

Cover Story (November 2003)

the Operators' Choice
play
METER

Is Global VR the future of coin op?



The beginning of the coin-op video game industry began with the dominance of Atari. Soon after that there were the Japanese market leaders such as Sega, Namco, and others. Before its departure, we cannot forget the impact Midway made with later hits such as Mortal Kombat, Cruisin', and Blitz. With Midway's exodus from the coin-op industry and with others struggling in weakened positions, the question remains, "Who will lead our industry into the new age of coin op?"

Global VR, a passionate and dynamic new team from San Jose, Calif., is confident they have the answer to today's changing video game world. With literally a who's who of coin-op veterans and a \$2.5 billion partner, Electronic Arts, it appears that Global VR is positioning itself to lead the industry into the next era of coin-op.



In the last year, Global VR's flagship product, the VR Vortek line, has dominated industry equipment polls, reinforcing the success of its replaceable software model. For example it took the top three spots in Play Meter's September 2003 Equipment Poll at the same time (Beach Head 2000, Beach Head 2002, and Beach Head 2003)--a rare feat. "Very few software games have a life span longer than one year," observed Global VR President Milind Bharvirkar. "For operators to flourish, we understand that it's imperative to design system cabinets with excellent quality software."



Last year, in a bold move, the San Jose company introduced EA Sports PGA Tour Golf. Bold because there had not been a serious contender in the golf game category since Golden Tee. Other companies produced golf games without making a serious impact on the marketplace. Global VR intends to change that.

The industry obviously saw the promise of things to come when the Amusement and Music Operators Association (AMOA) presented Global VR with one of its three coveted Innovator Awards for EA Sports PGA Golf Tour Championship Edition. Global VR also launched the most talked about driving game since San Francisco Rush 2049 at the recent AMOA International Expo called Need For Speed. In addition, the company moved into a new spacious 55,000-square-foot facility in Silicon Valley.

Play Meter was invited to Global VR's open house where we took the opportunity to ask the team about their secret ingredients for making coin-op hits.

"Our success is based on three concentrations: people, products, and progress," explained Bharvirkar.

PEOPLE

It's been said that behind every great product, there are great people. That's no exception at Global VR.

There is a virtual melting pot of industry veterans and Silicon Valley talent at the headquarters, which houses almost 100 people. From software engineering to electrical engineers, from service to finance, and from industrial design to marketing, the Global VR team has one vision and one goal: to raise this industry to a higher level.



"A big part of creating a winning team is hiring people who work well together and who share a single vision. Global VR is lucky enough to have done this by combining Silicon Valley technology and coin-op savvy," asserted Aaron Baker, Global VR's Chief Technology Officer.

Many of the faces at Global VR are familiar to the industry. They are people who carved out their industry careers decades ago like Elaine Shirley, Marty "the Man" Smith, Lou Rudolph, Mark Sherman, and Frank Ballouz. The skills of John Ray, Milt Loper, and Mark Gruber (veteran Midway industrial designer) lend polish to Need For Speed. "Having an knowledgeable, experienced coin-op industry staff is essential to our success," noted Executive Vice President Ken Bayer, adding, "These people have a wealth of knowledge about how this industry operates."

While the industry experts give a strong market sense to the company, Global VR went outside the industry to find technology gurus to bring about progress to a slow-moving industry. It all makes sense. A Silicon Valley technology team married to an impressive list of industry "know hows." Could this be the formula for success? "Innovation is a result of technology combined with good market sense. We've got a dedicated team with a passion for games, a high-technology vision, and industry experience all under one roof. It's a rare chemistry," declared Bharvirkar.

PRODUCT



Look up the word product in dictionary.com and you'll find this definition: "commodities offered for sale." That doesn't sound too exciting, although that definition may be applicable for some companies. Just not for Global VR, which maintains that a product is not introduced for sale unless the quality of the content and the worthiness of the hardware have been perfected. Not just commodities, but quality, well built, and desirable content are Global VR's products. The company knows all too well that "content is king" and regardless of how much you spend and how long it takes to produce, customers and the market will not accept a product unless it's perfect for them.



With its new round of games, Global VR has successfully mastered one of the most difficult tasks in video game development—delivering layers of complexity to appeal to players of different skills. "Ever notice how Disney blends adult humor in its kids' movies? It's so they can entertain children and adults at the same time. The adult content is so subtle that the kids are not offended, but adults understand the humor. It's very similar to our challenge of entertaining casual and expert players at the same time," explained Bharvirkar.

This philosophy is especially evident in Need For Speed. Casual gamers looking for a three-minute entertaining game will find a driver that's easy to control and exciting to play. Experienced players can choose more realistic handling, unlock more demanding cars, and master tricky driving techniques to gain an advantage.

The point of this "minute to learn, lifetime to master" design is to develop casual players into expert tournament players. "Once they become tournament players, games are a part of their lives. A tournament player will spend hours, not to mention many dollars, competing every month. And, almost as significant, they involve their friends because it's a social activity for them," offered James Kucera, Global VR's Tournament Manager.



According to Baker, "Developing a game for multiple skill levels in coin-op is one of the most difficult aspects of game development." He went on to share with Play Meter, "It's almost like having to develop the game twice--once for each audience. We put a lot of time, energy, and resources into making sure that our products have the broadest possible appeal."

This year Global VR introduced several new hardware platforms such as the Vortek V3, gvrSX, The Last Bounty Hunter, and Need For Speed. New software upgrades this year include, EA Sports PGA Tour Golf Championship Edition, Operation Blockade, Incoming, and Beach Head 2003: Desert War. Although this company firmly believes in platforms with multiple software titles, the focus at Global VR is quality, not quantity.

To that end, Global VR was the proud recipient of the AMOA's 2003 Innovator Award for EA Sports PGA TOUR Golf Championship Edition. When we asked what it was that made the Championship Edition such an outstanding product, Baker didn't hesitate, "It was the operators and the players! Our marketing surveys asked them where we could improve the game for their needs and we took their comments seriously."

Baker continued, "The player and the operator communities have been extremely supportive. We won this award because we listened to our market. From our new operator tournaments, our outstanding fantasy courses, our club fine tuning, to our new subscription or pay-per-play tournament model, we kept striving for improvement."

Need For Speed, set to launch soon, is revved up and ready to rock! If the reception it received at AMOA was any indication of its ultimate success, then we witnessed the birth of a superstar! It is poised to go down in driving game history. "This industry needs a great new driver," affirmed product producer John Ray. "Many of us have been around long enough to have witnessed how important a solid driver is to the success of the coin-op industry. Need For Speed is an exceptional driver with an incredible amount of depth for tournament play."



PROGRESS

Global VR has shown that it has the ability to deliver hit products. However, it doesn't end there by a long shot. Everyone at the company feels that their true contribution takes place after the cabinet is installed. Their first goal is to provide consistent new software updates for Global VR's system cabinets, so players keep coming back. Then they support their games with tournaments and next generation services for operators to promote their business. Let's delve a little deeper into these goals.

Software

EA Sports PGA Tour Golf is already on track with two more updates as part of the Championship Edition program. Championship Edition II in December will deliver five brand-new courses and the launch of local operator tournaments. In March, Championship Edition III will offer another four brand-new courses along with Global VR's Players' Plus, new play modes for registered players.

Need For Speed will receive similar attention, with its own tournament system. It's a player card program that allows players to unlock new cars and build their garages with models like Lamborghini, Porsche, and Mercedes. During an operators-only party at AMOA, Global VR hinted at future play modes for Need For Speed such as Hot Pursuit with police chases and more.

Global VR follows this platform philosophy throughout its entire product line. Software updates for The Last Bounty Hunter, the Vortek V3, and the gvrSX are in the works.

Service



John Ray and his capable and talented team (photo on left)

Global VR executives firmly believe that progress is not only demonstrated by developing exceptional games, but also it's equally important to provide new revenue streams and opportunities through advanced business models. Global VR has delivered both. As an example, operators can choose to sign up for tournaments by selecting either a flat fee or a pay-per-play model. "One plan isn't

right for every location," commented Caryn Mical, Global VR's Vice President of Marketing. "It's up to the operator--not Global VR--to choose what is going to work best in their locations."

Pete, Mark Sherman, and Sunny (photo on right)

Operators are already familiar with Global VR's Tournament System, and this December Global VR will launch local operator tournaments as part of the Championship Edition II update. Operators will be able to create their own tournaments and contests, with a strong level of marketing support from Global VR.



Ryan and his art team (photo on left)

Bharvirkar explained that this is just the tip of the tournament iceberg: "As a company and as an industry, we haven't even begun to exhaust the possibilities and opportunities of tournament play. There is so much more that we can do and will do."

He added this example of what he sees in the future of tournaments:
"Tournament play on Need For Speed has the potential to raise the bar yet again. Imagine what it would mean to operators--and to the industry--if tournament play on Need For Speed was bigger than golf. The amount of revenue that it could generate is mind boggling!"

Wes Harris, Caryn Michel, and Pat Normindan (photo on right)

Probably one of the most important accomplishments for Global VR is repeatedly proving its ability to jump across genres with successful product. From successful deluxe shooters with the Vortek line to EA Sports PGA Tour Golf and now with the hot Need For Speed driver, Global VR has products that appeal to many distinct audiences. If Global VR can successfully unite these player groups into one loyal player community, Bharvarkir's optimistic outlook is just waiting to become a reality.



"At the end of the day, we're competing with platforms like Xbox and Playstation 2 for the same entertainment dollars. Right now, Microsoft and Sony are trying to grow their online player base, and as an industry, that should be our primary goal as well," concluded Bharvirkar. "We offer more to players in competition and tournaments than the home market does. When our player base becomes even more substantial, the game industry will come full circle. Count on it."



[Return to Main Page](#)