The IMGD Booth at PAX East 2014

Abstract

Bringing WPI's Interactive Media and Game Development program to PAX East provided a rare opportunity to promote both students to prospective employers and advertise the program to a targeted group of prospective students. This projected centered around creating an exhibition booth to satisfy both of these goals. The process began by interviewing convention organizers, game developers, and previous groups who have worked on this project. From this, we designed booth mock-ups, advertisements, banners, buttons, and selected four Major Qualifying Projects (MQP) from WPI to showcase inside the booth. During the three days of PAX East, we brought in twelve student and seven faculty volunteers to man the booth. On average they interacted with roughly 180 people per day, and encouraged around 100 people to play the MQP's.

Research

One of our biggest sources of information and advice was the group who ran the PAX East booth the previous year. Through them we gained valuable knowledge on what worked and what didn't when it came to organizing the booth. Our second source was Kelly Wallick, organizer of the Indie Megabooth at PAX East. She was a PAX veteran who provided us with perspective on the logistics of running the booth effectively. Finally we spoke to Ichiro Lambe and Alex Schwartz, two people currently working in the gaming industry. They provided us with valuable input on promoting WPI students to prospective employers. Some of the noteworthy information we gained from these interviews included:

- Large prizes are a bad idea for a college booth.
- Have each MQP design a button.
- Have a floor plan design.

- Padded carpets are worth the investment for both volunteers and booth visitors.

- Cycle Volunteers frequently.

- Large TV's should be placed in the back of the booth.

- A greater number of people at the booth can lead to more people showing up.

- Let developers attending the event know beforehand that WPI projects are being shown

- Adding vertical height to the booth help draw in people.

- Avoid reserving booth locations near edges of the showroom floor.
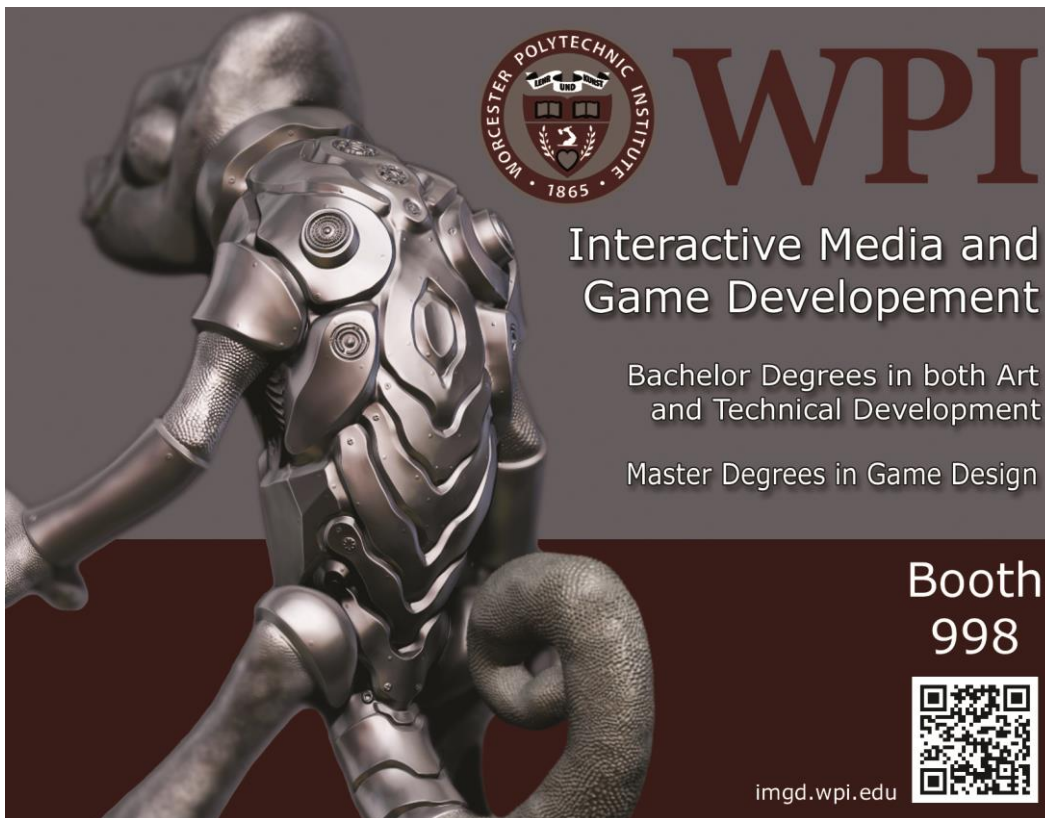
Booth Design

With all our information compiled, we began designing a booth. We based the preliminary design off the previous year's design, and added improvements were we saw fit. The basis of the design (shown below) consisted of two computers on each side of the booth loaded with MQP games, and a central TV playing a demo reel.

Improvements over last year's design included a large WPI Banner to hang in the back of the booth. We also invested in padded carpets, making use of the advice from last year's group. Finally we printed out new standup banners with generic content to allow for reuse in future booths.

Advertisement

The preeminent medium we used to advertise the booth to PAX East attendees was the full page advertisement we purchased inside the PAX program book (See image below). The cost of this advertisement was second only to the purchasing of the booth space itself.

Furthermore, we designed buttons to hand out and custom t-shirts for volunteers and WPI students attending PAX East to wear. The buttons consisted of three generic designs related to WPI and IMGD, and four buttons designed by each MQP group promoting their games. Finally we created a page on WPI's domain specifically for the booth at PAX East. On this page we advertised the games being shown at the booth and information on the booth itself.

Major Qualifying Projects

MQP games provide the main attraction to the booth, being that PAX has gained notoriety as a gamming convention. Because of this, we had to be fastidious in our selection of groups to showcase in the booth. Before the selection process began, we created metrics to score the games on how well they might show at PAX. These included gameplay, graphics, appeal, scope, polish, learning curve, pacing, and sound. Other considerations to take into account were whether the games were multiplayer, probability of completion before the event, and the communication skills of the members of the group.

The MQPs we chose to show at the booth consisted of:

- **Gone**
    - Produced by Logan Harrington, Shawn Calvert, and Cian Rice.
- **Xeero**
    - Produced by Eric Anumba and Dan Acito.
- **Maternal Instinct**
    - Produced by Alex Quartulli, Kimani Gyening, John Tordoff, and Nick Defossez
- **Hyper Groove**
    - Produced by Cian Rice.

Each of these groups was given a computer to load their game onto, and a schedule for which days they would volunteer for the booth. We gave MQP members the opportunity for extra shifts to volunteer, as it both allowed for their games to be represented effectively and saved the project money on extra exhibitor passes.

Post-PAX

At the closing of the showroom floor on Sunday, the booth had seen more than 600 people come and visit with the volunteers, and roughly 350 people try the MQP games. Since the previous year didn't track visitor numbers, we have no method to gage increases in exposure for WPI's IMGD program compared to last year. The entire experience provided a great deal of information for future groups analyze and build upon. Looking back on the end result of our booth, we found numerous areas to improve upon.

One concept we started and wish to be continued, is the focus on creating reusable and extendable assets for the booth. A decent amount of our budget went into updating materials from last year that could have been allocated towards improving other aspects of the booth. This year we designed generic banners and buttons that can easily be reused, and hopefully this practice will be continued and expanded upon in future iterations.

One of the greater issues that should be addressed is the visual appeal and attention-grabbing ability of the booth. The placement of the MQP games perpendicular to the show floor thoroughfare made it hard to view the games without being inside the booth. The speed modeling we showed on the central TV definitely helped kindle initial interest in the booth, as we witnessed many people stop and watch, but a great opportunity still lies here for initially attracting convention attendees. One great idea we witnessed at PAX this year was a diagonally place projector and 10 foot screen placed inside a 10' x 20' booth. It didn't require excessive space and would be easy to set up. An exciting and diverse show-reel would coincide well with such an idea. Another option might be to increase the vertical height of the booth to help distinguish it from others.

Lastly, booth placement is something that could be improved upon. Due to an error on the PAX organizers side, we weren't initially given a booth number, and ended up with a less than desirable location. This year out booth was positioned farthest from the entrance of the convention, and along the edge of exhibitors. A more ideal location would be along the

unofficial "college row" near the front of the exhibitors hall. Being near the other colleges would help draw in prospective students already looking at the colleges showing at PAX.

Conclusion

Considering the growing trend for colleges to represent themselves at conventions such as PAX East, it is important that WPI maintains and expands its presence at PAX East. The convention attracts a demographic that fits the potential student profile for IMGD majors perfectly. Future IQP teams should build upon what we learned from our PAX experience, and develop improved booth designs and strategies to promote the program.