



### Are we over delivering?

by Jamie Thomson

I've just been 'Civilized'. I tried to resist, having been civilized several times before, but my resistance crumbled as soon as I saw the box on the shelf. 200 hours later, I emerged into the daylight, to discover that I was actually married. My wife's name, apparently, was Lucy, and we'd been together for over ten years. Some memory is beginning to return now, and I think she is telling the truth.

Games can be such a timesink, and unfortunately a number of other boxes were stacked up in the corner of my room, crying out 'Play me, play me' at night. 25 hours later, I have been forced to stop, just to write this column. Then I can get back to it. With another 100 hours to go, counting replays, I'm only a third of the way through.

And I've still got another couple of games backed up ready to go after that. The re-creation of the Roman empire will take at least 50 hours – and that's been on my shelf for a while now. After that, I want to try a foray into the Old West. The games themselves are *Civilization 4*, *Dungeon Siege 2*, *Rome Total War* and *Gun*.

30 or 40 notes for each of these epics and their hours of play is pretty damn good value for money. But are we over delivering on game length? I'd still pay the same amount for far less play time than that. How many people buy and play a game they never finish, even if they've enjoyed every minute? Eventually you get bored, even an obsessive player like me.

To be fair, most of the games I've mentioned are sequels – and for a developer to create that amount of content without the benefit of a previous title to prove their concept works is a tall order, but it still happens. While games like *Civ4* and *Rome* are constructed so that they are played over and over, my first game of *Civ4* was 60 hours. That alone is more than enough, surely? It makes me wonder if we're trying too hard and spending far more than we need to on content.

But it's difficult to know when how much is too much – and striving to balance the game content volume-wise can have its detriments at both ends of the scale, especially if you're wary of overloading your game. Take *Gun*, for instance – while most reviews have been favourable, the main criticism is that there's not enough content and that the overall experience is too short. I think my wife would see that as bonus, and she may be right. In any case, I intend to find out! ■

FLAWED GENIUS

# Death by design

The seventh Animex festival's games design workshop saw **Marque Pierre Søndergaard** get some top advice on deathmatch design from Ritual's Richard Gray...



■ Dubbed the 'Levelord', Richard Gray is a master of designing multiplayer deathmatch arenas

**F**ebruary's Animex festival, hosted by games education powerhouse University of Teesside, brought an eclectic mix of the best and brightest in games and animation to Middlesbrough. Capturing many attentions was the workshop put together by Ritual's Richard Gray. Dubbed the 'Levelord', the workshop proved why his work on multiplayer maps for *Duke Nukem 3D*, *SiN*, *Delta Force: Black Hawk Down* and *Counter-Strike* has garnished him with such a title.

### BRAIN FIRST

According to Gray, deathmatch levels are a great introduction to level design, since they represent a more distilled type of fun than single player levels. But their simplicity masks a few challenges.

Making a map memorable to play and interesting to revisit starts with selecting a fitting theme and keeping that consistent through everything from sounds to textures. Good research and reference materials are critical.

Even though the optimal critical path for flow can be described as simply as a figure of eight, a map will need a lot more to make it interesting. Flat and horizontal maps are bad; adding an element of vertical play is always a bonus for a level. Not only will vertical add to gameplay and flow, but also the visual experience of the map. Gray stressed that vertical elements are in particular great for hub centres or wherever loops in the path connect. Only framerate, critical path and balancing considerations should trump making the map interesting.

### PAPER SECOND

Another piece of Gray advice: never ever open the level editor before you have a clear concept drawn on paper, complete with notes describing the features and gameplay hooks. Changing design plans in the editor is okay, but it does show a lack of planning. Essentially, the 'design' part of 'level design' should take place on paper.

For deathmatch levels flow is everything. And the flow and the pace of the level are

determined by how well you, as the level designer, lay out the critical path. Basically the player should be able to navigate the entire map in simple loops. To keep the play fast and furious, you must avoid anything that blocks the player or get him stuck somewhere, while still giving frequent opportunities to avoid pursuit or gain cover.

A shrewd designer can use health and armour power-up to increase the pace of the play, by keeping the players hungry, to keep them running. Likewise players should never spawn near valuable weapons or power-ups, but should expect the trade off of vulnerability or difficult navigation to gain access to the most powerful power-ups or weapons in the game.

### EDITOR LAST

Gray admonishes building your map in layers instead of finishing a room at a time. Starting with blocking out the foundations, only focusing on the critical path, will allow you to play test the map extensively before all the detailed brushwork has to be redone. Measure twice, cut once, as they say. Towards the end of the building, the big challenge is not to 'lame out', because you already have a thousand new and more interesting ideas, but to hang in there and polish the map up to the level of perfection it deserves and is needed.

Gray's final piece of advice was about self editing: he warned that the level designer should not fall in love with his own ideas at the expense of gameplay. After, all: "You want player versus player action, not player versus map frustration." ■

## MINIBIO



Megalomaniac (his words, not ours) games student Marque Pierre Søndergaard wants to be the world's best texture artist in 2010. But how will he incorporate them into a well-designed arena?