

Dr. Dobb's Life 2.0

Interview with John Zhaoying

by Surfdaddy Orca



John Zhaoying

Second Life's John Zhaoying is really John Jainschigg, Director of the Online Technology and New Business Software Technology Group for CMP Technology. CMP Technology, LLC, is one of the largest multimedia companies in the world. It is the parent company of Dr. Dobb's Portal, www.dj.com, the host for the Life 2.0 event inside Second Life (SL).

CMP Technology's newly created Metaverse group is a full-service SL solution provider that offers turnkey services to global clients "in project conceptualization; design, building and scripting; custom infrastructure engineering; event production; asset management; audience acquisition and community development; and metrics/analytics." The mission statement for the group is to help their customers achieve ROI on Metaverse investments "through subject-matter expertise and market insight; by best-practice in audience acquisition, qualification, community nurturance, and metrics; and by creating integrated solutions that leverage web technology to overcome metaverse scale, security and other limitations, insuring deep engagement with hyperqualified global audiences."

Sun Editor-in-Chief Surfdaddy Orca interviewed John in his virtual offices at Dr Dobb's Island in SL.

Surfdaddy Orca: Can you talk a little bit about your background, about CMP, and how CMP and Dr. Dobb's Journal ended up in Second Life?

John Zhaoying: Sure. I was educated in literature, psychology, and computing, and I was drawn into computing journalism early in my career, and of course, into gaming online. I spent decades in MMORPG and similar environments, and also working the enterprise, data communications, and messaging technologies. I spent decades asking myself when all of this was going to come together with a big bang and create something totally new: a metaverse.

I came in to SL in 2006, compelled by rumors—the beginning of the press buzz as the first corporates started taking root in here, and Electronic Sheep and Millions of Us were founded. And my jaw dropped. It was like paradise. None of the compulsory apparatus of role play, but a thousand times more creative with technical freedom than any "game." As Online Editor for Dr. Dobb's Portal, I realized it was a place that Dobb's needed to be to chronicle the development of the technology, compile its best practice, and help connect real-world coders with what was happening in-world.

It struck me that Dobb's, because of its age and reputation (30+ years on the bleeding edge of computing), was in a unique position to do this. So we jumped. Came up with the idea for Life 2.0. Started buying sims and building on them, and the rest is... well, it's been about seven months. So "history" is a strong word. But it's turning into something.

Surfdaddy Orca: Life 2.0 included speakers from IBM, Sun, Duke University, and several virtual world startups. How did you go about selecting such a distinguished group of speakers?

John Zhaoying: I don't really select speakers. Well, that's not true. There are some stellar presenters and well-known thinkers in the metaverse now, and you just know that whatever they talk about, it's going to be riveting, right? Mostly I select themes, and speakers appear to fit the thematic bill. For the Fall Life 2.0, I wanted to advance some of the topics that we'd spoken about at Spring Life 2.0, for example the open source client and server, metaverse environments that aren't Second Life, and this wild idea that things like SL and Google Earth are moving towards an era of fusion. Which probably makes no economic sense at all, but is a beautiful idea from a technical perspective. Giv-

en these themes, it made sense to ask Wade Roush, and the Forterra, MPK20, and Multiverse crews. And it all sort of came together.

Surfdaddy Orca: Jerry Paffendorf spoke about the Metaverse Roadmap, "when video games meet Web 2.0." How do you see the Roadmap playing out? Who do you view as the key players in making this happen?

John Zhaoying: I'd like to think there are a lot of key players. There's a tendency to believe, in the aftermath of the browser wars, for example, that this kind of business works by the eventual "engulf and devour" principle where one platform will exterminate the others. But I wonder if this metaverse stuff isn't bringing us to a point where... let me see if I can explain my thinking by analogy. I used to love WordPerfect. I knew everything about it. I could do anything with it. It was my constant professional companion for several years of office work. Then I changed jobs and moved into a Microsoft-only shop where I complained bitterly for a couple of weeks, and then I learned Word. So much for that. You adapt.

But imagine what happens when the business titans turn their grinding wheels and it turns out that Second Life loses and "Doppelganger" wins. So we all have to move to an adult version of Doppelganger. Do you see people going willingly? I almost think we're at the point where people will fight to protect their virtual homelands. Right or wrong.

You see this in MMORPGs. They reach a steady state where the makers aren't really interested any more, but the population ... well, it never grows, but it never shrinks either. Gemstone IV is "the homeland" for some people. Text-based. Orca.

Surfdaddy Orca: Do you think the emerging metaverse will end up following open standards?

John Zhaoying: Well, yes and no. I think the way this usually works is that an evolutionary process (with some politics attached) chooses a workable solution and then THAT gets standardized. I should say, a Darwinian process that takes into account things like funding. That was always true in telecom, although telecom has a reputation of being based on hard standards. That they



Surfdaddy Orca interviewed John Zhaoying in CMP's virtual corporate headquarters on Dr. Dobb's Island.

► John

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should be open—absolutely. Closed has never worked for long.

Surfdaddy Orca: Rumors are circulating in the blogosphere about “My World,” that Google may be collaborating with Arizona State University to test a 3D social network that may be tied into Google’s current applications of Google Earth and Google Maps. Do you think that this would end up being compatible with the Linden Lab grid?

John Zhaoying: I thought that story was more or less confirmed this week, no? I’m not sure how important creativity is in determining who ‘wins’ in this kind of space.

Surfdaddy Orca: Meaning the ability to create in-world?

John Zhaoying: Yes. And the advantage that having a lot of user-generated content and commitment to same might confer. It interests me that Google would develop something like this themselves. That bespeaks a couple things—but maybe mostly that this was a project that the geniuses at Google wanted to do, instead of acquiring.

Surfdaddy Orca: The “not invented here” syndrome.

John Zhaoying: Could be. Sure. Still... did you know we do an annual Coder’s Bowl at SD West? This year, the Google team completely walked away with it. Very serious contest. I mean... playful. But this is a public event, at which your stock-in-trade—your coding geniuses—are actually competing for prizes. So you have to expect there’s some PR downside to losing and some strong competitive feelings. These teams come in motivated. And I kind of suspect they don’t get chosen by lottery, haphazardly, the week before the contest.

The guy who led the Google team, Joshua Bloch was described by a number of people who met him for the first time

on that occasion as “The single smartest person I’ve ever met.” He writes a fascinating blog on Google, by the way. Anyway, they took every prize in the room. So when you’re that good, maybe it’s not so much “not invented here” as “this is an important paradigm, we need to try to advance the state of the art, and besides, it’s cool and looks like fun and draws on all our skills and if we win we win big?”

Surfdaddy Orca: You mentioned Wade Roush, a keynote speaker at Life 2.0, who recently led a panel discussion at MIT that included John Hanke (Google Earth), Gur Kim Chi (Microsoft’s Virtual Maps), John Lester (Linden Lab), and Jerry Paffendorf. How do you envision the convergence of geospatial data with 3D social networking?

John Zhaoying: I agree with the panelists, who see a fusion of modes. There’s need for buildable spaces founded on real world terrain and artifacts. But also for imaginary spaces. And for other stuff like the stuff Carbon Project makes, which is wireless geosocial networking that uses Microsoft Virtual Earth and MS P2P networking as backbones. It simply lets you socialize while moving through a space, like a form of augmented reality. You see what you’re walking through, you see a representation of it with added information, and you have multiple communication channels with other people currently sharing the space. All tied together with GPS. It becomes interesting for various reasons—as much as anything because people find it easier, weirdly, to IM a stranger than to walk up to someone and say “hello.” So the network becomes a social lubricant.

I love augmented reality. And I think SL is the ultimate development environment for it. We’ve been fooling around with some ourselves.

Surfdaddy Orca: Can you talk about it?

John Zhaoying: For this Life 2.0 event, we all had headsets that gave us a heads-up on the real names and job

descriptions of avatars in the vicinity. We, meaning “staff.” Not sponsors. Not anybody else.

We didn’t really need the facility, but we thought it might be interesting. In fact, I have to say it was less interesting than I thought it would be. But then again, I wasn’t looking to give VIP treatment to identifiable VIPs. Maybe if I’d had a commercial purpose for knowing, it would have saved me some kind of trouble or helped me do my job better.

In this case, what it taught me (or reminded me) was that everybody in SL has something valuable to say, and it doesn’t correlate to job title in any obvious way.

Surfdaddy Orca: How do today’s businesses go about integrating their 2D web applications with virtual worlds? What new business models do you see emerging?

John Zhaoying: I would love to see more experiments with sensible, one-touch commerce, in-world.

Surfdaddy Orca: How would that work?

John Zhaoying: Take clothing ... Why aren’t RL designers selling clothing in here? Why isn’t there a mechanism whereby the best SL designs get exported to RL?

Surfdaddy Orca: Or furniture.

John Zhaoying: Exactly. Or in some cases, architecture and urban planning—there’s amazing work in here. I’m not saying, necessarily, that I’d buy the boots because I see them on the avatar. But I’d sure like to look at a photo of the real boots on an e-commerce equipped website, if I decide I like them on the avatar. And that’s not uniformly happening.

Surfdaddy Orca: Can you share with me anything about CMP’s plans in meta-verse media and development over the next two years?

John Zhaoying: Yes I think so... CMP believes in this. Several of our peer business units are working with us at various stages to develop plans for different kinds of SL presences and services and events. One is Xchange, who run a brilliant series of global by-invitation-only events that bring together technology vendors and the channel—VARs, integrators, and dealers.

So I guess I could safely say that you can look for more CMP stuff. Events in several RL areas, and some evolution and morphing on the Life 2.0 front as well. We’d like to keep building out that event, trying different things, until we get it 100% right, and continue to use it as a way of testing infrastructure and technology we develop.

Surfdaddy Orca: Thanks for your time, John. And thanks to you and Rissa for the great Life 2.0 show. ☿