Reading the Game:
Introduction to Video Game Design and Development
Book Review

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BOOK INFORMATION

Title	: Introduction to Video Game Design and Development
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The computer games industry has reached an exponential increase rivaling that of the Hollywood entertainment and movies industry. In 2005, sales were recorded at nearly USD14 billion in the United States (US) alone while movies ticket sales were at USD9.5 billion that same year. How electronic games took over a large part of the entertainment industry? Hence, this book is timely in providing fundamental information on this truly remarkable phenomenon. Even though, the makeup of the book is mainly for an introductory undergraduate course in game design and development, it can also bring fresh insights to interested readers, independent game developers and professionals alike. It contains information, examples and guidelines that provides an overview how intricately interdependent all the parts are in making a truly "addictively" satisfying great game.

The author Joseph Sautler is the chairman of the Game Design and Development Department at the American InterContinental University in Atlanta and CEO of Entertainment Arts Research, one of the first African American 3D Video game Development Companies in the U.S. He has numerous experiences in the game design

and development industry including the Chairman of the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) Diversity Advisory Board, cofounder of the Urban Video game Academy and member of various entertainment affiliations. This book is one in the series of game development books he wrote.

Each chapter opens with a brief introduction and a list of learning objectives which is very helpful in gaining the general idea of the topic contents. The language used to explain the content is easily understood and laid out in bullet points with explicit headings. The graphics and charts are well illustrated with vivid colors and suitably exemplify the text contents, and where possible real-world game examples are included. Another good pedagogy is a boxed feature in relevant chapters giving professionals game developers or practitioners' insights into the game industry and game development best practices. In addition to that, a series of lab exercises, self-assessment questions and a list of reading materials are provide at the end of each chapter.

Sautler organizes the book typical of a text starting with a definition of a game in Chapter 1, and goes on to illustrate the dynamic and fast moving evolution of electronic games in Chapter 2. He offers a definition byway of identifying games common characteristics and categories. The highlight of the chapter is on a player's motivation for playing a game and a creative and colorful description of game players i.e. The Berserker, The Thespian, The Detective, The Power-Leveler, The Strategist, The Socializer and The Griefer. In the next chapter, he discusses the history of computer games from the "Golden Age" of arcade games to the home gaming systems with an outlook into the current trends of wireless, portable games and future consoles technologies

Chapter 3 and 4 outlines the components of a game. The first part takes a look at the game's user interface as this is the player's link to the game world. Important design elements such as player perspectives and methods of educating a player are explained. It continues to Chapter 4 with the visual design, technical and narrative components and how it contributes to the make-up of a game.

In Chapter 5, he explores Serious Games focusing on *America's Army* case study. Serious games are games with the purpose of educating or enlightening the player as they go through the game. This is a new and dynamic area of computer games that is increasingly becoming a significant part of the gaming industry. Serious games are usually developed to simulate real-world situation where an actual experience of that situation would be dangerous, costly or impractical such as "armed forces staging battle simulations between far flung units that under normal circumstances, would have required the units to travel to a common location and expend stocks of fuel, ammunition and equipment- obviously, very expensive." Another example would be a surgeon simulating an anatomical surgery numerous times before trying it on an actual patient and replaying the procedure to see where improvements can be made. Sautler divides these types of game into three categories: Commercial Off The Shelf (COTS), "Mods" and Custom games.

A significant part of the chapter describes the Army Game Project: *America's Army*, one of the first large scale serious game in the U.S. The game (and its promotional campaign to polish U.S. Army's image) was developed with more than USD 15 million and first released in 2002. *Recon*s, as its known was made available free either on a CD or download. It became one of the 10 most played game online first-person shooter because of its easy availability, similarity to *Counter-Strike*, the new Unreal engine and

large number of free servers sponsored by the army. Subsequently, a number of versions was released: *America's Army: Soldiers* and *America's Army: Special Forces* with different reception. This is a very good example of a game with a political propaganda aimed at social or behavioral change in its players. Its explicit recruitment goal and propaganda is confirmed by research papers from four different universities.

The chapter also noted key serious games players from the industry i.e. Muzzy Lane and BreakAway Games; and academia such as Dr. Henry Jenkins from MIT and Dr James Paul Gee from University of Wisconsin-Madison. MIT's and Microsoft Games-To-Teach project, led by Dr. Jenkins, was a model of industry and education collaboration. He is also well-known for his arguments on the breakdown of boundary between text and reader and research into interactivity. Another influential academic is Dr James Paul Gee, who wrote "*What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy*", enumerates 36 reasons why good video games can better learning environments than most of today's school. He states ,"In my opinion, schooling as it currently exists profoundly out of date and out of touch with the contemporary world. Most students fully realize this at least by high school, and high school tends now to be the least popular level of our educational system" (p145). To conclude the chapter, Saulter highlights some issues and opportunities for further development in Serious Games.

In the next chapter, he explains the different roles and responsibilities in a game development team. He states that some positions may overlap and depending on the different types of games and developers may vary in number and tasks. Both Chapter 7 and 8 covers the game development process from concepts to postrelease. A game begins with an idea and creating the game concept is the first step. At the end of this phase, a concept or proposal document is produced. As the project moves forward, the team needs to deliver a design and technical design document as a plan before proceeding with production of a game prototype. The discussion continues with the challenging issues and techniques for managing a game development project. Some of the issues include marketing, production schedules and postrelease support strategies.

Lastly, he wrapped-up the book with a view on the games industry and its future directions. The first part of the chapter is on the business part of game development including contractual issues and development deals i.e. Work-for-Hire, Pick-up, Pitched deal and Completion funding deal. The major part of the chapter looks into the current gaming trends that have a remarkable impact on the computer game industry. Player-created content or "mods" are creating waves in the gaming industry starting with Castle Wolfenstein in 1983 and then DOOM (1993) really hit the modding craze with their open architecture. From there on, Quake follows in 1996 and in 2002 Dungeons & Dragons RPG Neverwinter Nights sent shockwaves through the community with 60-hour single player campaign and its Aurora toolset. The Aurora is a 3D tile-based level editor that allows almost anyone to create an adventure to play online. Over 2,500 fans using the Aurora Toolset have created Neverwinter Nights modules. Another popular gaming trend is online multiplayer games like Ultima Online, Everquest, Dark Age of Camelot and Asheron's Call which have established themselves since the 1990s. These online persistent state worlds (PSWs) were not as successful as some industry experts predicted: Maxis' *Sims Online*, Electronic Arts' *Motor City Online*, Westwood Studios' *Earth and Beyond Online*, and many are still looking for the elusive formula. However, There and Second Life are unique in that they are both a game and virtual environment for social interactions and offer various activities like virtual sights or just wander about in the world and "minigames". Even these might not be the success factor of the virtual online world. Controversy remain to be a factor in the game market with issues of "addiction" to the potential of violence and adult content. The Interactive Digital

Software Rating (IDSA) created the Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB) to help tackle some of the issues.

The game technology's goal is to create a level of realism with development in graphics, physics, interactivity and artificial intelligence. This will produce accurate worlds and powerful computing allows for realistic lighting, environmental graphics and more responsive AI.

This book is recommended for a preparatory course textbook in games design and development. The contents prepare students or beginners with a strong fundamental before embarking into more focused areas of game design and development. It showed a complex balance of relationships in a game development project including its internal components, the people involved, the development phases and the game industry. The topics are broken down and set in an easy to follow organization covering various topics of interests for a beginner in game design and development. It gives just enough information to guide a novice to explore and focus into their areas of interest. The pedagogical strategies are well thought of and structured to help students learn the text in the best way possible.