
E3 2003

E3 turned out to be a much easier sell than last year because the game was closer to being finished. Since we were preparing for a public beta (even though it was still half a year away), we were able to show WoW's features and talk about our game in more solid terms.

At 10:00 a.m., the doors would open to let in tens of thousands of people to the show. I had my standard-issue Blizzard badge, but my friend, Steve Glicker, gave me an extra press "backstage" pass. Steve ran a website called gamingsteve.com, and I tagged along to watch press events behind closed doors, giving him a developer's perspective of whatever we saw. Steve and I had been going to E3s since the mid-nineties using his press credentials, which also gave us early access to the show. On my way to the VIP entrance, I passed some of my coworkers (who were waiting in line for their doors to open), and they jealously shook their fists and bared their teeth as I weaseled my way onto the floor early. I pantomimed a sarcastic shrug to express how terrible I felt that I was getting special treatment.

Steve and I first hit a few booths we wanted to see before the masses entered the event. He knew I'd be at the Blizzard booth all day, so we crossed a few of the must-see games off our list. After a couple hours, we headed toward the Blizzard area to see what was happening. One of the first things I heard was expletives coming from an *EverQuest* designer (I could tell by his badge); he was reacting to our flying taxi rides. "Our fucking programmers told me flying taxis were *impossible*! We could have done this sooner!" He was genuinely angry, and I had to turn my head to



The upper floor of the Blizzard booth was the site of our best demo stations where noise levels died down to an ear-splitting roar (some areas on the floor surpassed a hundred decibels). Photo by IGN

hide my laugh. In truth, flying taxis created severe frame rate problems for us, too, but we strategically restricted flight paths to areas where the frame rate drop wouldn't be noticeable.

In the years of tagging along with Steve, I'd learned how most companies ran their E3 booths. They had secret doors in the structures leading to quieter areas where people could talk without shouting into each other's ears. These small conference/storage rooms were filled with boxes of T-shirts, press packets, coat racks, packing equipment, trash cans (that were always full), and donut boxes (that were always empty). PR executives at various companies had invited Steve and I into these secret areas from time to time, and I had learned that the crucial resource, water, was often stored inside. Pallets of bottled water were stacked in the Vivendi Games secret area, and since I also had a Blizzard badge, I could go in whenever I wanted, although most of the suits seemed surprised to see me there (I just looked bored so people assumed I belonged there). Throughout the day, I was able to duck in and grab armfuls of bottled water and pass them out to my teammates (the same ones I mocked while sneaking into the show early). Their eyes lit up and expressed undisguised gratitude in hoarse shouts of "Where did you get the water?! You're a lifesaver!" I'm proud to say I kept most of the team hydrated for the duration of the event, and it felt great to be the bearer of essential provisions.

Scott Hartin waved me over to talk to a bunch of engineers he knew on the *EverQuest II* team. He introduced everyone and asked me to show them the game. He explained his voice was shot from shouting over the noise. "I can't talk anymore. Show these guys everything, answer all their questions." I had to look at him to see if he was being serious. It was strange talking about the nuts and bolts of the game with unfamiliar people, let alone competing developers. As the guy who built the engine, I could tell Scott was brimming with pride as he watched me explain how our game worked to a half-dozen programmers. Brian Hook, another id Software alumni, once told John Cash he really respected the WoW engine. He knew it wasn't the engine that magazines wrote about because it wasn't filled with the latest whiz-bang graphic features—yet it did amazing things on low-end systems, and Brian Hook was savvy enough to appreciate it. So I gave Scott's programmer friends a breakdown of what our game offered—sticking to technical numbers, such as our polygon budget on various screen elements. I explained where the polygons went, talked

about our tools, and the production pipeline. They asked questions and I answered as best I could. Scott would jump in when needed and answered technical queries like how we kept “batch counts” down. I showed them how we faked our horizon line, how many textures a scene used, and how many frames per second each feature cost. They didn’t hide their appreciation and thanked us both for the in-depth presentation. The *EverQuest* developers even gave us a tour of their booth (which was off-limits to the public) since they were just as eager to show off their work, but the Sony executives quickly spotted this and chased us away.

For three days we shouted over the cacophony of the floor and explained to anyone who would listen what to expect from WoW. I talked to enthusiastic webmasters, fans, and developers, all of whom recognized WoW’s potential. Some fans excitedly jumped up and down as I showed them features. That was the kind of feedback that made all my working weekends worthwhile. The only people who didn’t express enthusiasm were distributors and executives. They may have known on an intellectual level that WoW was going to be a hit, but they didn’t seem to care about the features that impressed players. Since they weren’t gamers, I tried to win them over by explaining how many languages we were translating the game into (six) and how partners around the world were lining up to support our game (that really caught their attention). I even shared my personal suspicion that the game could last for twenty years and that we had tons of ideas we hadn’t yet implemented. People searched my face for signs that I was kidding them—but I wasn’t. MMOs were everything to everyone, and I imagined we were capable of supporting a countless variety of mini-games. I even did a demonstration for Richard Garfield, the designer behind *Magic: The Gathering*. I explained to him how our trade skills worked, guessing he’d appreciate how our rewards were integrated into equipment and crafting. It was hard to tell if he liked what I told him; he was very cordial but his countenance was unreadable.

We let people play the game and happily answered questions. By letting people actually play WoW, we gained a credibility we previously didn’t have or deserve. There was no more skepticism; we had a great frame rate and a (mostly) stable build. There was a memory leak that made it necessary to reboot the system after a few hours, but that barely mattered. The one question everyone was asking because the zones we showed looked polished: “When are you shipping?” We told them the

usual “When it’s ready,” because we honestly didn’t know ourselves. Many gave me reproachful looks as if I were being coy, as if the game was ready to ship now. Only when I mentioned that we needed more zones and dungeons could I convince them we still had a long way to go. We told them we were planning to have public testing later in the year, and that mollified even the most persistent interrogators.

The 2003 E3 was our last all-positive feedback. If the highlight of WoW’s development was announcing the game, then talking about it at the 2003 E3 was the next most satisfying moment. After the public beta, the fans advanced to The Complaining Phase, where, I imagined, they would likely remain until the game lost its popularity.

Programmer Isle, March 2003.

This area was a testing ground for experiments such as lava flow effects. A travel advisory was always in effect on Programmer Isle, because remnants of broken code often caused client crashes. Most of the programmers knew where the troubled areas were and just avoided them.

Image provided courtesy of
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