PROFILES

Emerging from the Tunnel

Ion Storm's Randy Smith on distinguishing the art of games

**W**e caught up with Randy Smith just as he was putting the finishing touches on THIEF 3 as project director at Ion Storm. Randy has in fact worked on the stealth-based THIEF series since its inception, starting out his career as a designer at Looking Glass Studios. This latest THIEF integrates current techniques such as emergent gameplay, although there's much more going on, as evidenced by Randy's introduction of the ability to see your character's limbs from the first person perspective.

Game Developer: What challenges were posed by THIEF 3's "body awareness" feature?

Randy Smith: The feature has some of the harder challenges from implementing both first person and third person view modes. For example, in most first person games you don't have to show your character animating when climbing, but with body awareness you have to because the player character is visible and animating in the world. In most third person games, you don't have to line up the character with world geometry all that precisely, but with body awareness you have to because the camera is so close to the player character's model. Also, the camera is attached to the player character's head, so you need to create animations that hold the head steady in addition to being aesthetically pleasing, which is really hard.

GD: How do you define emergent gameplay?

RS: Emergent gameplay is the phenomenon in which gameplay challenges or solutions to challenges emerge (possibly unexpectedly) as a second-order consequence of game systems interacting with each other. So, say you've got AIs who chase the player, and you've got pressure plates that detect weight on them and trigger traps. The pressure plates were placed expecting the player would walk over them, but the design is that clever players can also lure AIs to set off the traps. Luring the AIs onto the pressure plates is an expected example of emergent gameplay in which the AI system and the physics system interact. Then during playtest, you discover that some clever players are tossing objects onto the pressure plates to set the traps off that way, which is an unexpected example of emergent gameplay, in this case an emergent solution. There's also emergent problems, such as when the AI on the pressure plate gets killed by the trap but then a friendly AI hears the noise and as a consequence starts walking towards the pressure plates to investigate—suddenly the player has to
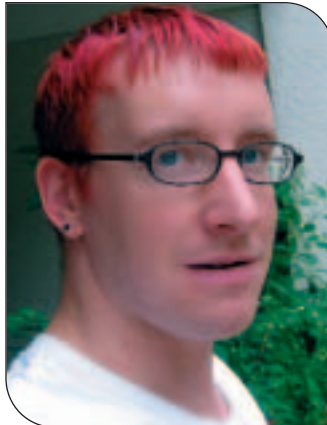
Randy Smith demonstrating the importance of emergence.

protect that AI from the pressure plates, which is an emergent problem.

GD: What role should it play in future games?

RS: As you can see from the examples, emergent gameplay supports player choice and expression in a way that you can't get in a game where every possible challenge, solution, and outcome is understood and explicitly implemented ahead of time by the developers. The important thing to me is the fact that interaction is what sets games apart and makes them a unique art form. If the history of other art forms is any indication, then I believe the future of interactive art is in more complicated forms of interaction, and emergence is likely to be a designer tool which contributes to pioneering that future. But it's probably the case that whether entertainment software follows this development is up to fickle consumer demand.

GD: What other tools do you think are worth experimenting with in distinguishing the interactive qualities of games?

RS: Well, I think simulation is going to continue being really important for empowering player expression and sophisticated interaction. If you don't have at least a little simulation in your game, if everything is emulated, then the most sophisticated player expression you can achieve is still discrete, and that's a pretty limited form of interaction and expression.

Another tool I'm interested in right now is narrative. For THIEF 3, we've been experimenting with the narrative presentation such that we aren't sure how the player will react. The player is presented with some ambiguous but emotionally-charged material towards which they can express a variety of reactions using their standard in-game tools. The game detects and responds to a handful of possible non-mutually–exclusive responses. This design is meant to capitalize on a player trend we noticed, in which players build little stories in their minds, based on the background fiction, by using their standard tools.

Also, as you can see, there's an assumption here that video-games are supposed to be somewhat realistic experience simulators. I think once interactive art really establishes itself as a fine art, as opposed to simply an entertainment medium, then this assumption too will start to be questioned. Again, this is pretty parallel to the history of other art forms.

GD: What games are you playing now?

RS: MARIO KART: DOUBLE DASH!!, DEUS EX: INVISIBLE WAR, THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: THE WIND WAKER, ANCIENT DOMAINS OF MYSTERY, and DECKER. 🖋