RENDERMAN
P I X A R
ANIMATION STUDIOS

BACKGROUND

Pixar began in 1979 as part of the Lucasfilm computer division (which was known as the Graphics Group) before its spinoff as a corporation in 1986 and was purchased by The Walt Disney Company in 2006. Pixar has enjoyed great success, having worked on critically acclaimed movies such as the Toy Story franchise films, WALL-E, Brave, Ratatouille and The Incredibles.

While Pixar uses RenderMan for its own videos, many other animation studios used its products as well, leading to more customers and more support — with additional demand for new features and updates to the engine. Additionally, while other rendering options were considered "gaming" engines, users quickly figured out that they could also be used for animated movies. RenderMan was the top choice for animated movies, and they needed it to remain at the top.

RenderMan has been Pixar's core rendering technology for over 30 years and has been developed to meet the ever-increasing challenges of 3D animation and visual effects. It is used for all Pixar production rendering, including feature films, shorts, content for theme parks and marketing. RenderMan is battle-tested and driven by real production requirements at studios around the world. Artists interact with RenderMan through content creation plugins tailored specifically for the leading 3D apps, and studios integrate it into pipelines and massive render farms using a rich collection of APIs and supported data formats.

As RenderMan became more popular throughout the industry, a well-supported Q&A solution was needed. That is when they implemented AnswerHub.

INDUSTRY

Pixar: Computer Animation & Media

RenderMan: Proprietary Photorealistic 3D Rendering Software

PRODUCTS & SERVICES

Pixar Animation Studios is a computer animation studio and provides computer animation for critically-acclaimed and commerically successful feature films.

RenderMan provides a state-of-the-art framework optimized for physically-based rendering and can deliver unmatched flexibility for any production pipeline.

> " *Our experience with AnswerHub has gone very well. We were anxious about how our customers, who were used to our forums, would react since they had been using that product for almost 20 years. We are very happy to say that, with the AnswerHub solution we chose, we are getting good engagement and saving time for our support team.* "

CHALLENGES

In 2016, Pixar was using outdated forums to allow developers to collaborate on best practices and techniques when using RenderMan for their movies. However, this format would spark endless debate, leaving customers no closer to getting answers even after long technical discussions on how to use the software. There was no way to mark accurate answers as correct, and the search function made solutions difficult to find. Additionally, forum posts had to be manually converted to JIRA tickets for the engineering team which, was a waste of time for support engineers.

Often, support engineers had difficulty figuring out if the questions asked by customers actually needed an answer, or if they were just discussions in the forum, leading to a great deal of wasted time. This also meant that there was no real way to tell if the forums were deflecting cases away from the support engineers — it instead seemed to be causing more frustration than help. Pixar began searching for a new way to engage with its community of developers as it redesigned their entire web experience.

SOLUTIONS

AnswerHub was the knowledge-sharing platform of choice for Pixar's RenderMan team. In order to maintain their cult-like following for its 3rd-party developers, they had to maintain and develop the most compelling and immersive experiences in digital media. AnswerHub created a single place to help their developers move faster, get answers to questions, share ideas and keep the RenderMan platform on the cutting edge. AnswerHub addressed all the deficiencies of their forums and siloed databases to keep them in the lead.

Pixar wanted the tool to integrate with their internal workflows and tools to maximize its use. Since they use JIRA for their bug tracking system within support, it was a natural place to start. AnswerHub made it easy for support engineers to create JIRA cases through its two-way integration, completely integrating with their external bug filing workflow. Once the integration was configured, the support engineer could decide if the issue was a software defect, and with just a click, they could create a JIRA case pre-populated with the customer's question and details right from the application. This greatly reduced the context-switching time between the community and JIRA system, and since the engineer could interact with the customer through AnswerHub, they could determine more quickly if the bug was real or not. This enabled faster and more thorough triage and eliminated many JIRA tickets from getting filed, saving precious development resources from unnecessary investigation. Additionally, since the JIRA status was displayed in the AnswerHub question in real-time, the customers would always know the status of the tickets without having to ask support. This eliminated meaningless calls to get an update on the issue by the customers, increased community engagement by the users and encouraged more community participation.

Pixar made the most of AnswerHub Ideas as well, using the voting buttons to hold fun and inviting art challenges with real-world rewards! Each new RenderMan release brought new animation features, and to teach the community to use the features and test them, the team held an art challenge where the community could participate and vote on the best use of the new features. The winner was chosen and received a Pixar RenderMan jacket at the Siggraph Conference each year. The increase in community engagement for testing new features was astonishing! Every challenge looked unique thanks to AnswerHub's ability to customize each different space on the site, creating an immersive experience.

OUTCOME

Once Pixar started using AnswerHub, the computer animation and media powerhouse saw:

- More testing and engagement of new RenderMan features (through the art challenges)

- Developers getting answers to questions the same day, as opposed to weeks with the old forums

- True Case deflection, since support engineers can see which questions are answered and they can spend time on unanswered questions

- Faster time to file tickets to the engineering team by having a two-way integration with JIRA (which keeps users up-to-date on ticket status in real time)

- Increased engagement in the community as developers help each other solve problems and find solutions that are captured for everyone to share through the Q&A system

Pixar uses the AnswerHub Ideation engine for artist competitions called Art Challenges, where winners receive real-world awards at the annual Siggraph Conference. This has become an industry best practice for using gamification as a strategy for increasing engagement within developer communities.

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