Greg James

COMPUTER PROGRAMMER/ANALYST

MSc Computer Science, Calgary 1993
BScH Cognitive Science, Queen's 1989

In his own words: "An INTJ (Myers-Briggs) renaissance guy with multiple interests and a dry sense of humour."

Interviewing Calgary-born Greg James is akin to delving into the fictional world of Douglas Coupland's novel, *Microserfs*. Like the protagonist Daniel, who finds himself immersed in the high-tech world of Silicon Valley, Greg has become a bleeding-edge technocrat — or was he always that way?

In fact, Greg's fascination with computers pre-dates the time when Apple II's were cutting-edge and continues to this day, when games such as *"Railroad Tycoon 2"* can keep him up until 6 am. "Computer games have always fascinated me. I don't quite know what it is about them, but from the primitive Pong to today's advanced games, I've been absolutely engaged."

In hindsight, he realizes that those endless hours riding the joystick were really about problem-solving. "I've learned that I'm really good at solving difficult computer problems. I love thinking about tough questions and coming up with an answer." But this insight was a few years off when he first considered going to university. "I applied to Calgary and Edmonton for $40 and $45 respectively, but for the bargain price of $25 I applied to three Ontario universities!"

He received early acceptance from Queen's and entered the astrophysics program. But he "hated" algebra and switched into Cognitive Science, a combination of cognitive psychology and computer science that let him actually study problem-solving — to think about thinking. Folding computer technology into a B.Sc. degree fueled Greg's interest research and development. "As an undergraduate, I was an advisor with Queen's University Communications and Computing Services (QUCCS), which was based in the bottom of Jeffrey Hall. I did a lot of troubleshooting for students whose printers or monitors had packed up on them. The analytical aspect of the job was intriguing to me."

Upon graduation, Greg declined a job with QUCCS, opting instead to enroll in an Artificial Intelligence program at the University of Calgary. He defended his M.Sc. thesis in 1993 and joined the Alberta Research Council (ARC) the same year. There he worked on disaster management programs, taxi dispatch systems and other computer-related projects.

When Greg's brother re-located to Vancouver for a computer science job within a gaming company, Greg headed west as well, joining Radical Entertainment in Vancouver as Quality Assurance Director. He soon made a department switch to programming,

which finally allowed him to mix work with the pleasure of writing software. After a contract dispute between Radical and Disney over ESPN games in 1998, Greg was axed along with more than 100 other employees. But he took the layoff philosophically, seeing it as just part of the 90's career path. "Never get so complacent in your career that an unexpected change in direction leaves you high and dry. Stay on top and you'll always have currency in the job market."

In January 1999, after a handful of interviews elsewhere — Chicago, Seattle, California — he followed up a tip from a friend that led to a job that allowed him to remain in Vancouver. Within four months he knew that working as a software developer for Intrinsyc Software was a dead end for him. "They were making software for very small computers; like you find in parking ticket dispensers. Stuff I didn't care about. It was mundane, tedious, and boring. It wasn't challenging me."

At the beginning of September he was laid off — a blessing in disguise, he now realizes. He had a few weeks' severance pay and savings. Combined with Employment Insurance, it was just enough, he figured, to fund him through another intense job search. More flying about to interviews ensued until he landed a position as senior research programmer with Matrox Graphics in Montreal. Once again, it was a business contact that steered him to the job. "None of my jobs has come to me completely cold. I've been lucky with my contacts. Some people act unkindly towards their colleagues when they're mistaken about something. I think you should always treat your peers with respect even if you think they're wrong. Don't ignore them."

Job-wise, Greg figures he has struck gold at Matrox, where he writes software that helps explain and market the company's video cards. "I love this job! I have lots of latitude to invent things. They come up with really cool ideas that my team researches and prototypes and sometimes turns into a real product. I'm using all my strengths now — my creativity, my problem-solving skills, my ability to look at the big picture."

The job allows him to mentor junior programmers and function with them as a team, a critical tool for success in the computer programming industry. "An unbelievable number of new grads know their programming but can't work decently within a team. In my line of work no one codes alone."

Once they hit the job market, new graduates should stay savvy about the long-term direction of any company they join. "Don't get into something you might end up hating. There was a time when it was virtually unthinkable for me to look at a new job in a new city. But moving to Vancouver to take the job at Radical started a shift for me. I could not say "no" to it, and since then I've only become better at making my interest in a job my top priority." ❖

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