Oliver Harris // Creative Approaches to Interactivity – Production Analyisis

The project brief allowed for a wide scope when considering and developing initial ideas; the very first thoughts to the many films I could have interpreted into interactive media were from a visual and aural perspective. The soundtrack was always to have been fast and dark to express feelings of threat, momentum and action; the character graphics to be my own illustrations with the game genre being a 'vertical scrolling shoot 'em up'. This project allowed a reflection that such overarching judgments should not be made at such an early stage, especially when vital changes that had to be made were later on put in place. A brainstorm was conceived of possible movies that could survive the transition into Flash with their respective atmospheres intact; ranging from Hitchcock through to original horror B-movie classics such as 'The Mummy', 'Dracula' and 'Frankenstein'. The qualities seen in the narratives that could be transferred were then scribed – eventually settling on the 'Frankenstein' 'tragedy of a human creation beyond human control' as it drew parallels with various Japanese Animation features that were already familiar ('Macross Plus', 'Akira' and even 'Pokemon: The First Movie's' 'Mewtwo' character). Another fatal mistake was accidentally proved when the imagination took over – the overall game was in mind rather than the detail of the original movie chosen; soon various aspects were brainstormed that were implemented that had little, if anything to do with the original 'Frankenstein' legend. As long as there was an uncontrollable creation to blow up and it looked/sounded more like a thrill ride, then anything else was to proverbially take a back seat – and this was to prove to be the undoing of the whole project - but hopeful later successful restitching was not a problem to realign it within the brief scope.

With the shoot 'em up genre having its roots dated at least twenty years ago, there was a wealth of potential research. Konami's 'Gradius' and Irem's 'R-type' were enjoyably revisited and studied; yet both were horizontally scrolling affairs. 'Ikaruga' by the highly regarded videogame firm 'Treasure' was the technologically latest (appearing first on the ill-fated Sega's Dreamcast, then ported by Atari over to Nintendo's Gamecube) in a few vertically scrolling shooters found after, Namco's arcade coin-op classic 'Galaga' and Atari's own 'Space Invaders' also being unearthed. With regards to the overall game-play over differing levels then Treasures other games were looked at favourably – 'Gunstar Heroes' in particular for its range of gameplay methods depending on level; from vertical and horizontal shooter through to tasks set in a board-game style. Originally a dynamic sense of style was to be employed; with an Eastern slant and with a sense of scale similar to 'Ikaruga's. Many minute details on the enemies and backgrounds lent an epic scale that the player was a small part in a much larger situation – whilst this idea was not carried through it is one avenue to peruse and persue in the future. An idea from Ikaruga that was included was ascension in time to the music present; with music having a linear nature it would fit with the linear movement (almost dancing) of the enemy around the screen.

'In their concentration on character, videogames are carefully strip-mining our conventional notions of narrative and storytelling for what can be usefully simulated in their own, utterly different medium[1]' this was combined with the theory units last year and the notion of 'Postmodernism', where this portrayed fresh ideas as springing forth from playing and fusing with prior ideas. With this in mind, 'Frankenstein' was set fifty years in the future

from the present to give a new spin on the aged fable; the protagonist was also female which only recently has been a trend in videogames. A certain poetic gothic nature (hence the latin for 'judgment' (Iudicium) and 'Genes vs Dreams' being included in the title) to the aspects of the game mechanics were thought to tie-in with the 'Frankenstein' story and such meandering thoughts as 'when hit flesh becomes rose-pettles which slowly fly and fall off, becoming streaming blood halfway down the screen' and similar to Square-Enix's 'Final Fantasy X's 'Sin' design the original enemy was to morph a certain amount to keep players interested. The Monster was also going to fire back and go through different 'power phases' of animation and offensive capabilities, represented visually by a gauge on screen, in time to the music. Not included was the firing back of 'red blood droplets', and after the ascension into space the wings were to blink black blood upon the planet - the twist being to destroy the eyes when they're open and do so as fast as possible so fewer points were deducted. It was this exclusion that swayed the whole game mechanic from being score based into a time-based condition with three possible outcomes – death of each character or time over when the music runs out and Dracula disappears. Also the addition of an integer counting down timer added to the overwhelming sense of urgency to kill the thing quickly. To design the monster (later to become Dracula) the four aspects of mechanical, biblical, animal and other features were brainstormed with a keen mind set on making the monster a futuristic interpretation – the 'wires and cables for dreadlocked hair' for instance. Other past videogame villains who become angel/demon hybrids were studied such as 'Kefka' of Square's 'Final Fantasy VI' for designs and this was the basis for the final sketch; it was felt that the juxtaposition between the beauty of flesh and the dirty cloth worn was visually captivating and since battling a possibly omnipotent deity the inclusion of a third eye was deemed suitable.

First to be edited together was the soundtrack, with seven pieces of varying lengths mixed down from sound effects and songs procured from the Internet and musical compact discs using the software Peak. Effects for the transformation in space and the flapping of wings were timestretched fireworks taking off and usual inhaling, respectively, which were recorded. New experiments using audio filters such as the VST plug-in 'Mantra Reverb – Large Chamber' were layered over the top of some samples such as the dying scream of the monster to add atmosphere. To join the frenetic nature I intended to portray, the 'Digital Hardcore Breakbeat Techno' (apparently) of artist Bomb20 was cut up and spliced to the anticipated animated actions of launch, ascension then final battle in space. Aesthetically it was decided that only two fonts were to be used – 'Apple Li Gothic' for the menu commands and instructions, and Curlz MT for everything else. The logo screen, then introduction followed with the following in mind: 'like any effect background effects can be used well or badly. In the worst cases, complex backgrounds with high-contrast patterns make the text on top almost impossible to read[2]'; a mixture of hand drawn scanned bitmaps and pictures from various Internet sites altered in Photoshop and compiled in Flash. A title screen illustration added to the professional look of the title, and the idea of smoke coming from the rocket and Iudicium's mouth appealed; in retrospect though too many believed her to be breaking wind instead of the rocket firing! The background gradient was simply produced although when the clouds were cut out they looked far from natural; varying Photoshop techniques such as wind and motion blur were incorporated to give the impression of real clouds – a fifty percent opacity also gave a fuller sense as the characters fly through them (although really just behind them). Another lesson learnt in the theory from last year was 'diegetic and non diegetic sound'

where sound can exist either inside the film that the characters are aware of, or it is layered over the top to create mood. Similarly, but visually this notion was incorporated - when there is a big change (i.e. between sky and space) a tweened white alpha layer appears and disappears, it also happens halfway through the space battle. Even though for a few nanoseconds the player can't see anything but white it adds to the mood being created of the frenetic frenzy of the melee taking place.

Animating the characters was easy with tweenings for each of the up, down, left and right commands for Iudicium and her rocket blasts, and Dracula's wings were individually animated by pulling them down forty-five degrees as the main sprite was raised one hundred pixels, over ten frames – then the frames were pasted again after and reversed. An experiment with the 'alpha' values and inverted Photoshop images spawned the slow black through white pulse of Dracula during the space battle, which is especially good looking. 'Interface design is responsible for creating a strong subjective impression as well as an easily understood overview of how the site works[3]', and with this in mind the interface was designed to be minimalist for as much of the action to take place as possible within the 600x800 frame yet still conveys the sense of urgency. Hence the 'altitude' meter, which replaces the prior idea of a power gauge for Dracula – deliberately not an integer so the various numbers counting up gives an extra animated visual source until 150Km are reached, which is the threshold before space. 'As Martin Amus put it in an early and engagingly enthusiastic book on videogames, *invasion of the space invaders*: 'to appear on the Great Score sheet is a powerful incentive in space-game praxis – a yearning perhaps connected with schooldays and the honour or notoriety of having your name chalked up on the board, white on black[4]' so with the score gone the player now has no initiative to play again if Dracula is beaten, so a dynamic text box was integrated resulting in replay value being added with a time-beating system. The actionscript utilized was a lesson well learnt in logical coding and were adapted from the lessons on shoot'em-up and character control. The code for different situations and the respective screens displayed when certain things happen was to prove the only taxing problems but these were soon ironed out. The relative balance of the health meters was undeniably important, especially when considering that Dracula had to die in space where the sprite in the death sequence was the one with the enlarged wings - this only occurs after 150km is reached; the player also needed a challenge but not an impossible to beat game. Another lesson learnt within the overall Flash environment related to the tweens that kept clogging the library – all objects had to come from the library itself or flash automatically generates these tweens.

Many different objects could be improved and refined; when cutting out sprites in Photoshop excess pixels are unfortunately not obviously present around the outside of the image – this is especially obvious on the Iudicium sprite during the transformation from the sky and into space. Due to last minute implementation the 'Level Two Preview' screen had one missing rollover, and a 'Quit' button that failed to work, both of which can easily be rectified. Mysteriously there is no hit radius around Dracula during the transformation either; only a minor problem as it is on screen for twenty frames. More 'Van Helsing' references could have been incorporated instead of just on the title screen yet pressing time only allowed these late development modifications - Iudicium could be his late grand-daughter. Finally in the future all graphics would be vector-based to give a further production shine to the presentation as noticeable bitmaps look too 'cut-out' and artificial; vectors would also keep the file size down which is imperative for any web designer.

Bibliography

Books
[1+4] Poole 2000. *Trigger Happy*. Fourth Estate
[2+3] Dinucci/Giudence/Stiles 1998. *Elements of Web Design*. Peachpit.