INDEPENDENTS’ DAY

The Community Games initiative brings XNA-powered indie creators out of their garages and onto the global stage. Meet the game-design stars of tomorrow…by playing their games today!

Weapon of Choice

MAIL IN THE FAMILY

“Many games have their more interesting gameplay features focused-tested out of them,” says Nathan Fouts, president and programmer of Indiana-based Mommy’s Best Games. “We think gamers are smarter than that.”

The proof: Weapon of Choice, a ridiculously smart game in the spirit of classics like Contra and Metal Warriors, and moments of “old-school style with a new, modern twist.”

That modern twist includes unusual gear and techniques like the Spiderpack, the Vengeance Missile, alt-fire weapons, and moments of “novel new ideas, like using one of the Spiderpack’s chipped in to help, but the bulk of work comes down to the dynamic duo. Afraid when indie developers let their freak flags fly,” says Fouts.

Despite what this photo suggests, Amy (left) and Nathan of Mommy’s Best Games really are going places. Despite what this photo suggests, Amy (left) and Nathan of Mommy’s Best Games really are going places.

Word Soup

COOKING UP AN ADDICTION

If there’s one Community Game that received legitimate pre-release buzz, it was Word Soup—not mostly because everybody who tried the word-search work-in-progress admitted that they couldn’t stop playing it. “The hardcore literal niche isn’t a big audience,” suggests Scott Newby, one of the three men who make up Britain-based Fuzzy Bug Interactive. “Word Soup is completely open to players of all standards. You don’t need to be the reigning Scrabble World Champion to enjoy playing our game.”

Like the best games, Word Soup’s setup is streamlined and simple: faced with a giant grid of letters and a five-minute time limit, players connect horizontally, vertically, and diagonally adjacent letters to spell words. Longer words and uncommon letters score bigger points; using tricky tiles like 2 and 3 buys you bonus time. It sounds simple. It is simple. The hard part is resisting the urge to say “one more game.” And while you can log on to Live to find real-time opponents, you’ll likely find them in your own living room. “It’s ostensibly a single-player game, but it does work incredibly well when you have a few people crowded around, all shouting and pointing at the TV,” says Newby. “That’s the multiplayer mode.”

As a Community Game, Word Soup should be able to succeed on its own merits, not to mention the positive word-of-mouth that the game has already generated. And, of course, tight competition never hurts. “I don’t feel like we’re going into a crowded word-game market,” Newby says dryly. “Are there really any good console word games? Once we’ve launched Word Soup, maybe the world won’t need another.”

You’ll want to learn the controls properly: Weapon of Choice features an atypical layout and some surprise attacks.

Words by Dan Amrich

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NOT JUST A PRETTY FEATURE: Every issue from now on, we’ll be putting a different community creator and their latest project. We’reittinexcited idea is this stuff!!
The Singapore-MIT GAMBIT lab cross-pollinates technical R&D with artistic ideas, but also teaches about fiscal feasibility of the games created. Visit gambit.mit.edu for info.

**INDEPENDENTS’ DAY**

It’s sadistic fun to torture Slinky.

**CarneyVale: Showtime**

**STEP RIGHT UP OR FALL HILARIOUSLY DOWN**

CarneyVale: Showtime is a sequel to a game you’ll probably never play. Last year, students at the MIT-backed GAMBIT game lab in Singapore created a circus-themed PC game in Flash, where players trained circus animals by whipping a Wii remote. Rather than port the cheekily named CarneyVale: Wip over to Xbo for this year’s DBP contest, the team kept the circus theme and created a brand-new game in the same world, this time based on acrobatics.

“We were definitely inspired by pinball,” says Bruce Chia, leader of Team GAMBIT. “In an early prototype, we wanted to allow the player to crash through the entire level, bouncing around as he went along like a pinball. However, there were some design flaws with that.” Instead, players fling an acrobat named Slinky skyward, tossing the hapless ragdoll with a series of mechanical arms, bouncing him into destructible obstacles, and executing daring flips that might execute Slinky himself. Explore the space, go for speed runs, try to pull off daring tricks — but eventually, send Slinky through the ring of fire to end the level. When you’ve mastered all the game’s challenges, build your own with the included level editor.

While a seven-person team worked for four months on the game, the only constant in the game’s design was change. “We shifted quite far from the original design in the end,” describes Chia, noting that Burnout Paradise’s crash mode was a strong early influence. Peer reviews refined it further while drawing more inspiration from N+, Sonic the Hedgehog, Tony Hawk’s Pro Skater, and Super Mario Galaxy, among many others.

After many prototypes and plenty of feedback, the final version of CarneyVale: Showtime took home first prize in the 2008 Dream-Build-Play competition, and for good reason. The “vertical ragdoll platform” gameplay feels fresh and novel; the learning curve hits the perfect balance point between engaging challenge and a sense of mastery; and the brightly colored big-top world appeals to the kid lurking inside even the most serious Gears of War 2 player. Plus, it’s sadistic fun to effectively torture Slinky.

Team GAMBIT received $40,000 for its Dream-Build-Play 2008 victory, and the details of a publishing contract are being worked out now. “It’s a sweet success for the young team. ‘We consist mostly of students or fresh graduates who are very new to the games industry and have only surf books and games that we play to refer to,” explains Chia. “We developed it very much in the independent spirit: with our passion for games.”
The version of OTT we tried featured only two tracks, but they were fun, and they supported four-player racing.

“Doing everything yourself is a challenge and can be a pain.”

The influence of Off-Road is evident — and welcome in the genre.

Malcolm Hodge built OTT for 360 because of the console’s power, but “running my own creations on my HDTV is cool, too.”

Look closely and you’ll see a few off-road shortcuts. Any advantage is a good one!

INDEPENDENTS’ DAY

“The one-Man, four-Month BRITISH ROAD RALLY”

“All my programming knowledge is self-taught,” admits Over the Top Racing creator Malcolm Hodge, adding, “I’m not that great at it.” But after trying an early version of OTT, we disagree: the four-player, top-down arcade racer recalls coin-op hits like Ironman Ivan Stewart’s Super Off-Road and Super Sprint in the nicest ways — and it’s a genre currently underrepresented on Xbox 360.

What’s more, you’d certainly never guess OTT was the first official release of a lifelong hobbyist programmer who has done time as a baker and a postal worker while raising a family. “A lot of the time creating OTT was spent learning and experimenting,” says the 34-year-old Londoner. “I didn’t have a set idea apart from wanting to do an overhead racer. I was a big fan of Off-Road and Supercars from my Amiga days. I also wanted to do something in 3D for the first time in my life, just to overcome that challenge.”

It’s a challenge he overcame in just four months. “I kinda gave up playing games for that period and put everything I could into the project,” he recalls. “I mainly wanted to have something worthwhile to enter in the Dream-Build-Play 2008 Competition. Even though I didn’t think I had a chance of winning, I just wanted to be part of it.” Ultimately, OTT was a solo effort out of necessity. “I wish I did have a team of friends to work with, but the fact is, I don’t know anyone who can use a 3D package, or do programming, or even use a 2D paint package that well,” says Hodge. “So I just set about doing everything myself. Doing everything is a challenge and can be a pain. I would love to be able to just concentrate on doing one thing and doing it right.”

Hodge is the first to admit that “there are still features, bug fixes, and likely more tracks needed” for him to be truly satisfied with OTT, but the game is even more impressive when you consider that Hodge has never finished building a game before, let alone released one to the public. What’s more, Malcolm’s mind is moving on. “I have already started creating something new,” he says, “but I’m going to take more time on this one and make sure I give myself time to play all the great games that have just come out.” Hey — he’s got four months of catching up to do.