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MG: Mudgeon on Games
by Mudgeon

Where's the Beef?

Getting grumpy in my old age, I guess. Trust software developers to note the success of others and then try to clone that technology to their own product line. Unfortunately, in too many cases, this attempt to ride the coat tails of other successful programs results in product that is lazy in its presentation and carries little value to the consumer.

What am I talking about? The sudden wave of "cinematic," "photorealistic," "multimedia,"

"virtual theatre," "interactive," "real-time" titles that all read as though a major Hollywood studio has written, directed and released THE best title for your computer or video game machine. And, yes, they certainly are [in most cases] beautiful to behold. Several software developers have expended thousands of dollars in acquiring the most powerful graphics workstations to run the most elite graphics and modeling software to produce the most three-dimensional titles.

These programs are an absolute delight to view-their splash and cut scenes remind you of the enveloping cocoon you experience within a movie theatre as the professionally created animations play across your monitor. The digital sound that accompanies the introductions is superbly composed and reproduced. Your sense of expectation rises as the animations continue, either using live actors who produced their roles in front of a blue screen for later incorporation into computer modeled backgrounds, or with hand-drawn and computer-assisted cel flicks, and you are finally deposited at the game's main menu. With hands a-quiver, you select to play the game and . . .THERE'S NO CONCRETE PLOTLINE!

You mean, after all of these thousands of dollars have been expended to produce a game that is visually as perfect as today's computer and video game technology will allow, the game sucks? You got it! In the mad dash and haste to produce three-dimensional titles that'll wow consumers with their graphics, the most important aspect of electronic gaming has been left behind in the dust. Watching some of these new games is similar to selecting a beautifully bound book at your book retailer that possesses the most stunning cover art, only to open to the pages and finding them blank or totally without merit. A game without a plot, no matter how gorgeous its presentation, is worthless!

I suppose, for the sake of accuracy, I really shouldn't state these games are without a plot. There is, of course, always some attempt to ensure that the graphics are attached to some form of linear or non-linear activity the consumer must follow to reach an alleged conclusion. The unfortunate aspect is that too many of the plots are mimics of already successful programs and, therefore, just diluted experiences. Some plots have been so hastily prepared they carry no impact whatsoever. This reminds me of work once done for software developers wherein the documentation that instructed consumers in the use of the program was usually completed as an afterthought, and no part of the development process.

Whoever (or whatever) is developing storyboards for some of these highly visual games ought to rush out and enroll in a developmental writing course immediately! Writing the storyline for an interactive, cinematic game is not simply one of the modules of the graphics program-this process is the most critical part of the entire game development and should not be treated as merely a minor tool for game development. I can certainly tell you that the consumers are pretty fed up with paying big bucks for cinematic adventures that leave them wowed with graphics, and pretty PO'd at the lack of storyline.

Just wanted to let you know I "received" an Atari Jaguar for Christmas as well as two games for this 64-bit game machine: Alien(TM) vs. Predator1(TM) and Doom(TM). The machine is really quite a delight to play, although it absolutely must get a CD-ROM attachment if Atari ever wishes to attract additional developers. The first game is really quite exceptional, if you like shooters that are also enormously exciting, bloody and filled with terror at every turn. The latter is little more than a 64-bit version of Doom, albeit graphically superior to other video game versions. Of the two, the on-screen map innovation in the former, the spine-tingling messages from the Predator as you prepare to meet your maker, and the speed of the gameplay really put it a notch above other video games this season. In fact, I would wager that Alien vs. Predator could be a major factor in consumer decisions to purchase this video game machine. Now, if only Atari could get more titles for this puppy, why, they could become a contender again!-Mudgeon