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TECHGY

uWink's founder and CEO
Nolan Bushnell (seated),
and CTO, Brent Bushnell

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Eat, Drink & PLAY GAMES

BUSHNELL CONTINUES LEGACY OF FIRSTS WITH uWINK, THE INTERACTIVE RESTAURANT
WHERE TECHNOLOGY AND GAME-PLAY CREATE PERFECT STORM FOR DINING OUT

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL SEXTON

Nolan Bushnell (right), CEO of uWink and founding father of the video game industry, knows that guests are ready to take their dining experiences to the next level. uWink CTO Brent Bushnell (left) leads the technology charge.

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A photograph of Nolan Bushnell, an older man with glasses and a mustache, wearing a dark suit jacket over a light-colored shirt. He is seated at a table in a restaurant setting. On the table in front of him is a glowing, interactive interface with a grid of blue lines and a circular button. Two glasses of wine are also on the table. The background is dimly lit with yellow ambient lighting.

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Eat, Drink & PLAY GAMES

Bushnell continues legacy of firsts with uWink, the interactive restaurant where technology and game-play create perfect storm for dining out

WRITTEN BY ABIGAIL A. LORDEN

If the latest venture from restaurant entrepreneur Nolan Bushnell seems like a grown up and more sophisticated version of Chuck E. Cheese restaurants — where game play meets meal time — there's good reason for it. Bushnell not only founded Chuck E Cheese in 1977, but also video game company Atari Corporation in 1972. He has taken the concept of entertainment-based dining to new heights as founder and CEO of uWink, Inc., a digital entertainment company based in Los Angeles, California. The company operates three restaurant locations by the same name and has franchise plans in the works.

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The uWink concept aims to create an uber-social entertainment and dining experience. Touch screen terminals are mounted at each table and loaded with not only digital restaurant menus (accessible in eight languages), but a breadth of games that facilitate interaction among guests. Diners can place their food and drink orders from the terminals, which are then automatically routed to the kitchen and delivered by runners.

Instead of a wait staff, uWink restaurants have entertainment directors who encourage group game play and social interaction. Even the walls are a part of the experience, displaying large projections that can be changed to reflect literally anything, including a theme, a game, or even guests' own electronic drawings.

THE PARTY GENOME

"The genesis of uWink had as much to do with games as with restaurants," Nolan explains. "A party is usually some combination of games, food and drink. If you think of some of the more fun parties you've been to, they had structure with competition and prizes. So I thought, 'Could we create an environment that captures those DNA triggers for fun?'" Focusing on the current trend in social networking and online gaming, Bushnell

quickly found that certain games, when coupled with food and alcohol, create what he calls a "perfect storm for people eating out."

The social aspect allows guests to engage in group competitions with others in the restaurant, watch movie trailers, and order up digital media entertainment. A library of more than 70 games serves as the backbone of the entertainment offerings, which range from family-friendly (such as trivia and word games, electronic card games and a selection just "for kids"), to the "After Dark" games that are accessible after 10 p.m. for grown-up guests

Despite being justifiably accepted as the founding father of the video game industry, Nolan is a humble father when it comes to taking credit for uWink. His own children were, and continue to be, instrumental in the process. "I hate to take full authorship of it because we have had some pretty free ranging conversations about this around the dinner table," Nolan recalls, referring to his son Brent, now uWink's chief technology officer, and daughter Alissa, the company's vice president of public relations. "There were a lot of parts to this that I wanted to do back in the Chuck E. Cheese days. I'd see certain opportunities that we had, but it was too much of a kid experience. I did Chuck E. Cheese when my kids were little; now that they're

grown, they're a great focus group," Nolan says. "Brent was every bit as much an architect of the original plan and Alyssa has written some of the better games that we offer," including Truth or Dare, a favorite among the "After Dark" crowd

Today, Brent Bushnell is responsible for all development and infrastructure. Leading a team of 15 system engineers, he is charged with leveraging the technology platform to its fullest potential. "Engineering has always been something that I've liked. Nolan had us playing with programming at a very young age," he recalls. Before officially joining the uWink project, Brent sharpened his technology teeth at Interlinx, an Internet applications and marketing company, where he served as CTO for two years, and prior to that was founder and CEO of Izolo, a technology service provider focused on web applications and web hosting.

SMOOTH OPERATOR

Despite its now obvious benefits, automating restaurant operations at uWink was an afterthought to the game play aspect. "Once we had touch screens at every table, it became natural to say, 'let's automate the restaurant,'" Nolan explains. A standard point of sale (POS) system from Volante Systems (www.volatesystems.com)



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— NOLAN BUSHNELL, FOUNDER & CEO, uWINK

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interfaces to the uWink platform. The two systems communicate seamlessly via an application programming interface (API) on the POS, which Volante customized for the uWink project. "Instead of needing a wait staff person to go to a POS terminal and make a request, our software communicates directly with the web service on the Volante POS to order food or ring up a credit card," explains Brent.

Despite guests staying longer to play games, table turns aren't an issue. "We bring drink and food to people four-to-seven minutes faster than any other well-run restaurant, so we front-load the deck," says Nolan. And if they're staying and playing, they're likely drinking, too. Plus, when a guest is ready to leave, they can pay their bill via the touch screen, removing the typical wait time associated with closing out the check and paying for a meal.

In addition, all game play is monetized. Guests are given an hour of free game play for dining. After that first hour, there's a charge. "We're still playing with the timing on that," explains Nolan. "Different parts of the country might have different approaches." In an airport, for example, they might consider monetizing game play from the first minute.

What's more, the restaurant's entertainment directors can manage 10 tables instead of the three or four handled by a traditional server. "The system paid for itself within six month based solely on labor saving," says Nolan.



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— BRENT BUSHNELL, CTO, uWINK

WEB-INSPIRED PLATFORM

The infrastructure is a proprietary uWink solution built with a Web 2.0 approach and employing XML to move data around. "The entire front end is consuming content in the same way that an app on the Internet would,"

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explains Brent. "Because it's so robust, we're able to present new types of media and repackage existing content." To users, it looks and feels just like using the Internet would, but it's a closed network; a deliberate decision to ensure that any content on the terminals is appropriate for the restaurant's goals of guest interaction. "Web 2.0 is about social media and its ability to encourage social interaction," says Brent. Checking e-mail, by comparison, isn't a social event, so the closed network prevents guests from "checking-out" of the socialization aspect.

The team is constantly developing new ways to leverage the platform even further. At the recently-opened uWink Hollywood location, for example, guests can play uWink Live using their personal cellular phones via a partnership with MegaPhone (www.playmega.com), a phone-call-controlled game company. The guest's own cell phone becomes a game controller, and game play is viewed on large screen televisions in the restaurant. The platform works on any cell phone and with any carrier.

The bar area in uWink's Hollywood location taps into the platform via a 12-foot long, interactive, multi-touch bar, iBar from Mindstorm (www.mindstorm.eu.com). Guests can use their fingers, hands and drink glasses to digitally paint the bar top, play a game of pong and ultimately order food and drinks from uWink's digital menu.

Brent intends to leverage the platform even further to add greater levels of personalization for guests. "There are aspects that we've not fully realized yet that include the customer's ability to influence the display and put more of their own creation into the system."

The next step for the Bushnells is to license the platform for use by

other restaurant brands. "With the licensing approach, we can very easily provide an à la carte approach to the software features that a restaurant would want," says Brent. Through a scaled approach, restaurants could select such features as interactive ordering, the game platform, a content channel with news, surveys,

comedy, etc., cell-phone interaction, or even the solution for the multi-touch bar service. "We have a really bite-sized plan," adds Nolan. "You can choose to convert your bar, convert your restaurant area, or you can become a full franchisee. We know the world is ready for this technology, and we're going to supply it." **HT**

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