

THE BREAKPOINT PREMIERE

BY ANDROO OF BRAINSTORM

zine
BEHIND THE SCENE

My trip to Breakpoint 2009 began in late August 2008 at NVScene. A demoscene outreach crew including some of the best-known European sceners landed in San Jose to participate in a demo party - the nearest demoscene event to my location in my entire life. I had been following the scene since I saw the Rebels "Vectory" demo when I was a kid growing up in Hawaii. But Hawaii is so far from any sceners or events, and I never participated. When I saw the invitation to NVScene, I knew I had to go. It was a watershed event for me. I felt like I

I FELT LIKE I HAD COME UPON MY TRIBE

had come upon my tribe, for lack of a better word. They were idiosyncratic and sometimes irascible, but these were truly my people. The seminars and people I spoke to inspired me to stay in touch with the group, and the method was plain: attend other events such as this one. I decided then that I would attend the next Breakpoint. "I will try to make a production by

then," I told Preacher in the squashed RV sub-party. "No," he said, "you WILL bring something."

Breakpoint 2009 was nearly a victim of the recession. Sponsors pulling out, the prospect of low attendance due to lack of funds, and the generally bad economic conditions meant that there was no money to support compo prizes, seminars, bands, decorations, boozing, a shuttle, or any of the other features that people enjoy about this party. In the months leading up to the event, the organizers put up a progress bar showing the donation levels they would need to be able to provide each of these services, with the lowest bar marking "party happens at all."

I watched the progress bar with great interest. Every time a new level of party was attained a flurry of cheering posts appeared, especially when the booze tent was secured. Soon it became clear that the sceners would cover what the sponsors would not - the organizers had found a way to cover nearly everything using only donations and volunteers.

DAY 1

Bingen am Rhein, Germany. Weather: 80 F (27C) and sunny. SFX: Church bells. Some people were going to sleep in the partyplace, but I'm old and creaky enough to require a hotel. I

checked in with my partner Helen, and we boarded the free shuttle to the venue. When we arrived at the Rundsporthalle, it was surrounded by a fence, snack and drink stands, and



a crowd of people holding beer and wearing black T-shirts. I showed my supporter ticket and bought another ticket for Helen and wandered into the auditorium. I quickly recognized Truck, who I had previously met when he lived in Seattle. He was talking to a very thin black-haired man who could have only been kb. Unfortunately, I didn't get to talk to kb at all because at that point some red-shirted BP staff person appeared and escorted me back to the front desk. I hadn't gotten the proper supporter ticket paperwork. "Oh well," I thought, "I bet I can catch up with kb later." Tip: do not count on being able to

chat with the technical support crew of a 1,000-person media festival.

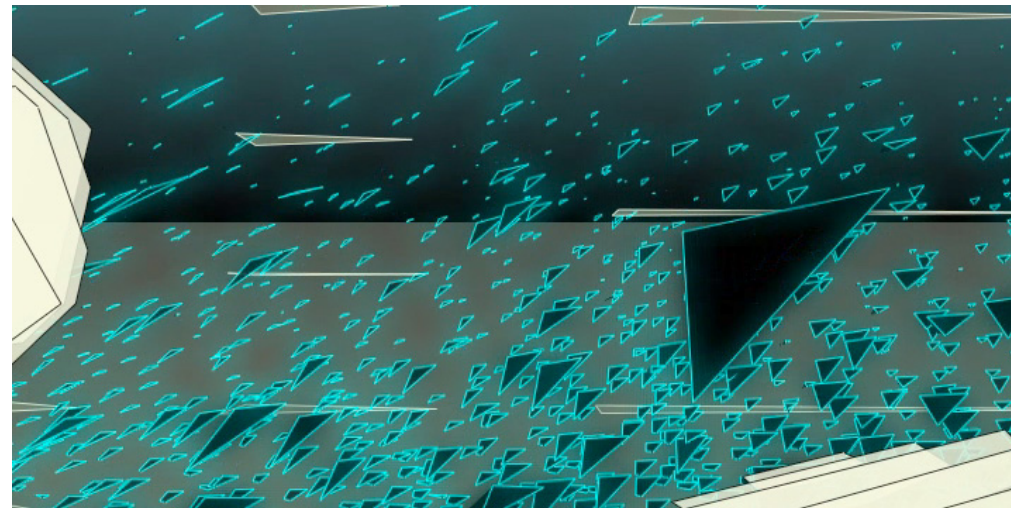
A brief ceremony ensued, involving several million dollars worth of BP currency bearing the faces of prominent sceners. These could apparently be exchanged for actual beers. Truck announced that I was going to meet people, and pulled me outdoors, where the real party, apparently, is. Meeting people at a huge demo-party is weird. I had many extremely brief conversations, wandering around looking for people I recognized. I only knew what the people who had attended NVScene looked like, so I tried to find Gargaj, Preacher,

Navis, et al. Also, unlike most parties, you don't have to explain what the demoscene is when you talk to someone about what you're up to. At this event, I could just say that I had brought a production and people knew what that was, and everyone was pretty positive about that in general.

I'D MEANT FOR IT TO BE A 64K BUT IT WAS A DEMO NOW

At some point I was introduced to Nosfe, perhaps the best-known noise artist in attendance. Very recognizable. So of course I said, "Oh, I remember - you're a metal guy." Nosfe's expression didn't change. "Actually, I'm more of a minimalist electronic musician." Doh. I'll get people's identities straight

someday. The opening ceremony was a variety-show style mix of comedy, performance, dance, and video productions. A video is posted online, which is worth seeing for Jeenio's number alone. (<http://pouet.net/prod.php?which=53098>) Some demosceners like to call out to each other, like barbarian clans communicating across the plains. In particular, the Amiga is invoked like the memory of a heroic ancestor. Amigaaa! Pants off! Junk suuucks! The call and response was there for most of the party.



Preacher arrived, and mentioned that I could take my entry up to the compo machine to see if it would run correctly. This seemed like a really good idea, since there was still time to fix bugs, and I didn't expect that my very first production was anything approaching bug-free. There was a little confusion about which 64K entry I was trying to test and I briefly wound up in the Amiga compo machine area, but I did eventually find the orga team, who quickly discovered that I had linked against a runtime library not included in the compo machine. "You probably have enough room to statically link it," they said. I made the change, but now my binary was over 90K. This would put it in the "Demo" category with the 30 MB entries. I went back upstairs to see if this version would run in the compo. Chaos was there, as was RGBA member IQ, who was most likely there to test "Elevated." I waited my turn, feeling conspicuously noobish. Finally, the compo machine was open, and Chaos flipped through the compo entries looking for mine. I told him I hadn't submitted it because I didn't know what category it would end up in, and that I'd meant for it to be a 64K but it was a demo now. "Happens to the best of us," he said.

The demo ran okay, but I was mortified that it went larger than 64K given the absence of any heavy datafiles. This was entirely due to my ignorance of sizecoding technique. Chaos offered some advice: links to seminars from previous years and pages of hard-won coding knowledge. This was more than I could have asked for, but then he said he could take a quick look at

my code to see how bad the situation was. So down we went to my laptop. In about ten seconds he concluded that there was hope. Remove these features, use intrinsics, completely avoid doing certain things. I could fix it and miss the party, or leave it alone. This was not something I had to think about for very long - I thanked Chaos and began the refactoring work. Back at the hotel that evening I removed unused data, changed algorithms, replaced usage of the STL, and fought the compiler. I worked on it all night, downloaded seminar videos over the hotel network, and examined compiler output to discover what to do next. By 9 a.m., I had it down to 74K.

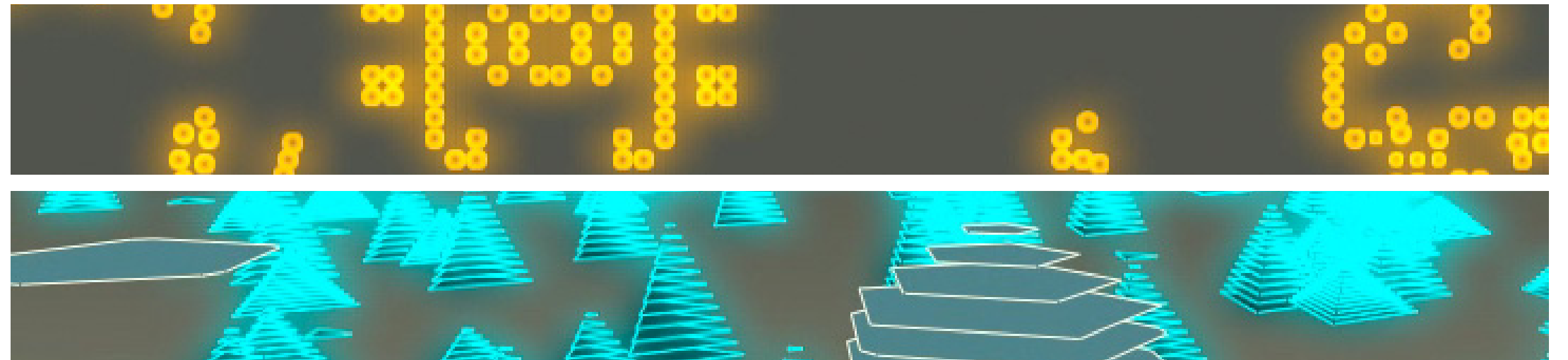
DAY 2

The next day we returned to the Rundsporthalle. Turns out, if you leave the party and take your computer with you, you surrender a permanent seat at a table for the rest of the party. We found a couple of those astoundingly uncomfortable folding chairs in front of the big screen, opened up our computers, and I got to work. I was flipping back and forth between my debug-release target and my statically linked target, and suddenly kkrunchy reported the output was 56K. “Huh,” I thought, “that was a sudden jump down.” And then, slowly, my brain did the comparison between 56 and 64 and realized it was now an intro. A final check with the compo machine and then it was

time to enjoy a beer and currywurst with the demoscene.

A FINAL CHECK WITH THE COMPO MACHINE AND THEN IT WAS TIME TO ENJOY A BEER AND CURRYWURST

Currywurst, to this American, seemed like sliced hot dogs with spiced ketchup on it. Not a bad snack, but not what I initially imagined when I saw the word “curry.” Helen and I were also feeling a little slow after the late-night coding effort, so we went



to get a “large” coffee from the drink vending stand. “Wow, that’s a lot of coffee!” exclaimed the woman selling it to us, who seemed slightly taken aback. It was kind of big, but hadn’t she sold a big coffee to anyone else? I wasn’t the only one pulling all-nighters, after all. One of the first things Truck told

me the day I arrived was that his crewmate DDT was already passed out in a vehicle somewhere. Today he was no longer in a car but sprawled on the lawn. The weather was extremely sunny and warm, and we were concerned that he might be burned. Truck’s solution was to spray aerosol sunblock all over DDT’s sleeping head. Safely protected from the sun, we left him in his comfy lawn spot.

That night, during the Amiga 64K competitions, I sat up in the bleachers near a large delegation of Danes. The Danish sceners, for complicated or perhaps mystical reasons, feel compelled to take off their pants during the demo competition.

They remind each other (and the rest of us) of the custom at regular intervals: “PANTS OFF!” At some point, a scener arrived wearing no shirt. “Shirts off,” someone observed. Then realizing the error, he added: “Not shirts off – PANTS OFF!” The scene.org awards were also presented. Of course, Andromeda had

to make multiple appearances to collect all the accolades for Stargazer, each time slightly drunker than the last. Hyde took this opportunity to offer a critically important piece of advice: “Get off the fucking internet and challenge us!”

DAY 3

This day of compos, like the day before, was compo after compo interspersed with short conversations with sceners. It’s hard to summarize the experience. I recognize the handles but not the faces, so when I see a tall guy with his shirt collar flipped up, I’m not sure what to talk about. But it turns out to be Smash of Fairlight, and now I can annoy him with questions about deferred shading. This dynamic plays itself out many times over the day

THE DANISH SCENERS, FOR COMPLICATED OR PERHAPS MYSTICAL REASONS, FEEL COMPELLED TO TAKE OFF THEIR PANTS DURING THE DEMO COMPETITION

as I meet all sorts of recognizable names from pouet and irc. This is the day of the 64K compo – my compo! I was sure I would be disqualified or preselected out for poor quality. The produc-

tions are presented in rough order of quality, as determined by the secretive Ministry of Truth. I knew mine would be shown first. Or second. Well, definitely third ... but several intros were shown and mine didn’t show up in the first few. At this point, I was certain it had been disqualified and I was paralyzed with nervousness. And then, there it was! Turns out it was the third to last shown. I couldn’t help but glow a little afterwards - or maybe that was just because I hadn’t been breathing.

Things were different after the 64K compo. I’d gone from having zero releases to having one release. Some people actually liked it! Or at the very least, they said it showed evidence of thought and effort. Truck handed me a fancy Trappiste beer that m0d had given him; he said it was a personal prize for making it out here with a working production. Preacher mentioned that I should talk to Axel of Brainstorm. Unfortunately, since I still didn’t know what anyone looked like, I didn’t know how to find him.

DAY 4

Summary: COMPUTER OFF!

The fourth day was awards and shutting down. As we all sat in the butt-breaking chairs, watching the results unfold, the man to my left made sure I was holding a full beer at all times. After three straight days of concentrated demoparty, everyone was a little shell-shocked and quite content to sit in a chair boozing.

My intro placed fourth – This was success beyond expectation. I couldn’t help but resolve to use the time until the next event to make the best production I could, and that’s what I’ve been doing. If the organizers of Breakpoint can pull it off again next year, I plan to be there.

