

ARCATERA

1- Interview of the Project Manager.

Jean-Bernard Jacon – Project Manager – Ubi Soft Entertainment

You were previously the Project Manager of Action-Racing (SCARS) or Sport games (Ultimate Golf). How did you get to work on an Adventure game ?

I used to be a real fan of story-telling and table RPGs (Role Playing Games). So when we were proposed to produce such an innovative adventure game, I just couldn't miss the opportunity ! Of course, it is always exciting and challenging to follow the development of a game from scratch to its release, whatever its genre. But I realised that you can bring much more efficient and creative advises and have a much more open relationship with a developer if you already dreamt of his project...before you even met him !

Can you present us the game in a few words ?

Basically, the game is a non-linear adventure game, set in the heroic-fantasy world of Arcatera. It also contains RPG elements such as fights, party personalisation, XPs... But the core of the game is the adventure itself and the importance of the intrigue. Your main mission is, within a limited time, to understand the plot that is unfolding in real-time and to find a way to prevent chaos from taking over the city. You can do whatever you want in the game, go hunting, squat a house, become a complete outlaw if you want to, but you have only 3 weeks to act...and among the 10 possible endings only 1 or 2 will be happy ends !

What does this game bring to the Adventure genre ?

What makes this game different, apart from its original mix of adventure and RPG, is that we have tried to set up a world that has a life of its own, where each NPC (Non-Playing Character) has its own activities and its own schedule that you can observe on screen. If you follow a merchant for instance, you will see him go to the market place buy some food, then spend his afternoon working in his shop, you can also join him in the pub in the evening and see him back home at night to sleep ! The AI (Artificial Intelligence) of the game was designed so that all NPCs can interact with each other. This principle was applied in Half-Life, for instance (when you can watch the soldiers attack the monsters)... we have just taken the idea further. Once you have this independent, living world, all you have to do is put the player in and let him mess around with the ingredients. He may or may not find a solution, but that's really up to him !

So you set up a realistic world where the player has much freedom of action. Isn't there a risk that the player decides to do nothing as planned ?

Of course there is a risk ! But in the video game industry, there is a tendency now towards more "intelligent" games, where you give back the control of the action to the player. I personally don't think that linear adventure games have a bright future. In our game, each player will complete the story in a different way, go through different obstacles and find their own solutions ! And that is much more rewarding, don't you think ?

Can you tell us a secret about this game ?

Well... all I said today can be considered a secret as the game is announced here for the first time ! But I would like to add that the intrigue we propose you to play was first played around a table, in a Role Playing Game, by a group of friends. And all of those friends, 10 years later, are now part of the team of the developers And this is not that common in the industry !

2- Interview of the developer

Christophe Kabelitz is Managing Director at Westka Entertainment and Project Manager for Arcatera.

Christophe, can you tell us who you are?

I was born in Cologne, Germany on March 24, 1970, went to college and studied Business Administration at the University of Cologne. During my time in college I programmed, along with a friend, my first computer games on a Commodore 64. The first title to be marketed worldwide was "Domination" for C64, Amiga and Atari ST. It was released in 1989.

In 1993 we founded "Westka Kommunikation", a company whose purpose is the realization of promotional games for major German companies that up until today has been quite successful.

At the beginning of 1998 we created "Westka Entertainment" as an additional unit to meet our long-term goal: to develop our first high quality computer game for the international market: "Arcatera - The Black Sun".

What makes Arcatera special?

I think there are many details that make the game special including its unique character and atmosphere, but perhaps one of the most important points is its gameplay.

Our goal is to combine the highest graphics quality with the intuitive user interface of other "point-and-click" adventure games. On top of that we added features of Role Playing Games (RPG) (like playing several different characters in a party, combats, magic spells, etc.) to create a new kind of gameplay. We can now offer an adventure with better graphics and atmosphere than any RPG game and more freedom of movement and features than any "point-and-click" adventure game.

And what is the basis of the RPG elements?

The first adventure "The Black Sun" and the RPG system are part of the world of "Arcatera". Sascha Hussock, the author of the concept and the story of the game, took more than 10 years by to create this world.

"Arcatera" was initially designed as a classical paper RPG and contains a huge world with its own history and culture, gods and religions, devils and demons, towns and their inhabitants, monsters and many unsolved quests...

This means the characters in the game have also been part of the paper RPG system?

Yes, basically they have. But of course we totally redesigned their role in the computer game.

Every character in the game has his own history, attitude and habits and often a kind of inner conflict, which determines his behavior and actions. This means: there will be, like in real life, no "black and white" or "pure good" and "pure bad" characters. We even try to give a simple shopkeeper a character, history and some funny or interesting aspects. One of our most important goals is to immerse the player into a fantastic and interesting, but also logic and credible world. And we are sure that these complex and "three-dimensional" characters will help a lot to achieve this.

What can the player do with the characters in the game?

The player himself can take control of a party of up to four Playing Characters (PCs) with different skills and abilities at the same time. With these PCs he can perform many interactions with the Non-Playing Characters (NPCs) in the game.

Overall we gave the player as much freedom of movement and action as possible. For example you can talk to all NPCs (and every NPC will have spoken language output), you can give or show objects to them (or use objects on them), you can try to steal from them or buy things from them, cast spells on them or, of course, attack and fight them!

This means the player can attack any NPC in the game?

Yes, you may insult or make compliments to anybody and may also attack him – it doesn't matter if he is just a simple shopkeeper, the prince of the town, a dangerous monster or an animal. Of course you will have to deal with the consequences of your actions!

But not only can the player interact with the NPCs : these Non-Playing Characters will also interact with other NPCs. The player may for example observe a NPCs talking to another NPC, buying an item from another NPC or even fighting against each other. All NPCs are moving around independently in the game, are living their everyday life, doing their job, shopping and more. This means the player may meet a NPC in his shop during the day and at the pub in the evening.

Sounds as if the AI of the NPCs is a very important element of the game?

Yes, that's right. We worked a lot on a messaging system that allows every NPC in the game to receive and understand every necessary information about his environment (like for example "It is day/night", "Someone is entering my shop", "Someone is talking to me / stealing from me" or "I am hungry / sleepy")

This is the basis to process his action / reaction script, which determines his behavior and character. And this is in our eyes one of the most important tasks for us: to create these scripts in a way that they reflect the behavior and character of the NPC in ways as realistic and credible as possible.

We also try to give the NPC feelings and emotions. They have certain attitudes against the other characters in the game, which may change as the story unfolds and also change from one game to another! Depending on his attitude the NPCs decide whether they give another character in the game more or less information or whether they help the character in a combat. Moreover the NPCs have a good memory and will remember which characters they like and which they don't like.

Does the AI of the NPCs also influence the story and the flow of the game?

Yes! The opponents of the player (the members of the Black Sun) also have a very complex AI script and will react in different ways depending on the actions of the player.

For example, one of the main missions of the player is to bring back the scepter of the prince of the city of Senora to save the city from the Black Sun's reign of terror. If the player starts investigating to find it, the Black Sun may bring it to different places in the world, may increase the guards around the scepter, may send assassins to kill the player and more...

This means the story will develop in different ways in every new game?

Yes, depending on the actions of the player, the actions and reactions of the NPCs and certain other events the game can (and must) be solved in different ways each time.

Hence the replay value has always been one of our main concerns. Rather than developing a never-ending story, we chose to limit the time-length and circumference of the game so that it is surprising and challenging to play again - perhaps with a new character and party, with different skills and by following different tracks than the previous game.

We will also provide a ranking (and several videos) after the game ends, to give the player feedback on how successful he was in solving the quest. That should motivate him to play again to achieve a better rank.

What do you see as the biggest challenge during the development of the game?

Well... clearly, it was our attempt to give the player the feeling of complete immersion in a fantastic, astonishing but also credible world. This includes amazing graphics, a realistic acoustical image, intelligent NPCs and also as much freedom of movement and action for the player as possible.

I think everybody knows the feeling in many adventure games; "I want to do this combination of actions that seem to be logical, but I can't, because the program won't allow it for no logical reason." One of our goals - which I hope we will achieve - is to reduce this feeling as much as possible and provide players with all logical possibilities. For example they will be able to manipulate objects or will be given a credible reason why certain

actions are not possible. This also means that we will often provide several possible ways to solve the same puzzle depending on the skills of the different characters. For example, you can open a locked door with the right key, break it open with force if you are strong enough, with a magic spell if you have one, or by picking the lock if you are dexterous enough.