As game designers we are constantly faced with constraints to work within. These can be brought about by the genre, the game, and also by the publisher. Some of these constraints are more forgiving than others, but in all cases finding a way to make ideas shine while working within them can be very rewarding.

One constraint that I believe often falls victim to pitfall is movie to game conversions. As a development team you are forced to stay within the realm of the movie, yet make a marketable product. There are some special considerations to take into account when taking on one of these projects.

The pipelines for these projects have become synchronous in the last few years. It used to be that after a movie was released there was a pause for public acceptance before a game was developed. Now the game is released along side the movie in a way to multiply the "Buzz" around the project. The list of recent movie/game combinations released within a month of each other includes: *Meet the Robinsons*, *TMNT*, and *Spiderman 3*. And that's just a start. Of the 7 major games released on the *Nintendo Wii* in March of 2007, 3 of them were movie based.

Copy write Atari 1982[1]

With as high of a percentage of movie-based games there are in the market, your chance of working on one of these titles is continually increasing. Of the many design consideration to ponder with a project of this type I feel that three in particular are key points for design uniqueness. It is this sense of making fun out of seemingly recycled goods that make these constraints, in my opinion, the most entertaining to work with. The three considerations I would like to explore are: External producer considerations, Usage of film footage, and Character/Location development techniques.

External Producer Considerations

Appealing to an external Producer is one of the most consequential challenges of developing a movie to game conversion. The role of this external producer is to make sure that the vision of the development team is consistent with the film, and its creators. In most cases your team will be approached with these products, and creating an idea pitch is not as necessary as with other products. But developing and pitching a unique idea that the publishing company will like can be very challenging.

For the most part a publishing company will be looking for a game that follows the story path of the same movie. But do the players just want to jump through hoops for which they already know the consequences? Getting a publisher to buy into the minor differences between your product and the film teams product can be somewhat difficult but there are a few tricks that can help.

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[1] Movie to game conversions have been around for almost as long as games themselves. *E.T. - The Extraterrestrial* for the *Atari 2600* is an extreme example of a conversion gone wrong.

The advantage to a film to game conversion is that your characters are generally already developed. This will be discussed later, but in the context of dealing with your publisher it can play as a huge advantage for your team. The characters are familiar to the publishing team, and you can use this familiarity to push ideas that are maybe not as consistent with the film. When your development team creates an idea that would constitute unique gameplay it helps in the presentation of this idea to pair it with something the publisher has knowledge of. An example of this is a set of missions that are not included in the movie, but take place at a familiar location.

Presenting a completely radical idea to a publisher involved in the movie is most likely not going to be green lit. If you bundle your idea with a location, or lead in/out that ties into the movie you are more likely to receive the approval. Just because you have an external publisher watching for consistency between the projects does not mean your team has no area for unique play ideas.

As previously mentioned, the pipeline for these projects are often intertwined. This can be a major advantage for your team if you plan ahead for certain aspects. This is especially the case for games based on 3D animation movies (which are obviously gaining more and more mainstream popularity). Because the assets are similar for the two pipelines your team can save time in departments like modeling, rigging, and animation. And devote more time to creating expanded worlds or more developed character storylines.

To make this extra time available requires work on the internal producers part. Coordinating meetings between the two teams can get help to establish which assets can be recycled between the two projects. Although optimizing a model that was used in a film (High poly) to fit in a game engine (Low poly) can be an art into itself, it is generally much less time consuming that creating the model from scratch. If you align yourself with the film team, and work with the publishers, many adjustments can be made that may save both teams time, and make the producers more money.

Usage of film footage

The use of film footage in game development is a somewhat debatable topic. I spoke with some developers that believed it is a great way to slice time from things like cinematic and/or cut scenes and focus more on the game element. I also spoke with developers that believe footage should be used only in an "unlockables" aspect, and that using recycled footage for in game scenes only detracts from the originality of a game.

I believe that the overlaying factor here is an argument of the classic Chicken vs. The Egg. Do people see the movie, and in turn are drawn to the game? Or do they play the game, leading them to see the movie? I think the numbers heavily weigh on the side of the movie coming first, with an occasional game player being drawn out of the dark to see a movie. I believe there is a hefty amount of players that intend to see a movie and play the game (without the influence of one or the other). In speaking with some avid players many of them plan on both seeing and playing 2007's spring/summer blockbusters. These include *TMNT* and *Spiderman 3*.

Copy write Activision 2007[2]

The real issue at hand is how and when it is advantageous to use recycled footage in your game design. When working under these sorts of publishers you are usually given a less generous deadline for

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[2] *Spiderman 3* is an example of a title that many players will both see and play without being drawn to one by the other. This is becoming more common, especially with blockbuster film releases

milestones. This makes it easy to substitute film footage for things like cinematic. When facing a decision of fine-tuning gameplay or creating original cut scenes, I believe any good designer knows which side to choose. But what if you are not faced with that sort of choice.

How do the players feel? After all they are our audience, critics, and metaphorically even our employers. In speaking with players they tend to prefer original footage for cut scenes and cinematic, but think the idea of unlockable movie clips is great. This is especially true with the current generations of systems. With systems like the *PS3* using *Blu-Ray Discs* the possibility for full, high definition film footage is even more appealing.

Character and location development techniques

The development of characters in these projects is always a complicated matter. You are usually forced by the publisher to stay true to the story, and not venture too far from the plot. One studio that has done an amazing job on their games based off intellectual properties is *Vivendi Universal*. The title that stands out to me is The *Chronicles of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay*.

With this game *Vivendi* expounded ideas from the movie, without making an exact play through. Many people I have spoke with, and myself included, were not familiar with, let alone fans of, this series until playing this game. They drew me into a series that I had never heard of. They accomplish this by drawing from the already compelling characters, and turning the player to their side. There are a couple of ways to handle this situation

Copy Write Vivendi 2004[3]

A lot can be learned from dialog. And the nice thing is that a script can be obtained for a movie very early in the project (if you are working in conjunction with the movie team at least). By evaluating this dialog you can draw key locations from the characters including origins and how they arrived at the current setting. With the nature of level progression in games, these places can become imperative. You can also draw out any subtle relationships that may exist between characters. These can be often lost in the rich visuals to the movie audience, but when they are later tied to the game it can all come full circle and be a very rewarding connection for the player.

As you may have heard many business professionals say, "Its all about Location! Location! Location!" The same holds true in movie to game conversions. If you simply use places the player has seen in the movie, and now explores for countless hours they will quickly become bored. But if you use places that were never discussed in the movie the player can quickly feel lost inside of the plot. You need to focus on locations that may have been alluded to in the movie, or particular areas of the main location that were hidden from the players throughout the movie. Both of these options can give a sense of suspicion, and encourage exploration. This more heavily emerges the player, and ultimately keeps them playing longer.

Another tactic to help steer you in the direction of character development is the classic focus group. This works especially well for younger audiences. This can help you determine which characters are the most liked, or which are truly despised… Either can make for a great game character. What you want to stay away from is the characters that people seem almost indifferent to, or do not understand at all. If the point of a game is to emerge the player then using a character they are not emotionally attached to will quickly ruin the suspension of disbelief. Some of the most well liked games and series use characters that are truly loved or despised, these movie to game conversions are no different.

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[3] *Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay* is one of the most well received conversion titles in recent memory. Although it used familiar characters and locations, the storyline was fresh and new to the player.

Many of these conversion titles use what I like to call a shift in the timeline. This is when a game plays out the events that would happen before or after the actual movie plot. It plays as a prequel, or sequel, to the movie. This can be a very wise choice because it gives the player the characters they have already become familiar with, yet lets them have the freedom of deciding their own story. Even when the plot is linear the player feels as if they are creating the story, since it is not made of sequences they have already seen and committed to memory.

Conclusion

So what are the keys to making a successful movie to game conversion? Ultimately this depend on the project itself, and the freedom you have within that project. I do believe that there are a few broad ideas that a designer can keep in mind when planning these projects.

We make games, not movies. The reason our industry is different from the film industry is the interaction between the consumer and the product. Anything that detracts from this interaction is obviously hurting your product. Your goal is to keep the player playing. Excessive cut scenes are the major culprits here. And with a movie based game it is even more evident because the footage is right there. Because of the nature of story telling, a scene from a movie is quite a bit longer than a typical game cut scene. As a designer you must keep this in mind and be cautious when trying to tell a story in your game. The key is to understand the difference between a customer in our industry, and the movie industry.

The quickest way to frustrate a player is to introduce an idea they are not familiar with or have not learned along the way. With these types of games you must pay special attention to this. Players are generally buying these games with expectations of characters, locations, and overall mood. If you stray wildly from these preconceived ideas your players will become frustrated, and will ultimately put down your game. Letting the player connect obscure locations and/or characters themselves can be very rewarding for them, but if that connection is missing it is simply frustrating. The placement of these items should be very well thought out to avoid discontent on behalf of the players.

Learning to Use the film team to your advantage, as opposed to your disadvantage, is key with a conversion project. Recycling assets and ideas can save countless hours of time. But more importantly the film team may have already made mistakes down certain avenues that you can learn from. Perhaps a certain character didn't test well in focus groups and was subsequently cut. Or a certain outfit or color scheme was ineffective on a character. This kind of knowledge can keep you from worrying about things that may have been already worked out, and keep your team focused on what makes you different from the movie… Gameplay

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