IDAT307
4D – Time Base Media

Once Upon A Time

Individual Critique
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Introduction

Machinima, as an art form, is relatively new. Whilst its roots can be traced back to the 1980s with the computer subculture called demoscene, it was not until the release of MechWarrior 2 in 1995 and Quake in 1996 with controllable cameras and 3D game worlds that machinima as we recognize it today became more widespread.

The intention of the project was to investigate the creative properties of video games by producing a narrative-led film "shot" entirely within a video game. We also wanted the film to bear no resemblance to the original game.

Production Team

The production team consisted of Jamie Taylor and me. We had collaborated on various projects in the past so knew that we could happily work together. This also meant that we were familiar with how our contrasting skill sets complimented each other and felt that this would enable the project to be a success.

Initial Concepts

Visual style:
We are both admirers of the work of Friedrich Kirschner and in particular how his films do not bear any resemblance to Unreal Tournament, the game engine he uses, and this was a concept that we wanted to follow. We both also like the comic book style of Sin City and decided that despite the games all running on a 3D engine, we wanted to keep our characters 2D to try and emulate that technique.

Video Games:
Most of the machinima films produced are based on a small handful of video games; Unreal Tournament 2004, Quake 3, Doom 3 and F.E.A.R. After some experimentation, with a couple of them we decided to use Unreal Tournament (UT2004) for a number of reasons. It's the game used by Kirschner so has a track record of producing films visually unrelated to itself plus the Windows version comes with a level editing program called UnrealEd which would make the importing of different backgrounds and characters easier.

Audio style:
Early into the project we made a conscious decision that there would be no voice-overs. Although we had no intention of providing the voices ourselves, our research into this discovered that lip-synching was an extremely difficult and complicated process in itself and if we had got it wrong then it would have detracted from the quality of the film that we were hoping to produce.

Narrative:
This proved to be quite a difficult area to agree on. Although we felt that we could achieve the look and feel that we intended, we were still keen to have a narrative that would live up to the visuals. We decided to use an existing story

and in particular use a fairy tale. Although we all think that we know them, generally we seem to know a softer, "Disney" version of the story. For example, Little Red Riding Hood, the story we decided to use, has a number of interpretations and outcomes. Although all of the tales have a very strong morality running through them of being wary of strangers, some have both the grandmother and the girl eaten by the wolf, some just the grandmother; some have both of them killed, others have them cut out of the wolf by the woodsman. Even the use of the red is also open to a number of interpretations. It has been seen to represent the sun, the blood of the menstrual cycle or even as the classic sign of prostitution.

As stated above, we had decided to use Little Red Riding Hood as the basis of our narrative but to bring it up to date with the story set in an urban environment and the young girl being in an abusive relationship. The film will open with her getting ready to meet her boyfriend. The "wolf" will be two entities; her boyfriend and the club that they will meet and the "woodsman" will be a bouncer at the club. We had considered the "woodsman" to be a secret admirer and the film to be from their perspective. However, as we want to have the start of the film to be of Little Red Riding Hood getting ready to go out, we decided that if he watched her then we were going down the road of stalkers and it was something that we didn't want to explore and so rejected that idea.

It was during the research of Little Red Riding Hood that we decided upon the name of the club that she would meet her boyfriend in; Libertine. As the club was going to be part of the wolf persona, we wanted it to have a name that reflected its "wolfness" and so we ran wolf through thesaurus.com. It offered several alternatives but the one that attracted us was under the definition of flirt. As well as "libertine", it also had "brute" which obviously could be used to describe her boyfriend. But we chose Libertine because it also has the definitions of debauched and depraved which we felt echoed back to the moral warnings of the original story.

**Production**
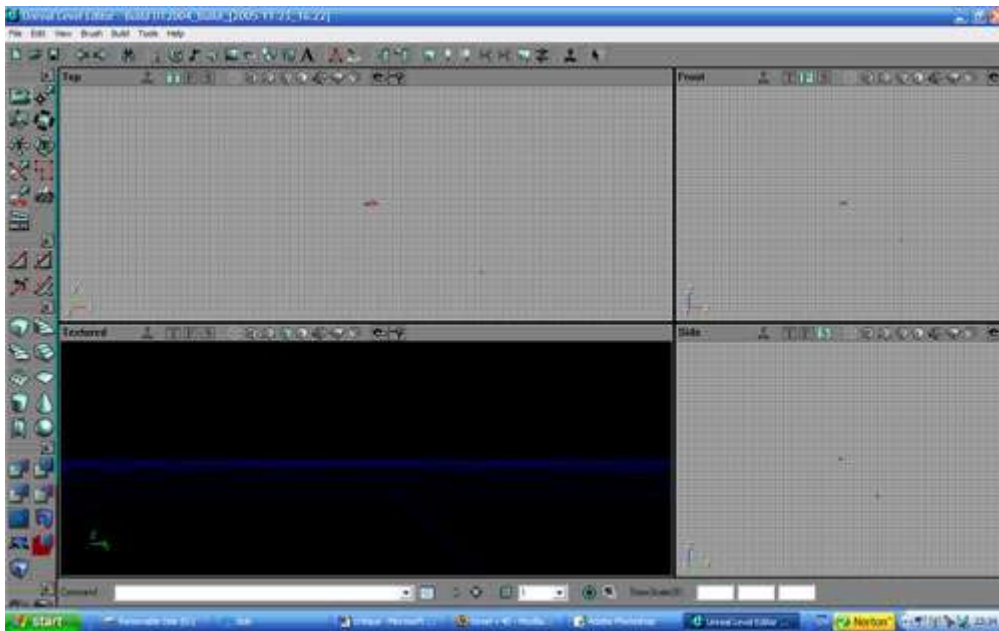
Screenshot of Unreal Ed

Experimentation:
Before producing our film, we needed to familiarise ourselves with the controls and tools of UnrealEd. We started with the cameras. Scenes within UT2004 are called maps so using an existing map we managed to set up 2 cameras and got them to track a piece of scenery. One moved from right to left and the other moved up and down a staircase (see below).


An interesting outcome of this experiment was that we discovered cameras just moved wherever you want them which also included through scenery and outside of the map. This was something that we would need to bear in mind when planning our angles during the production phase.

The next step was to create our own map. The UT2004 world is known as subtractive which means that you have to think of it as a solid mass and hollow out a space to work in. In real terms the first thing you create is a large box that you "subtract" from the UT2004 world to form the basis for your map. Once done, the sides of the box need to be covered with backdrops known as textures. Below is a screenshot of our first UT2004 map which was an attempt at a room with floor boards and wallpaper.
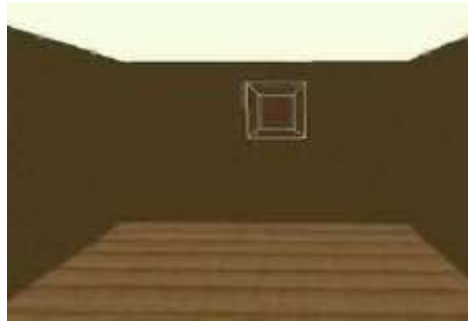
When importing textures, UnrealEd can only really cope with two file formats properly, targa and direct draw surface (DDS). The advantage that DDS has over targa is DDS files can have a transparent background and so that was the format we decided to use throughout the project. Applied textures are automatically tiled on the surface that they're applied to so it is important that their dimensions match the dimensions of the map. Through trial and error by importing different textures, we discovered that their dimensions needed to be a multiple of two (2, 4, 8, 16, 32 etc) and that one pixel in the real world equated to one Unreal unit within the UT2004 world. Consequently this meant that if we had a wall that was 512 x 512 Unreal units and we needed a texture to cover it, we could use an image with the dimensions 512px x 512px.

As with all films, the use of lighting is important to help to set the mood of the scene and the same applies to UT2004. UnrealEd has the ability for users to setup their own lights and that was the next step that we needed to master. Using an existing map, we placed the lighting in different locations as can be seen below.
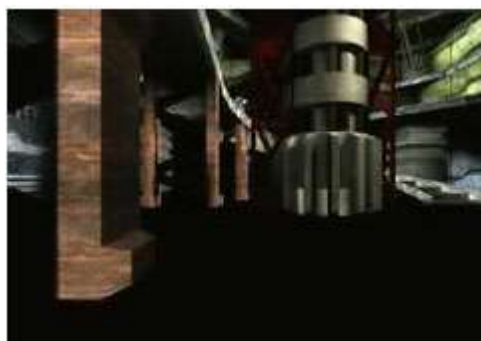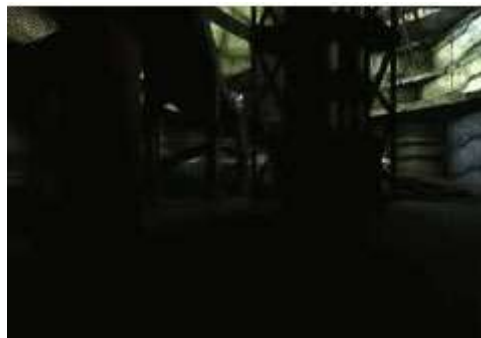
The first image has minimal lighting whereas the second had the intensity of the lighting turned up and consequently a lot lighter.

We also used this as an experiment in animation. We used an existing character in UT2004, a space marine, and placed him at the bottom of the stairs. To make him run up the stairs, we traced a route for him to follow. However, the movement of his arms and legs to give the impression of running were taken care of by UnrealEd. To understand how it worked meant we had to deconstruct the space marine. The secret to character animation was simpler than we imagined. Essentially each animation is made up of different images stitched together into a sequence, much like any animation. What made it simple to follow was that on importing an image, you told it what the preceding image was and UnrealEd made the animation sequence for you.

Production of assets:
As stated above, we decided to use DDS file format. To save time we also decided to use existing photos and run them through Photoshop to give the the effect of having been hand-drawn. This also meant we had more control over their dimensions.

Construction of the set:
There are only two main locations for our film; the street and the club. Because of that, we decided that the street location really needed to consist of many streets to allow us to fly the camera around corners to give the impression of a small town. Also, apart from the main characters, we decided that the "extras" will essentially be part of the background. This meant that they would only be outlines with minimal features and in some cases not even move.

Soundtrack:
As we decided not to lip-synch, we felt that we still needed some sort of voiceover as with Sin City to help carry the film along. Rather than have a narration, we decided to use music. In essence we wanted our soundtrack to not just act as filler or to enhance the mood but also to act as supplement to the narrative. We chose three tracks, one each for the three distinct sections of the film.

Get in Line by Air Traffic – intro and girl walking to club

Standing in the Way of Control by The Gossip – the confrontation with the boyfriend in the club

You can't have it all by Ash – end of the film with the girl walking away from her rescuer.

Style of characters:
Originally, we wanted the girl to be in a red dress against the black and grim of the city. Following on from our decision with the style of our choice of music, we changed our minds and decided that making both her and her boyfriend

indie kids would be more fitting. This also meant changing the style of clothing. The girl is now seen in red jeans as opposed to a red dress.

Strengths and weaknesses:
Overall, we are very pleased with the finished video and it is definitely a process that we would both be keen to do again. We are particularly pleased with the set, we feel that we have managed to achieve the look and feel that we were trying to attain. We had hoped to have brief flashes of woodland amongst the urban landscape as a way of paying homage to the original Little Red Rising Hood story but unfortunately had to shelve that idea due to time constraints.

Although it is relatively straightforward to do simple animation within UT2004, anything more complex than moving from one place to another entails writing scripts. As we had quite a steep learning curve getting to grips with the rest of the UT2004 environment, scripting was something we had to forego. Also, although it is just one large set, we had to record it in individual scenes. This meant that we are unable to release it as a modification for other machinima film makers.

Digital Workbook

www.boxel.co.uk/category/4d/

References

Film
Anna by Katherine Anna Kang URL www.machinima.com/films.php?id=525
Person2184 by Friedrich Kirschner URL www.person2184.com
Sin City by Frank Miller
The Journey by Friedrich Kirschner URL journey.machinimag.com
The Photographer by Friedrich Kirschner URL www.person2184.com
Waiting in Line – video for Zero7 by Ghost Robot/Fountainhead Enter
URL www.machinima.com/films.php?id=346

Book
The Art of Machinima by P. Marino,
Mastering Unreal Technology by Jason Busby, Zak Parrish & Joel Van.
Eenwyk
Machinima by Matt Kelland, Dave Morris & Dave Lloyd

Web
Little Red Riding Hood URL en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little_Red_Riding_Hood
Machinima URL www.machinima.com