

Meet Mr. Durrett

(Friday, 18 June 2004) - Written by HowlinWolf

Sometimes we forget that our world, our metaverse, was originally just the product of some very talented and imaginative people. One of those individuals was the current Vice President of Operations for There, Inc., Brett Durrett. Many of us may have first heard his name just last week, when he gave the highly anticipated "State of There" speech. But he is no newcomer... no, he's employee #6 at There. Listen as he talks about his time with the company, his dachshund who is the real life inspiration for the dachshunds in-world, There\_test avatars, and much more.

This past Friday afternoon, I had the pleasure of interviewing Brett Durrett, Vice President of Operations for There, Inc.

Brett is dedicated to seeing There succeed, and after speaking with him a bit, I have absolute faith in There's long-term

future. So pull up a chair and find out all you've ever wanted to know about Brett. From the "Real Dachshund" that inspired

There's dachshund, to the many roles Brett has played in There, this member of There's team is as entertaining as he is informative.

HowlinWolf: So Brett, you've been with There, Inc. since 1999?

Brett: Yeah, that sounds about right... a little ov

er five years.

HowlinWolf: What was the company like when you started?

Brett: When I first technically started, it was like three people in an office; although, I'm employee #6, so there were a couple people that had been hired but hadn't started yet. It was a little office about a block from Will Harvey's house, or condo, or apartment, or whatever it is. It was great, it was a really small team, and we were in a small office, and you communicated by sort of doing the "groundhog" thing of poking your head over a cube. At the time I think everyone sort of had an idea about the basic technology we were building, but I don't think we were all necessarily sure about the application of it. But we all sort of understood what we were going to build, and the theme of 'metaverse' was in all of our minds. The question was: was it going to be something that other game companies license out and we sort of rent out space, is it going to become a world unto itself? Those kinds of questions weren't completely answered at the time. But it was pretty amazing; there was a lot of energy and a lot of really dedicated people.

HowlinWolf: Was there ever a point where everybody realized that this thing is going to be really big? Or did it just happen gradually?

Brett: I think in a lot of ways, within a couple y

ears [of There's inception], there were actually some over-estimations on the business side, about how big this is. Hindsight, of course, is 20/20. I'm actually still not convinced that this is "big". I think it will be a while before it gets "big"... but I think we'll get there... in my mind, we haven't gotten "big" yet. I think it's a slow road, though; I don't think it's something that happens overnight.

HowlinWolf: What roles have you played with the company?

Brett: Oh dear lord... um, janitor, mail room clerk, um let's see (laughs)... actually, it's funny, I was originally hired as Director of Third Party Development, but there was a month between when I accepted the offer and when I actually came in to work at the company. As I mentioned, at the time we weren't exactly clear about some of the strategies. We had focused a lot of our effort on having third parties build a lot of content. But in that month's time, there was more clarification on the subject and it was decided that instead of relying on third party development, we were going to be initially building this stuff internally. I remember a conversation between Will Harvey and myself where I came in and said "Well, it doesn't look like you need a Director of Third Party Development." And he said, "Yeah, probably not. Why don't you be... um... Director of Engineering." So I became Director of Engineering to start off with. Ken, the CTO, was also directing engineering at the time, and the way that we divided it up was: my team was building content within the world, and his

team was building a lot of the platform stuff. So I did that for a few years. Eventually, I shifted into sort of a project management role for about a year, and at the same time I was handling IT. For the last few years, I've kept IT on my plate, and I've been dealing with mostly operations, which is basically the running of the live cluster. For the first year, my group was just the tech ops team which was keeping the servers running and building them out. We actually have a bunch of other clusters that they were supporting as well, but as far as the consumer side, that was the only one that they saw. Then starting late last year, customer service has moved out of marketing and moved to be an operational group, and so that's been reporting to me as well. I haven't done anything in the art side yet, so that's about the only part that I haven't dealt with yet.

HowlinWolf: Well, no doubt that's your next stop, then.

Brett: I'm hoping not. If you've seen the "Draw Skip the Turtle" or the pirate thing in magazines... I don't even get the encouragement letter from the art school (laughs)

HowlinWolf: So when you were building content, did you put in any features or locations that you considered to be "yours"?

Brett: Well, I actually used to have Durrett Canyon, but then last year when they did some world updates, Durrett Canyon

went away. But I think my biggest claim to fame, and probably the thing that I'm most hated for on the engineering side, is an object I created. A long time ago, I wanted to build an object that would be a very simple object that would allow us to create large groups of objects without very much overhead for the client, the server, and the network. So I put together this little piece of code that was very simple, very specific to what it was doing; I think it was actually a pretty good piece of code at the time. But what happened is: we found that the fastest way to get new content into the world for new types of objects was to actually build it on top of this code. So this little tiny piece of code that had a very specific purpose sort of ballooned up and I think the majority of the objects in the world are built on this piece of code now. And the code has gotten to the point where people look at it and say "why is it built this way???" It's kind of well known in the engineering group as sort of the thing that kept getting pieced together and actually controls a bunch of the objects in this world. So that's probably my biggest contribution to the world on the engineering side... the fact that most objects in the world are powered by a little piece of code I wrote that wasn't even meant to power them.

HowlinWolf: When you log on and go into the world, are you able to ever just relax and enjoy the place? Or are you always looking at it with a critical eye; like, viewing it as code instead of as a living community?

Brett: My wife is a pretty avid user of There, and I actually get more enjoyment from watching her a

nd listening to her experiences than I do from logging in myself. Most of the time that I actually log in with my personal avatar Brett, a couple things always happen. First, I get a lot of contacts from members in the world, so it's difficult for me to actually do things that are normal, like communicate or interact; I get a lot of IM's that pop up with people asking me about bugs or problems or business stuff, and I do like to try to be responsive to that. So it's difficult for me to go in with my own personal avatar and enjoy the place. Second, it's difficult for me to focus when I'm logged in because if something doesn't work, I focus on it; I start jotting down that this is a problem and we need to do something with it. So it's hard for me to really enjoy my time logged in with my own avatar. . But I do like to listen to my wife's stories and I like to watch her log in and use the product, because I think it gives me an other perspective.

HowlinWolf: As a whole, what do you think about the community that has developed in There?

Brett: The thing that I'm most impressed by is this: if a member somehow has a will to do something and to make something happen, they will. There are a few things that you can't do, and while we're not promising any updates, we are actually working on ways to enable members to do more things. And I think we'll be pleasantly surprising people in the future. But I'm always impressed with the way that when people want to do something, they're going to find a way. Even

very early on, when we first started our trials and our first beta periods, you would see people who, despite the much worse dropping interface we had back then, would painstakingly stack hundreds of ramps to build a giant ramp up into the sky. I remember we would occasionally walk around and see some of the things that were happening and we'd think "that's insane that somebody would take so much time to do that." So I think that's the thing that I'm most surprised with, the fact that if people have the ability to do something, they will go to great lengths to make it happen. A lot of people have such a passion for this place.

HowlinWolf: So do you see the potential for more third party development to come in the future?

Brett: Very much so. I think that one of effects of the recent changes is: we're going to be focused more on that, because that's a way to really get new stuff into the world. Over the last three weeks, I've been really focused on other issues, and part of that focus has been trying to assess what tools and resources we have available. So I've been spending a lot of time trying to figure out how we might develop new features. I think that we're going to be doing things that will greatly expand the breadth of third party development that we'll have. I don't expect something like this to be working in the next 30-60 days necessarily, but I think it becomes very important. We really have to rely on the community for some of the things like this. And I think this is really important to note: a lot of members have contacted me a

nd said "Hey, I know how to program, or I know how to do this or that..." And that's what motivates us to make sure that we get these programs working properly. CrystalShard is a good example of somebody who, given a little bit of help, could actually do amazing things for us. He is a great motivation, so let's get the tools to people like CrystalShard to help build some of these things and actually make new content for the members; new games and stuff like that.

HowlinWolf: Have you seen the jail that somebody constructed where close to 20 of the There\_test avatars have been rounded up?

Brett: (laughs) I haven't personally seen it, but we've exchanged some emails around the office about it.

HowlinWolf: Everybody wants to know: what's the deal with the underwear? Why don't the test avatars have pants?

Brett: I think that gets to the heart of BigEights. To be honest with you, I have no insight into how or why they were outfitted in any particular way... I don't actually have a lot of background on their wardrobes, other than that they all have BigEights shirts on. But as far as their imprisonment goes, I think it's good that they're all in one place. They are a very social group, so isolating them would be unfortunate. And of course, we've always found them to be very dedicated



workers.

HowlinWolf: Yeah... so what does BigEights mean?

Brett: Well, we haven't been able to divulge what BigEights means... you as a journalist are going to have to dig and find out the truth behind BigEights.

HowlinWolf: BigEights... ok, I'll do my homework while we're on the subject of things you probably can't divulge... I'm going to ask anyway: who is GOD?

Brett: I think I actually know who it is, but I'm not positive... but I can't reveal the identity of any member avatar... so I'm sorry but, I can't "out" GOD.

HowlinWolf: So tell me a little bit more about yourself... this role that you've recently taken on with There... this is quite different from what you've done previously with There, right?

Brett: Yeah, and I don't consider myself a great "community" person. I think that there are other people who could do it better than me. And one thing that I've tried to relay to people is...we're changing roles so much right now that it's possible that if one person is doing something this week, next week they could be shifted to another job and someone else is doing their job. So with the community role, I'm very careful to make sure that I keep the word "act

ing" in front of my title,  
because I don't necessarily think that I'm the perfect person for this job.

HowlinWolf: So you're married... do you have any kids?

Brett: Yes, in fact. I have a son who is 8 weeks and 5 days old right now!

HowlinWolf: Congratulations!

Brett: Thank you.

HowlinWolf: Do you have any pets?

Brett: Yes, I have a cat who is deranged and insane; I also have a miniature dachshund named Turbo... in fact, if you ever see a dachshund running around in-world named Turbo, he could be mine. And believe it or not, the real Turbo was actually the inspiration behind the dachshund dog that you can buy in There. So that's his sole claim to fame.

HowlinWolf: Well, Brett, thank you very much for your time.

Brett: You're welcome, and have a great weekend!

Throughout the interview, Brett repeatedly emphasi

zed that he thinks that people will be "pleasantly surprised" with what they see happening in There. Despite the general overriding feeling that started a couple weeks ago that There was just going to turn off the servers, Brett has a great amount of optimism and enthusiasm. And those positive vibes rub off. Spend five minutes with him and you'll feel it too.

Now, as to the "BigEights" thing... thanks to the quick and nimble researching of my assistant editor, I've found out a little bit about BigEights. But I'm going to leave it at that ...