PEAK EFFECT

BEHIND THE SCENES WITH PEAK TECH

By Christine McCrory

Q&A with IGT's head of Platform Engineering

At first glance, there's no question IGT's Peak cabinets are striking, but inside these beautifully sleek cabinets reside many other advancements. Developing compelling products involves many disciplines and the coordination of a variety of engineering efforts. Obviously, mechanical and electrical engineering teams are involved in creating a new cabinet, but the efforts don't stop there. Software development also plays a critical role in delivering the total product experience. The technology and game development teams also work diligently to take advantage of the new hardware capabilities, while ensuring IGT's incredible game library is available at launch. To understand the technology aspect more fully, I sat down with IGT's head of Platform Engineering to find out how his team contributes to bringing the Peak family to life.

What technology challenges did you face in implementing these compelling new designs? How did you overcome these?

As we introduced these great new designs, one of the first responsibilities was to adapt our greatest games to these stunning cabinets. For example, with updated lighting features, we needed to ensure that our Crystal-series content looked even better on the Peak offering. It's not just enhanced lighting features that have to be addressed, but for Peak, the introduction of a third HD display provided new content possibilities. We worked to adapt the previous video topper content to look incredible on the new displays, freeing the game studios to focus on new content specifically targeting the Peak's capabilities. We worked on how to upscale the resolution and make it look incredible, while also not requiring intensive effort from game development.

The PeakBarTop™ introduces several new features, and one that we are particularly excited about is the Play Indicator, which is intended to benefit bartenders by enhancing customer service and player recognition programs. This feature will work with new and existing adapted games to make it easy to recognize the most valued players. Based on feedback, this is a feature that can be refined and improved on to address our customers' and players' future desires.

Are there plans to continue to add to the functionality of the play indicator? In what way?

The Play Indicator is based on the concept of a thermometer today. We envision the possibility of more interaction with bartender input and see possible opportunities to further integrate into casino operations. Future responsible gaming features were also considered during design. We want to keep gaming a fun activity.

Which were your key software priorities when shaping the next generation hardware family?

Although our players focus on the entertainment aspect of IGT's popular gaming machines, there's a lot more going on inside. Security and reliability of the software and hardware are always a primary concern to the engineering teams.

Maintaining our active popular game library is very important to our customers, and thus we work hard to make sure IGT's valuable content is available on new hardware to meet their needs. But new cabinets also allow our game studios to explore what's possible with new titles like Treasure Box™ that really take advantage of updated feature capabilities.

As pioneers of dynamic multi-game configurations, we strive to improve game switch times with every generation of hardware. We are routinely challenged to improve as the content with every new game becomes more immersive, entails increasingly high resolution and fidelity, and grows comparatively larger in size.

How is our software platform evolving to meet increasing demands in MLP product?

Multi-level progressives have tremendous developer focus at IGT, and we're always looking for ways to enhance those offerings. We're advancing the Peak cabinet's capabilities to self-host bank-wide progressives without the need for a dedicated external progressive controller. Even if you're in a bar where you don't have quite the merchandising options, you can still get our great MLP opportunities without any additional hardware expense. We're also looking into interesting and compelling ways to simplify the progressive management solutions of how we transfer from one progressive game to the next.

How does the introduction of new technology impact the game foundation?

Our game library is managed dynamically on each machine by IGT's advanced gaming platform software. As we introduce new technologies, whether it's more powerful video cards or interesting technologies like the Play Indicator or wireless charging, we always want to push the boundaries. We look for new, great ways to introduce an experience to our players and operators, while continuing to bring them the game performance

they know and deserve. By taking games like Wolf Run® or Ocean Magic® and bringing them onto these new Peak cabinets, we can introduce players and operators to these new technologies in a familiar and comfortable way.

The Peak Family of cabinets is the latest and greatest on the scene for hardware solutions. How do you work to "future proof" these designs? What technology or changes are you planning for in the future?

Pairing a fabulous cabinet with a great game really makes the ultimate package for our players. Players are going to play it, operators are going to love it, and they're going to put it on their floor. While we're excited to see new games like Treasure Box™ and Lunar Disc™ on the PeakSlant32™ or HexBreak3r™ on the PeakSlant49™, it is equally important for us to ensure that as we add more features and new pieces of functionality, all the games that we know and love will still be fully supported and able to take advantage of those aspects.

Can you tell us about how much time goes into the development of a new cabinet?

The development of a cabinet from conception to the time it is deployed in the field is anywhere between 18 and 24 months. Hardware starts out with concepts, and eventually my team engages and gets everything ready for our studios to be able to develop. We make sure all the hardware works, the technology with the new displays is taken advantage of, and everyone knows how to get the best quality out of them. The core gaming platform team is most actively involved with new cabinet development for 10 to 12 months and continues to support our products for their entire life cycle. Once the new cabinet is functional, development focus moves to the game studios with the creation of new vibrant game titles. There are many departments and lots of coordination involved in delivering these cabinets. The fact that we were able to line everything up as the world was entering this pandemic and still deliver such a wonderful product is really a testament to the engineering prowess at IGT.

The PeakSlant32™ features three large screens and a design that initially caused some concern due to its overall size. What drove the decision to move ahead with the larger footprint?

We talked about this a lot, and it came down to these questions. What is the point of the PeakSlant32™? How is it going to drive forward? What is compelling about it? We ultimately knew it was those big, gorgeous screens, and as a result, the finished product would ultimately be larger and a little bit different from our traditional slants. Once we received final mockups, we knew it was the right decision. You can see the presence that the cabinet has: advertising all your progressives on that top monitor, showing all your great, themed artwork on the digital glass, really immersing the player in the main game display. It was a risk, but we knew that player impact was the number one driver for this cabinet. Our customers want these cabinets to stand out and be noticeable on the floor. The larger size is where we went, and I couldn't be happier with how it turned out.

What challenges do you expect to face post COVID-19 with technology components going "end of life" on new cabinets?

Our world around electronic components has now fundamentally changed. In the past, we knew we could lock into a part for five or even ten years at a time. Post pandemic, the new normal is we can anticipate part availability for a year, if that. It has forced us to adapt and rethink the way we do things to be much nimbler, and I'm excited for this change. It will allow us to deliver new and greater functionality faster to our players. Though it initially caused some supply chain issues, ultimately, it is going to force us to adapt and deliver great products faster.

Which cabinet or feature found in the Peak family is your favorite and why?

My favorite cabinet is the PeakBarTop™. It looks amazing on the bar; it fits in so naturally and doesn't look out of place. It also has nice ergonomics and a smooth, huge screen compared to our last one. And it's also versatile. We can take this cabinet and put it in a new casing. For example, look at our new ETG Dynasty offering utilizing the PeakBarTop™. We're also looking at possibly using it in a sports betting environment in the future. It's a great-looking cabinet with a ton of versatility.

Is there anything else you would like to add concerning your department's contribution to the development of the new Peak hardware family?

I need to give a big thank you to the team. When we were working on the PeakSlant32™, our portion was just wrapping up as the pandemic was starting. We were transitioning to working from home and really experiencing uncertainty in the whole market. My team had to buckle down and finish delivering this product amidst the backdrop of a chaotic world. Because of their hard work, when casinos started reopening, we had this beautiful cabinet we could start offering for sale. I couldn't be prouder of the team for all of the personal sacrifice they went through during such a trying time. ■

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