

It's a wrap, GDC top 12 list

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It's been a long week of talking game development tools, dealing with a cold and rainy San Jose, and listening to companies saying "Wait until E3," instead of answering questions. But this correspondent persevered to bring you the top 12 tools and items uncovered at the 2006 Game Developer's Conference.

(12.) Sun Microsystems Project Darkstar

Sun is getting into the game business and they are going about it the right way -- by playing to their strengths and that's making platform independent hardware. Their new Project Darkstar initiative, announced at the conference this week is just that -- a brand-new server made specifically for game designers. Their value proposition is that the server will be able to run multiple game applications simultaneously. So a developer would purchase a server that's capable of delivering 400,000 simultaneous connections, but the server doesn't care if it's running an Xbox, Massively Multiplayer Online Game (MMORG) or a PSP game. Through Project Darkstar, Sun is also hoping to host and manage these servers as well.

(11.) Novint Falcon 3D Controller

The Novint Falcon 3D Controller from Novint Technologies is a bold and unique new controller that will give gamers the ability to feel and play games in a fully realized 3D space. Users hold onto the Falcon's handle, which moves left and right and forwards and backwards, like a computer mouse, but also moves up and down. The interchangeable

handle, or "end effector" can come in many shapes and forms and the device includes a quick disconnect feature which lets users change handles for specific uses or types of game play. The controller is big, bulky and tires out your hand after a few minutes of use, but with a few design tweaks and once we see it used in real games these problems will most likely be ironed out. The controller is due to hit stores next year.

(10.) Nokia's Snap! Mobile Efforts

This correspondent still isn't entirely sold on the idea of mobile gaming, but Nokia (and their competitors, Motorola and Sony Ericsson) are making all the right moves to further the progress of online games. All three companies have announced an expansion in their efforts to reach out to developers and are lowering the barrier of entry to encourage them to create more original IP (Intellectual Property) designed specifically for the mobile space.

(9.) Big World -- The Complete MMOG Solution

With the huge popularity of MMOGs, someone was bound to create a middleware solution that would include all the tools necessary to create new virtual worlds and environments out of the box. The Big World technology suite is just that tool. It's fairly simple to use and includes every thing a small or large development shop needs to get started. The only thing missing is that original idea, hopefully this will free up designers to come up with more original online properties than the standard Everquest or World of Warcraft clones.

(8.) Gamecaster

Honestly, this correspondent isn't quite sure what Gamecaster is trying to be, but whatever it is, it's pretty cool technology. The company is doing two things; on the one hand they are at the show promoting a new video

game camera technology called The Gamecaster Cybercam Series 2 camera. The camera lets users record live video directly from games. The theory being that the source footage would be clearer, at the moment it's difficult to record live in game footage. The company hopes to license this technology to companies that are creating professional video gaming leagues. Gamecaster is also promoting its own professional gaming league.

(7.) Unreal Engine 3

Ah, what can this correspondent say about Epic Game's amazing Unreal Engine 3? It's one of the top development tools of choice and gives developers a tool that enables the speedy deployment of top level games and is the tool used in such as the amazing looking Unreal Tournament 2007, the upcoming and much hyped X-Box 360 title Gears of War and more. The Unreal toolkit makes creating top tier games a lot easier than trying to build an engine from scratch. What's more the Unreal engine is platform independent and will work on all of the next generation console systems.

(6.) Video Game Awards

This week the industry honored themselves with the annual Game Development Awards ceremony, where the underdog game Shadow of the Colossus won in five categories including taking home the game of the year award. The ceremony was sponsored by the IGDA the game industry's premiere professional organization. The frustrating thing about these awards is that the Industry has trouble getting others outside the industry to recognize the real creativity and talent that's needed to create these great entertainment experiences. At the end of the year the public at large follow which films get nominated for which awards and debate its merits passionately; unfortunately that same kind of passion isn't showcased by gamers when game ceremonies like this are held.

(5.) AGEIA PhysX Processor

Ageia's PhysX processor is being dubbed as the first physics processing unit (PPU) which is designed to amp the level of real world physics in the next generation of games. What this means is that no longer will players play games in static worlds, with this processor games will experience fully realized worlds where everything will be destructible and those destroyed elements will behave the way they would in a real world. So an exploding bolder won't simply fall on the ground, the pieces will have a sense of weight and feel. The process is already being used in Epic's Unreal 3 Engine and will be available on high end PCs everywhere.

(4.) Game Spy

It's pretty amazing how far Game Spy has come since they first entered the game business. Now their suite of community building tools are being used to power online game connectivity and community activities from companies like Nintendo, Sony, Electronic Arts and numerous others. If you play online games and participate in clans or other online game activities, there's a good chance that it's their toolset that you are using.

(3.) Microsoft XNA and Live Market Place

Microsoft's XNA platform was first unveiled at last year's GDC but now it appears that they are really ready to take it to the next level. Last year everyone was like, huh? But this year the boys and girls from Seattle finally have their marketing message a little more consistent. Basically XNA is a repackaged version of some of their primary tools like C#(plus plus), Visual Studio, etc. under a new banner and more focused on game developers. The success of Microsoft's Live Market Place has encouraged Microsoft to really pushed the idea of casual games and

using the XNA framework to make developing casual games easier and quicker. MS is so taken with the idea of casual games, that during a conversation with Scott Henson, product unit manager for Microsoft's Games Division, that was the focus of our conversation. He hopes XNA's ease of use will encourage more small start ups to develop original IPs for Live Market Place.

(2.) Sony, Sony, Sony

Let's face it, we're all going to get a PlayStation 3, there's no denying it. Sony's Phil Harrison imparted some interesting tidbits this week, including the "bombshell" announcement, ok not bombshell, we've been expecting it for a year now, but it's official the PlayStation 3 will support online play and in a big way. Yes, the PlayStation Network looks like a clone -- in terms of features, of Xbox Live, but that's not a bad thing. Xbox live is a fantastic service and it only benefits gamers that Sony will be getting rid the terrible ad hoc approach that was used for the PS2. The major disappointment was how average some of the live PlayStation 3 tech demos were; sure all the particle and physics effects were cool but graphically speaking the demo titles that were shown were at the same level of the Xbox 360. The live demos were mixed with a couple of amazing looking "pre-rendered" footage. Keep in mind these were very early demos and to achieve that level of detail was impressive. Other Sony news included all of the new features they are adding to the PSP including a new Flash Browser, GPS and Camera add-ons. Harrison promised we'll see a lot more on the PS3 and PSP at E3.

(1) Nintendo's Not Dead Yet!

Nintendo Co., Ltd. President Satoru Iwata keynote address on "Disrupting Development" rocked the room of over a thousand attendees. The man is an industry rock star and had the crowd laughing, applauding and cheering at all the right moments. He kicked off his

speech discussing the success of their Brain Age DS games that have sold almost 6 million copies in Japan, he then talked about the success of Nintendo's WiFi program, segued into a demo of Metroid Prime Hunters and surprised the crowd with announcements of The Legend of Zelda: The Phantom Hourglass for the DS and sent the crowd into hysterics by announcing that the Revolution's Virtual Console would include Sega Genesis games.

It's hard not to admire Nintendo, they take risks that seem totally silly but somehow make them work. The success of the DS and their slick new redesigned DS is a testament to this, but then they have the wackiest most non-traditional games that you would think wouldn't work games like Nintendogs, Brain Age, etc. but in the end they do. Nintendo's problem is they appear to be the only ones who can make games for their systems sell. So while the industry adores Nintendo and everything they do, it doesn't translate into more third-party support.

According to Iwata, making games easier for consumers is harder for developers and in this risk adverse environment a game like Tetris wouldn't be made, says Iwata, "We at Nintendo don't run from risks, we run to it."

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