All I know about CBP I learned in San Diego ^H^H^H^H^H^H^H^H Berkeley

As I've done for the last few years, here's a tedious synopsis of the Waterside Computer Book Publishing conference held in Berkeley last week. I believe that xian has blogged the whole show, but he was sitting on the other side of the room, so here's a "right-winger's" point of view.

The venue was the Berkeley Marina Radisson, fairly similar to the digs we've been at in San Diego the last few years in terms of layout and foghorns. The physical infrastructure was actually sort of disappointing; the road to the Marina was more of a ride at Six Flags than a throughway for automobiles, there was no high-speed access in the sleeping rooms (although the wireless access in the session rooms was nifty for those who could take advantage of it), and much of the digs were pretty worn down. Carpeting was frayed, elevators were a risk, ice and pop machines were out of order. And the last big earthquake to hit the area was still evident - a marble dropped on the floor of my room by the door accelerated as it rolled down to the window of its own volition - and the door to the porch was out of square to the frame by about 3 inches - permanently. Good thing they provided lots of blankets!

However, the staff at the Radisson was more than outstanding - one night, I was going to bail on getting ice after finding out the machine across the hall was broken. However, as I was returning to my room, the maid walking down the hall saw me and insisted on hoofing it to another floor for a bucket for me - and refused a tip. Gosh! The prices were pretty reasonable and some of the mess was due to some construction and rehab that may fix some of the problems encountered this year.

Rumour has it that we'll be back at the same place next year, and goodness knows one doesn't go to a conference because of the facilities. At least I don't. Conferences could be held at the O'Hare Sheraton for all I care. So enough crabbing.

Following are my notes of the various sessions. I've tried to represent what the speaker said fairly, while at the same time adding my own $0.02. Any mistakes, misunderstandings, omissions, misrepresentations, or otherwise general screwups are my fault, although it's actually probably because someone was talking in my ear.

Keynote

Tim O'Reilly opened the sessions Thursday afternoon with a talk the title of which no one was quite sure, because mechanical difficulties prevented Tim's PowerBook from displaying at the correct res with the projector. (This whole business would be a lot easier if we didn't have to mess with hardware.) So I'll refer to his keynote as "Watching the Alpha Geeks". Tim sort of rambled through a bunch of interesting observations of the past couple of years, and pondered, as he is wont to do, about the next few as well. I'm not sure that there was a specific point he led up to (although at one point he promised he was going to bring it all together in a big finish), but when you talk about the future, would doing so have been useful or productive? I go to conferences to be reminded of things I already knew but forgot, and his talk was excellent fodder in this regard. Among his observations and quotes (most of which I have no idea bout the originator):

"An invention has to make sense not when it's started, but when it's finished"
"The future is here. It's not not evenly distributed."
The one quote I've been repeating since he mentioned it was from his Mom: "Bill Gates seems like the sort of guy who you'd invite over to dinner, and he'd take all of the mashed potatoes for himself."

Tim was emphatic that we're still just on the cusp of the second major computing revolution (the first was the PC itself, 20 years ago, the second was the Internet). "We have a lot more Internet time ahead of us." I would completely concur. While the Internet is ubiquitous to us - at our house, with PC's connected to the Internet via high speed in every room except the head, we don't get a newspaper, use a phone book or have a map, that ubiquity ends when we walk out the door. Why don't we have an Internet connection in the car, and in the local pub where I'm meeting a colleague, so we can fire up our machines and chat with a third pal in another city? Imagine how your behavior and attitude will change with that capability. And that's still just the beginning.

He continued to talk about changes in the industry. For example, that everyone gets Open Source wrong, that everyone dwells on Linux because it's closest to what has gone before. But what is important is not the battle between Windows and Linux, it's the apps - and that the apps for Linux are not The Gimp or OpenOffice.org, but they're Amazon, Google, and blogging.

The idea of software as a service - not a service like "service and support" that you might get when you pick up a copy of Red Hat Linux, but service in terms of matching up our needs with data that's out there.

So how does all of this tie into book publishing? He first reminded us that we're really not in the business of producing books - reaching IT professionals through book stores is like painting your front hall through the letter drop. ORA's "Big Hairy Corporate Goal" is making innovator's knowledge accessible to those who are following in their footsteps. This requires constant innovation - people who have entrenched business models tend to be the enemy of innovation because they have extended a great deal of effort getting to where they are and they don't want to 'waste' that effort.

So reaching the IT people is going to take continual experimentation and innovation.

Open Source

The next session was Mark Taub (Prentice Hall), Bruce Perens (Open Source Evangelist) and Bill Pollock (No Starch Press) talking about Open Source. Prentice Hall and Bruce Perens are producing a series of books about various open source topics. What's notable is that they're all being produced under the Open Publication License, which means that, unlike traditional publishing, commercial redistribution is permitted. See opencontent.org for more details on this.

Mark spoke first, discussing the business model and the risks and rewards. After the book itself has been out for 90 days, the electronic version will be available for free. This may seem like risky situation, but, obviously, they've thought long and hard

about doing it. He made it clear that each book in the series had to meet the same profit goals as regular books.

He divided the risks and rewards possibilities in terms of customers, authors, and publisher. The customer should see high quality documentation, free, low risk to try before buying, search capability and portability with ebooks. The downsides to the customer are that multiple electronic versions may evolve, thus creating confusion and difficulty in reconciling versions, and that new print versions may show up more often, requiring new purchases for people who want the print book.

Authors should see increased exposure, the opportunity to take a leadership role in the OS community, better editions through collaboration, and hopefully (although this was a guess), increasing sales and thus higher royalties. The downsides map to the rewards fairly well - the possible loss of control over the content due to collaboration, unwanted intensified scrutiny, loss of rights royalties and potentially decreased sales since people can get the electronic book for free.

The publisher's rewards include a financially responsible way to give back to the OS community ("altruism within the bounds of commerce"), broader exposure of series, better books, better authors, and increased sales. The downsides are exposure to rogue publishers (who can simply reprint the book 'as is' without the expense - although they must still include the original publisher's name as large as the title), impact on third party rights revenues, and decreased sales.

Bruce then took over and spoke more vigorously about his stake in the gig. He first asked "Who here has a clue about the economics of Open Source?" One hand in the audience rose. He spoke about the key point of software as being a cost center to a company - and that software like an operating system doesn't differentiate one business from another. They CAN compete in the custom application layer on top. As a result software companies that are competitors can collaborate on the operating system. That's why IBM and HP can both contribute to Linux - Linux doesn't differentiate their business - the packaging and other stuff they provide - hardware, services, and so on - differentiate the businesses.

In a vaguely similar vein, he said that they were using the ebooks to sell the print books - and that when you can curl up with an ebook, then that model is going to have to be looked at again.

He closed with some thoughts about the richness of possibilities of collaboration. "In the age of the Internet, there are no isolated nuts anymore. You can always find 50 other nuts to work with you on something."

Bill Pollock did another one of his classic slide shows, each slide containing no more than about four words (and often just one). His company, No Starch Press, while not related to Peren's series, has been producing OS books under a variety of licenses for a number of years, and that the license that they use is up to the author - if the author is passionate about using a specific license, that's what they'll use. He reiterated the idea that ebooks were really not a threat yet - that people want print books.

Then the floor was opened to Q&A. One of the first questions that was asked was

about the mapping of music to books - how they compared. Bruce said that if your software isn't any good, you don't get a community. With music, you don't need a community to produce. He also noted that the drive to combat piracy is having, and has the potential even more widely, to stifle competition due to the requirements of the anti-piracy techniques being overwhelming to the small producer. While the big players may not have the initial intent to do so, they probably aren't too worried about the small companies going under either.

What prevents a competitor with a much lower cost structure (like those overseas) from undercutting Peren's?" Taub replied that it hasn't happened yet, and he and Bruce both opined that the rogue would be shut out by peer pressure. Some in the audience were not sure about hat one - why would a retailer care? One company offers the book for $10, the other, with a much lower cost structure, offers it for $5 - and it's basically the same book. Taub also mentioned other strategies to counter this type of behavior should they happen, such as rolling out new editions more quickly, and son on. Frankly, though, he said, some companies do this now, and he shrugged.

Another question had to do with how to make use of contributors to an Open Source work. The options are (1) insist all contributors work under same license, or (2) ask contributor to sign over their copy right, or (3) ask them to relicense. Why should they sign over their work? What's the benefit? The benefit is that the publisher and primary author act as the master compiler (much like Tovalds is the final arbiter.)

Certification

Noel Edde started out the session on certification with a look at the history of cert books - the early years, 94-96, through the growth 970-99, the boom 98-00, and drop 01-02 and then wondered what would happen now.

Ed Tittel had a pretty interesting tale about "Re-launching Exam Cram". The Exam Cram series was one of the casualties of Coriolis going under last year, and there were a number of issues facing with trying to salvage something of it. One was what to do with the existing materials after the company went under; another was simply the legal issues of the copy rights and licenses. Fortunately for Ed, Bill Gladstone was able to secure the license to the "Exam Cram" name and the materials as well (I think), and after a hiatus of a few months, Exam Cram II was launched at the end of 02 and beginning of 03.

Friday opened with the Computer Publishing Panel, where four publishers all talked about their companies and offered up some opinions of the biz and the mess we're all in.

Nancy Aldrich-Ruenzel from Peachpit started out talking about how one measures success in a market where everyone is losing sales left and right. Then she addressed the two Peachpit principles - people and relationships. Peachpit hasn't tried to be all things to all people - they focus on the creative professional and the creative wannabe (user). She came back to the theme of being consistent and predictable - how many times have you gone back to a restaurant where you had a bad meal the first time you visited? Another tip she passed along was to be "pathologically conservative about predicting success." In times like this, that's good advice.

Scott Rogers from Osbourne recounted the start of the Osborne Computer Company - 1 million/year in Sept 81, 100 million/year in Feb 83, bankrupt a few months later. Why? Pre-announcement of a new product stopped the purchases of the existing product; the resulting cash flow problems were unrecoverable. He talked about a 'back to basics' mantra, fewer books, unique competitive positions, and the requirements to support a book in new ways.

Andy Cummings from Wiley did yet another "What's New with Dummies" spiel which unfortunately wasn't news to many in the audience, but he slid a very interesting tidbit that I suspect went past many - they've done three research studies for the Dummies series - in 98, 00 and 02, which is pretty much unique in the publishing industry.

Lucinda Rowley from Microsoft Press entertained us with another twist on "our ongoing identify crisis in the business". Press can never decide if they're a floor wax or a dessert topping - this year, their mission is to "back up the larger corporate goals by supporting software and improving customer satisfaction. But also selling books!" So it appears they're still confused. Echoing Rogers, she indicated that 03's change du jour would be 'back to basics', but at the same time, looking at expanding past the bookstore and going where the customers are - college bookstores, corporate learning centers and online channels.

She talked about the "in" buzzwords at a 'kinder, gentler Microsoft' this year - collaboration, communication, ecosystems, values, and what's no longer fashionable - feature bloat, information at your fingertips, complexities and the kitchen sink.

Again, echoing another theme introduced by O'Reilly, Lucinda talked about social networks - knowing not only who's online, but who knows who you know (there was a /. article on this on Monday: http://slashdot.org/articles/03/04/14/0347236.shtml?tid=120), and who is working on the same projects. Finally, she discussed the value of the author- publisher combination in being able to bridge the gap between UI and usability, but they're still simply just documenting the interface. Imagine, she closed with, what we can do when the interface no longer has to be documented - and we can go beyond that.

The floor was then opened to Q&A and the first question to hit the panel was about the multi-channel model - can publishers sell directly from their own website as well as through existing channels (stores, Amazon, etc.) The publishers all agreed that while they might have tried to be destinations in the past, they realized that setting up a 'portal' wasn't a core competence, and thus have turned to simply supporting their books and supporting the sites that are destinations.

The second question was about whether authors are leaving the business because of fewer books, or if there are more authors because they're out of work elsewhere. The general consensus was that people are leaving or diversifying past simply writing books. And some authors who had day jobs are now too stressed with longer workdays (to keep their jobs) to do a good job writing.

Harold Davis and Gary Cornell talked about .NET or .NOT. Their not-so-startling

revelation was that .NET adoption has been much, much slower than expected - 52% of developers polled (about.com) said they would never upgrade to .NET but instead will be sticking with VB6 until their cold, dead fingers are pried from the keyboard. Other factors have also hurt - the flood of books (244 VB.NET books alone), many of which were pretty bad, the early adopter curve phenomena, the fact that you can't search on "C#" on Amazon (the # is a terminating character), and the lack of 'mom and pop' developers all contributed to a disaster in the .NET market.

Still, .NET is critical to Microsoft, and they've got the resources to wait. They recommended to publishers to pull poor quality and non-starters from the market immediately, and to develop niche and advanced books - although these are the hardest to do - people who can do advanced books well are too busy developing to write. And if you're not writing fro Microsoft Press, you don't have to - and shouldn't - stick to the party line.

Alan Cooper opened the Friday afternoon sessions after a lunch that was terrifically delicious (one often doesn't expect much from sit-downs at conferences, right?) Alan is just fun to listen to, although his session, "Imagine this", started out strong but kind of went on too long. He spent most of his time talking about what software development would be like if people acted rationally. Imagine a medium of pure thought, imagine a factory with no variable cost, imagine a distribution network where shipping is free and instantaneous, and so on.

Once he finished with the "imagine..." slides (there were about 30 or 40, I think), he discussed the concept of software as craft, and that mass manufacturing devalued craft. The end of the industrial age (did you know it's over?) heralds a new age of craft.

The last line I wrote down was the idea that if you're not immersed in your subject, your not a professional. But if you're immersed, you don't see the big picture, and that's why software developers need management - to see the big picture. What a disappointment! *smile*

Dan Brodnitz from Sybex and Paul Temme of CMP talked about emerging topics and technologies. Dan talked about the business side of things - emerging markets do better during tough times because most mainstream markets aren't bought as heavily. He also emphasized the difference between emerging technologies and emerging book markets - not always the same thing.

Dr. Lee Sun from Multi-Lingua Publishing discussed the Chinese market, providing an detailed discussion of the what the market consists of, how it works, and who's involved, and where publishers (and authors) should direct their energies.

I was just thrilled to be in a city where there wasn't four inches of snow on my front walk waiting to be shoveled, so I wandered in and out of sessions on Saturday, and my notes are accordingly less than copious. I enjoyed listening to Peter Monadjemi from Germany, a successful Windows author with a passionate perspective. He noted that 15 years ago, the book market was supposed to be dead in 5 years because software would be so easy to use, and that the generation that hasn't grown up with books hasn't been born yet. And he closed with some of his viewpoints - that books

with attitude are more successful than plain jane titles, that books with good working examples are more valuable - but much harder to write. And if you want your books to be translated easily, make sure that your books can be translated easily. For example, screen shots can be difficult to set up and if they're too hard to do, they'll just be dropped from the international version.

Michael Larsen and Elizabeth Pomada talked about writing proposals for the trade (non-computer books). If you were interested in the topic, they had a lot of interesting ideas - they spoke about the importance of the title for perhaps ten minutes alone! The one tip that I'd heard before but is good to repeat is that publishers of trade books like series - the author who can crank out a book once a year over and over is much more valuable than a one-hit wonder. Finally, they discussed the value of relationships - much more so than computer books, the author is responsible for making the book work - and the more people you know, the further your book will go. Jacqueline Susann has 7,000 names in her address book - Harvey McKay has 12,000 entries in his Rolodex.

Summary

All in all, the mood was much more subdued than in the past 'go-go' years. Attendance was down perhaps 50% from two years ago. That meant, however, that one had a chance to talk with nearly everyone there, although I still left Sunday morning with a few "Need to talk to" items on my To Do list not crossed off. As Ed Tittel mentioned, the theme for this year's conference should have been "Still here, still kicking". Morbid, yes, but in large part, very applicable.

Waterside appears to be branching out past computer book projects into other types of writing (fiction, business, etc.) and a few speakers this year had nothing to do with computer books. It'll be interesting to see how 2004 turns out.