review

conference

The Game Developers' Conference is the only place where people are -- and have been -- actively thinking about and discussing the combination of interactivity, aesthetics, sound, user experience, artificial intelligence, and non-linear narrative on a regular basis.

The GDC is an interesting event. Self-loathing and braggadocio are mixed with equal parts of awe, self-effacement, and grandstanding. Games are the only entertainment industry to rival Hollywood, and, like Hollywood, they are both in love with and despise themselves. The games industry has its healthy share of superstars and its steady stream of wannabes. The industry is relatively new, so while it carries financial clout, many of its practitioners and consumers grew up being thought of as geeks and outcasts, derided for their passion. There is a simultaneous craving for academic and critical discourse and a repulsion of it for many of the same reasons. Game companies can be incredibly innovative and artistic or mind-numbingly dense, slow-adopters. While this may be true of any commercial art field, in gaming, they seem to wear their internal conflicts on their sleeves. Also, the GDC seems, roughly, four-fifths male, which is bound to influence the type of content and manner in which things are presented.

The most exciting aspect of the games industry is the burgeoning independent game developer movement (think indie movies with smaller budgets and, generally, smaller goals) led by GameLab and fostered by the Independent Game Developers Association (http://www.igda.org). The IGDA has a strong presence at the conference, serving as both hub and host to much of the conference; yet it also seemed invisible to many of the conference's big studio attendees.

The Conference

The first two days of the week-long conference were set aside for all-day workshops. On the first day, Monday, I attended the Serious Games Workshop, which actually was a two-day event. The pretense of the SGW was to discuss serious issues with games and to think about serious issues which might be solved through games and game play. The room was broken into groups and you had to align yourself with a group such as wireless or social games or military concerns. Each group created a list of things that they might be able to do well, and a list of things that might keep them from accomplishing these things. At the end, each group presented their conclusions. Regardless of the groups, everybody had pretty much the same answers, phrased in different ways. Things that were good: learning through social interaction and simulation rather than a priori investigation, rich scenarios, life-like interactions, etc. Bad things: lack of money, lack of research, lack of statistics to measure per-

formance. It was enlightening to hear the Social Issues Group raise the same concerns and problems as the Military Interests Group.

The second day, I devoted my time to the massively multiplayer game workshop led by Eric Zimmerman and Katie Salen. The workshop was entertaining and informative. It was a nice real-life supplement to their book Rules Of Play (http://mitpress.mit.edu/catalog/item/default.asp?ttype=2&tid=9802). Participants designed, developed, then play-tested massively multiplayer games.

On another day, Eric Zimmerman challenged Will Wright (http://www.cmpevents.com/GDx/a.asp?option=G&V=3&id=106900), Warren Spector (http://www.cmpevents.com/GDx/a.asp?option=G&V=3&id=120499), and Raph Koster (http://www.cmpevents.com/GDx/a.asp?option=G&V=3&id=92263) to come up with a love story game. They gave their presentations to a standing-room-only audience. Mr. Spector delivered an enlightening speech on how games would never be able to elicit a feeling of love, based on extensive research he had done on the bio-chemical and social phenomena we experience when we fall in love. Mr. Koster sketched a branching-narrative text game based on romance novels: slides were rendered in pink, cursive type, replete

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with exclamations. However, it was Mr. Wright's game that truly delivered. He began with a poster from *Casablanca*. He followed with a brief sketch of what he described as a First Person Kisser; a peer-to-peer, chat-enabled, 3D world game in which users meet in a space. After finding another person or group, the users are given a goal destination. They then have a certain amount of time to traverse the landscape and various intrinsic obstacles to arrive at their goal. He spoke about how conflict and stressful situations often heighten our feeling of camaraderie and encourage deeper bonds. Then he described the world in which his game would be situated: Battlefield 1942. Two orthogonal games would be being played within the same world: one which is a typical military, FPS, strategy game; the other a civilian, social bonding game. Each might influence the other (e.g., the soldiers might choose to help the civilians, or to drive over them in their tanks). The game sounds both plausible and fun. It's precisely the type of brilliant idea that makes you wonder why no one thought of it before.

Matteo Bittanti (http://www.mattscape.com/pages/1/) called for a greater level of criticism in games. He noted that most game reviews are concerned only with what the games look like and how they play, neglecting both subtextual and cultural analyses. This moment of self-analysis was complemented by Gonzalo Frasca's (http://www.ludology.org) elucidation of the divide between academics and developers, and Robin Hunicke's (http://www.cs.northwestern.edu/~hunicke/) panel, in which academics and industry moguls discussed how and why they could and could not work together.

The Experimental Games Workshop, hosted by Jon Blow, is always one of the festival highlights. The EGW began by featuring the work of this year's Indie Game Jam (http://www.indiegamejam.com/igj2/index.html). Each year, a small cadre of programmers are given a single technology and four days to assemble a game. This year, the technology was Atman Binstock's 2D physics engine. My favorite games were a herding game in which the user is a wasp, and a rock-em, sock-em-robots type game, which, while lacking a need for real skill, was both hilarious and fun. Several of the compelling games featured worlds which could be affected by user interaction. Another feature of the EGW was a demo of a Japanese game, *Katamari Damacy* (http://www.katamaridamacy.jp), in which the user rolled around a ball, collecting more and more things. The more items you collect, the bigger your ball gets and the bigger items you can collect; i.e., you start by collecting thumbtacks and work your way up to pencils and staplers, then on to birds and animals, then people and cars, etc. Eventually you are rolling a ball over the surface of the Earth, collecting countries as you go.

Robin Hunicke gave an enlightening talk about time in games. Chaim Gingold presented a brief analysis of *Wario Ware*, an experimental (but mass distributed) GameBoy game in which the actual game changes every 3 seconds. Mary Flanagan and Ken Perlin talked about their ambitious Rapunsel Project (http://mrl.nyu.edu/rapunsel) in which they are trying to get middle school girls interested in programming. Peter Weyrauch and Andrew Stern demonstrated the latest Zoesis (http://www.zoesis.com) project, *Save the Princess*. The project is another step in Zoesis' AI-heavy games and in this case, an ogre responds in a plausible manner to your advances and actions. To win the game, you must flatter the ogre, compelling him to step away from the princess long enough for you to rescue her.

The IGDA and GDC awards ceremony was no particular surprise, with major studios and projects scooping up most of the awards, with the exception of *Puzzle Pirates* (http://www.puzzlepirates.com) and the simple and great *Dr.Blob's Organism* (http://digital-eel.com/organism/).

Celia Pierce hosted the ArtModJam which featured art projects created by modifying existing games, or using game engines to create new works. The works ranged from the quiet and poetic to the heavy-handed.

The Games
Of the games that were featured, the most original and compelling were *Puzzle Pirates* and *Façade*. *Puzzle Pirates* is a MMORPG in which the user is, well, a pirate. Users inhabit a pirate world and do pirate things. However, every task that

needs to be completed is accomplished by playing puzzle-type games, ala *Tetris*. The experience is surprisingly fun and communal.

Façade (http://www.interactivestory.net) was perhaps the most ambitious project on display, as it was undertaken by only two people, Michael Mateas and Andrew Stern. The deceptively simple goal of *Façade* is to create an interactive 10-minute drama. The game is structured as though the user were a first person character in a short story. You interact (speak through typing and pick up and maneuver throughout the space with your mouse) with two characters, Trip and Grace. As the game unfolds, it turns out that you are an old friend of this couple who is apparently in the midst of some sort of relationship trauma. There are several impressive things about the game, the first one simply being the subject matter it chooses to tackle -- no guns here. Secondly, there is the fact that Mr. Stern and Mr. Mateas have done an amazing job at building a dynamic story engine, which manages character movements and interactions while moving the narrative forward. The characters' responses are utterly believable. The game most closely represents not another game, but, rather, the experience of being in a live improv environment. You can read about what they have to say in the book *First Person* (http://mitpress.mit.edu/catalog/item/default.asp?sid=31771A3D-B031-490D-A3FD-9D79AFD20E36&ttype=2&tid=9908),which features essays and commentary by some of the foremost new media practitioners and theorists.

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I was hoping to see some cool new games for the Sony EyeToy, but unfortunately, their developers still seem to be behind the curve. They did feature a cool demo of a magic spell casting system, but there was no game to accompany it. Last year, the Indie Game Jam came up with a whole set of games using a similar technology (Zack Simpson's shadow tracking software; http://www.mine-control.com) and being measurably better than what Sony has thus far released.

Summary
This is only the 6th year of the conference, and there's already an active voice pushing for more critical self-analysis. It's nice to see that the indie game movement is gaining mass, which is a recognition of vision and appeal, if not cold hard cash. It would have been nice to see more time and space devoted to writing in games (the few events which addressed this topic were so full they had to turn people away at the door). And, as I said before, the GDC appears to be roughly four-fifths male, which is depressing. Still, coming out of the event, people were inspired and motivated, and what more could one ask of a conference.