

The Godfather of competitive gaming

Posted by Steven dfb Leunens on 2010-03-11 16:47:47

Tags: Interview, angel, munoz, avault, cpl

Angel Munoz is a man who, to most eSports fans, needs no introduction. Seen as a pioneer in the gaming industry and called the (god)father of competitive gaming, he laid the foundation to what eSports has become today.

The Cyberathletes Professional League or short CPL still stands as one of the best competitive tournaments the world has seen and in its prime years counted as the reference for everyone else.

Angel Munoz lead the CPL for over 11 years and sold the company in 2008 to an investment group from Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates who now continue to run CPL branded events. After that Angel stepped out of the spotlight of competitive gaming to focus on other projects but has returned to grant us an exclusive interview.



First of all Angel, welcome and thanks for agreeing to this interview. After the sale of the CPL you seem to have dropped off the grid. What have you been up to lately?

Thanks for inviting me. After we completed the sale of the CPL I spent a couple of years outside of the public eye to help re-focus my attention on the current market trends and to try to determine which trends showed promising opportunities. Recently I've realized that digital media is experiencing a huge transformation, and I'm working in establishing some key fronts in that evolving landscape.

What is the idea behind The Adrenaline Vault, what makes it stand out from the rest?

I think Michele White, Editor-in-Chief, describes Adrenaline Vault best when she says, "The Avault of today still holds true to its original goal, but instead of being merely an online repository of 'all the gaming news that's fit to print', it's become an interactive online community for sharing ideas and opinions." I'm not sure there is anything immensely different about the Adrenaline Vault (Avault) from other gaming sites, but there's a core group of people that read the site daily (about 5,000) and that is enough to motivate us to get them timely and honest information about our common passion... video games.



Angel Munoz posing for a picture during one of his CPL World Tour events.

How do you hope to see this project evolve? Where do you see it in five years from now?

Well the Adrenaline Vault (and its popular Podcast show) is just one of the projects we are working on. We recently announced a new Podcast show with gaming icon Stevie Case that will launch this month on St. Patrick's Day (March 17) and is called Stevie FTW (www.ftwpodcast.com). Some will remember Stevie as CPL's first female pro-gamer. We also signed an agreement with another talent called Evil Ed which will have a Podcast show more in line with the likes of Howard Stern, and we are working on a few more shows. Eventually we hope to manage a network of compelling shows that should have something interesting for about everyone in technology and gaming; this will most likely take a few years to fully develop.

Did you start Avault because you wanted something different? It took you nearly two years to get back on your feet after the CPL, was Avault the fresh start you needed, away from the controversy struck world of eSports?

The Adrenaline Vault celebrates its 15th birthday on November 1st of this year, so it's not a new project. I launched Avault a few years before CPL. :)

In the two years that I was observing the current market trends, I also worked as a consultant for several gaming ventures (including the now defunct CGS), and finally worked with the Adrenaline Vault staff to make the site relevant again.

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Many regard you as the (god)father of competitive gaming and a pioneer in eSports. Looking back at your ventures in gaming, how do you feel about this? Do you think there is some truth in that?

There's always been some controversy about that, but I think I'm a lot more comfortable with "pioneer of professional computer game competitions." This shows respect to the efforts made by Twin Galaxies in the 80's in reference to arcade competitions, and to the other large prize tournaments that took place before CPL, like Red Annihilation. We certainly did approach things differently, for example by standardizing competitions. The CPL was the first large-scale organization that enforced all tournament computers to be identical. What seems so logical today was virtually unheard of in 1997, and we had to convince the gaming community that standardization was an essential component of building a new sport.

The new CPL management is walking a different path and focusing mostly on the Asian market. The glory days of huge prize funds and massive international events seems to be over for the CPL, would you do it differently if you were still in charge?

Times have changed since those glory days. We are now in a global recession, eSports is no longer grass roots and companies have tight marketing budgets. I think that CPL's new management is wise to adapt to the current times by focusing on the fastest growing market in the world: China, and by creating other value propositions for their partners and sponsors (like huge traffic numbers) instead of just huge prizes.

I am really proud of CPL's new management; they took the brand over in a tough market and under tough circumstances and with tons of perseverance and hard work have made a significant impact in Asia. I can't wait for them to start releasing to the public all of the great things they are working on.

Looking back at all the ups and downs of the CPL in hindsight, is there anything you would do different? Would you do it all over again?

I turned 50 on March 6 and when you get to see life from a perspective of elapsed time, there's little that given a chance you would not do differently. I would have loved to be a better son, a better brother, a better father, a better husband, a better friend, a better person and of course a better leader for CPL and the gaming community, but we get to play our role in the theater of life only once - so it makes no sense to entertain thoughts of what things we could have hypothetically done differently. What I can do now is apologize to those that feel I wronged them in any way, and take the lessons learned to my new endeavors and apply them to the best of my ability.

Looking back at a decade of competitive gaming in the CPL we can, beyond any doubt, say that the CPL is responsible for laying the foundation of what eSports has become today. It has greatly contributed to the community and set an example for others to follow. What do you think was the biggest achievement that the CPL obtained?

I think our biggest achievement was making eSports viable. Others may have thought about it first, and yet others may have done some tournaments first, but CPL made eSports a real option for many people across the globe. Thousands of people today make their living in or around eSports, from pro-gamers, media, organizers, vendors, to leagues, sponsors and corporations. And they all owe a bit of gratitude to the CPL's groundbreaking efforts.

My hope is that one day the original management team of the CPL, Mike Wardwell, Tim Schuh, Monte Fontenot, Kimberly Vizurraga and the late Jerry Wolski get the industry recognition they deserve. They were pioneers that pursued a dream that seemed improbable if not almost impossible at the time.



Angel Munoz posing with the rest of his CPL team in 2005.

Despite all the positives the CPL had to cease its activities. What do you think lead to this decision and what were the things that went wrong? Could it have gone any other way?

We ceased our 2008 tournament activities for a few reasons, but primarily because we were experiencing diminishing returns and our cash flow turned negative. The only way to see this through was to cancel the tournaments and then to try to re-invent the CPL in an entire new way.

That's why we were so amiable to the plans proposed to us by the current owners of the CPL brand. They wanted to start fresh and told us that it would take them two years before they could start moving the brand forward again. In retrospect, this proved to be the best decision for everyone and they were absolutely right about the timing involved.

When Sierra entered as partner of the CPL the Sierra games World in Conflict and FEAR were picked and a \$500,000 prize purse was announced. Months later however, both games have been dubbed unplayable in a competitive environment and unsuitable for such large competitions and the turnout at events was at an all-time low. Many critics claim that this is what sealed the fate of the CPL, would you agree?

That certainly did not help but Sierra is not to blame. They were very proactive and received world promotion for their games, and the games sold a lot more than what they invested in the tournaments. For CPL it was a lot tougher, we were trying to contain expenses and generate revenue, Sierra did not cover the full prizes and sponsors were starting to retract in anticipation of a tough market, and the decreased foot traffic definitely had a negative impact on perception.

How hard is it to look at the CPL, something you founded and helped grow, and realize you no longer have any involvement in the project planning and decision making?

It's a little weird because I did it for eleven years, but ultimately I feel pleased that the brand continues to expand, especially now that I'm now focused on other trends and possibilities.

In a recent interview you said that you don't follow the competitive gaming scene that much anymore. Did you still follow your successors the World Series of Video Games (WSVG) or the Championship Gaming Series (CGS)? What did you think of their concepts?

I consulted for CGS for over a year but they did not listen much :) In the end I thought both were valiant attempts, but the market in North America just does not seem ready for primetime eSports, and new sports simply cannot be forced on people.

Back in November 2009 you seemed to be involved in the GXF gaming event in San Juan, Puerto Rico, where your personal roots lie. Could you tell us a little bit more about this event? What was your involvement in this event?

I had no direct involvement in the GXF event and did not attend it. I did consult for the organizers for a few months, and their event was financially successful. I no longer have the time to help them, so I informed them a few months ago that I could no longer consult or help run their operation as they had proposed. They are a smart bunch and I'm sure they can manage on their own :)

Does this mean that over time we might see a return of Angel Munoz to the competitive gaming scene and the events business? Are there any plans afloat for future events?

Not really, although I have recently been invited to visit China for a CPL event. Now that could be very exciting for me :)

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Angel Munoz posing for a picture with Sheryl Huang from Nvidia, at that time sponsor of the CPL.

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Angel Munoz posing with DJWheat.

How are you balancing your investment banking firm NewWorld with your passion for gaming?

I officially left investment banking about 12 years ago, but NewWorld still makes some occasional investments in start-ups that are in fields of core-competency for us. These days we are really busy with digital media and I think the community will be pleasantly surprised with the quality of our shows. Much of them will be related to gaming.

Quick questions

What is your favorite song with "Angel" in it?

I have two: Back to the Future 's "Earth Angel" (Marvin Berry 's version) and Eurythmics' "There Must Be An Angel."

Puerto Rico or Dallas?

Dallas. I love this city. :)

The CPL or Avault?

Both The CPL and Avault.

Avault or NewWorld?

NewWorld.

I would like to thank Angel Munoz for taking the time to answer our questions. Feel free to leave your ideas and thoughts in the comments or suggestions as to who you would like to see interviewed next. You can also follow me on Twitter (www.twitter.com/stevenleunens) and let me know there or just stay up to date on the next articles and interviews coming up :)

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