. We've worked with orgs like the ESA, GANG, TIGA, ELSPA, DiGRA, IA-SIG, SIGGRAPH and others.

DR: If someone wants to get involved with or assist your organization, what should they do?

JDR: Drop by the `www.igda.org` site to check us out and learn more about ongoing projects and how to contribute. Of course, becoming a member is smart as well!

Resources

- IGDA web site: `http://www.igda.org`
- IGDA quality of life advocacy site: `http://www.igda.org/qol/`
- Quality of life open letter: `http://www.igda.org/qol/open_letter.php`
- Quality of life white paper: `http://www.igda.org/qol/whitepaper.php`
- The Game Developers Choice Awards: `http://www.igda.org/awards/`

About the `*.`ORG Interview Series

There are many software- or programmer-oriented organizations out there, and many (most?) software developers don't know anything about them. The purpose of the `*.`ORG interview series is two-fold: first, to discuss a variety of issues of interest to software developers, and second, to give organizations an opportunity to explain why they exist, what they do, and why software professionals might want to get involved.

We will strive to include a wide variety of organizations. Some may be dedicated to issue advocacy or lobbying, others might be social clubs or professional societies. Typically they will be non-profit in nature. Neither **developer.*** nor its editor and authors are necessarily endorsing any organization that appears in this series. Rather, the goal is to create a forum for ideas and in general promote the idea of getting involved. If you know of an organization that should be included in this series, please let us know.

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Daniel Read is editor and publisher of the **developer.*** web magazine. He lives in Atlanta, GA, where he works as a software architect.