

Design forged in the workshop

Marque Pierre Søndergaard picked up some tips on design at Liverpool John Moores University's latest conference event...

November saw Liverpool John Moores University host its third annual Game Design and Technology Workshop. In order to stand out among the wide array of games conferences, this event hosts parallel sessions for developers and students, as well as offering overviews of the most promising academic research in fields related to games.

Quite a tough brief, but there were plenty of moments to justify making the effort – particularly in relation to games design.

GAMEPLAY NOT TERAFLOPS

Everybody seems to agree that gameplay will come to the fore just as soon as technology starts to plateau. I remember Oliver Davies, lead designer on *GoldenEye* (the awesome one, not the abysmal one) speculating that once the console war has ended – at around PlayStation 5 or so – new iterations of hardware will only come out every ten years or so; that, in turn, will force attention away from technology and towards gameplay.

Back to today where, impressively, the PlayStation 3, is classed under the High Performance Computing Act. Consequently, developers are asking Sarah Ewen from SCEA's Technology Group what to use all that processing power for. Neither she nor Sony has all the answers yet, it seems. Have we reached the technological saturation point even before jet packs and anti-gravity boots are a commonplace?

It's certainly interesting to see the direction Nintendo has been pursuing since the DS: innovation for the sake of the gameplay, not to merely push polygon counts and clock speeds. As such, Nintendo might just have arrived at the final station, while everybody else still has a long and arduous journey of realisation in front of them.

Perhaps that was why Andrew Oliver from Blitz stated that were he only to buy one of the next gen consoles, the Revolution would be his choice.

CINEMATOGRAPHY

As they look for ways to squeeze ever more emotional juice out of the games experience, the rich history of experimentation in cinematography can offer games designers plenty of inspiration.

Acousmètre – as developed by Alfred Hitchcock and Fritz Lang – is one such concept, based around an all-seeing, omniscient and ubiquitous voice/character. To be most effective, the identity of this voice should be delayed until all imaginary possibilities have been emptied.

We heard from Wendy Ann Mansilla of the University of Lübeck, who has been carrying out testing with acousmètre in interactive 3D environments based on emotionally charged situations – and electronically measuring the impact on the player. The early results from her pilot study suggest a massively increased



■ Thomas Buscaglia (right) might be the world's best games attorney, but his Marlon Brando impression would not hold up in court. Dino Dini (left) suppresses a giggle...

emotional impact when the normal game experience was coupled with use acousmètre.

To this end, games designers could do worse than familiarise themselves with Dolf Zillman's work on the theory of suspense.

WOLF IN SHEEPSKIN

Elsewhere, various academics developing bots for first person shooters revealed another interesting yet simple idea.

Making a bot that is either very hard or very easy to beat is quite simple. However the illusion of intelligence can easily be broken. Once it is, being consciously aware that you're playing against a bot pretending to be a human player detracts considerably from the game experience.

To get around this, academics have been exploring a system in which they observe human players, catalogue their unique movements and actions, and then infuse these into the standard bot's behaviour of 'go here', 'shoot that' and 'pick up this'. This creates much more believable bots, which more successfully mimic real players.

The Workshop concluded with a debate. A woman in the audience asked the panel a pointed question: why is it that we are so bent on making women play games? After all, she said, we keep speaking about it as if it's such a noble and honourable agenda to design for women, but isn't it just a purely financial goal? Veteran Dino Dini tried to defend the aim by stating that as a games designer, he's an entertainer, and he'd rather entertain a larger audience than a small one.

We're good at designing games with omnipresent guns and abnormal female physiques for a certain demographic. Must we force this experience on uninterested parts of the world's population?

■ www.cms.livjm.ac.uk/GDTW/GDTW2005/

MINIBIO



Marque Pierre Søndergaard admits he is still an eager student who doesn't know the first thing about practical games design. But he does know free conference food when he sees it.



The escalator of doom

by Jamie Thomson

Most games have an escalation path in terms of player power. You get access to new weapons, units or abilities as the game progresses, the idea generally being to keep the game fresh and fun by enriching and deepening the gameplay.

For example, you might acquire your first bow in an RPG. That's great because it's a ranged weapon. Then your first magic bow might be good, because now you can injure Undead, say. But by the time you get to upgrading from a +4 bow to a +5 bow, or from one type of automatic weapon to another, you are getting diminishing returns in terms of the thrill.

It's the same thing, but it just does a bit more damage, or has a bigger ammo clip. Worse, it feels like more of the same.

This is a problem common to RPGs, FPS and RTS games. Arguably the scope of the

"This is a problem common to RPGs, FPS, and RTS..."

RTS genre gives the designer a bit more to play with – sight ranges, unit speeds, resource costs, time to spawn, attack values versus different target types, armour, terrain, AI strategies and so on – so as a player you can always feel like you've got something new to play with, at least for a while.

Alternatively, you can hide the incremental improvements away with an interface change or behind conceptual masks. For instance, you've got a chariot, and then you upgrade to a tank – it has a whole range of new anims and special effects, but basically it's a souped-up chariot. The difference is that it doesn't feel like a souped-up chariot – again, for a while.

Designers of RPGs and, even more so, FPS games have less elements to play with and less opportunity to 'mask' an incremental element, and so the problem is exacerbated. You can make various attempts to get around the issue by chucking more and more enemies at the player, or by giving them more hit points or more variants on existing gameplay features, but eventually this will lead to creeping boredom.

How can a designer avoid boring the player, without having to put loads of extra options and systems into a game, and without giving the player so much power it unbalances the gameplay?

The trick is to make any new feature or advance feel different – but also to open up new areas of gameplay. If that tank can now cross certain types of terrain that the chariot couldn't, you've opened up a whole new area of possible strategies, and thus a whole new area of gameplay choices. ■

DESIGN

FLAWED GENIUS