

Unknown

Design Overview



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High Concept



Brief summary

Unknown is a first person survival horror game that focuses on physics interaction, action based challenges and non-linear storytelling. The player must explore an old castle full of deadly traps, horrific creatures, strange characters and haunting discoveries, never knowing what lurks behind the next corner. Behind the walls of the ancient castle lies an age-old mystery and it's up to the player to unravel it and survive to tell the tale.

Unique selling points

- A proper survival horror game that does not have violence as the main focus, rather a tense ambience and actual survival.
- Highly interactive environments and intuitive controls for interaction. Anything not bolted stuck can be moved and interacted with.
- Unique and interesting setting.
- Player can choose how to progress in the levels, how to tackle problems and chose their own path through the game.
- Dynamic and non-linear story telling lets the player choose their own depth of detail and is never forced to watch a sequence.

Target platforms

The main platform for Unknown will be the PC (and Mac/Linux if wanted) as it's the platform we have the most experience for as developers. Xbox 360 is also a possibility and Frictional Games is already a licensed Xbox 360 developer. Due to previous ports to both Mac and Linux the engine is very portable and developing for several platforms is something we are very comfortable with.

Core Gameplay

Unknown's goal is to mimic the experience of a really scary horror movie, without having the main protagonist being a Rambo type of character that goes in guns blazing. Instead the game will be slower paced and rely more on exploring the environments carefully, unraveling the plot, interacting with the surroundings and trying to outwit the monsters encountered. This does not mean that Unknown is a game revolving around solving puzzles and sneaking though, it will have an action oriented gameplay style and feel like a thrill ride from start to finish.

The cornerstone of this gameplay is the rich interactivity possibilities of the environment – everything not bolted stuck can be moved and interacted with. The player will constantly need to explore the surroundings to overcome obstacles and find clues that will help move the plot forward. Being trapped in a castle, built over the centuries by deranged men, means that there are always surprises in store and a key challenge is to adapt to new conditions throughout the game.

By having a large focus on the physical simulation of the world, the challenges facing the player will be solvable in a multitude of ways. It is up to the player to take advantage of the tools given and to figure out a solution to the current problem. When facing an enemy the player might be able to create a diversion and sneak past, he/she might be able to run past and then block the path with some rubble or perhaps electrifying a pool of water will take care of the creature.

Freedom will not only be available in the core gameplay, it's part of the story telling as well. The player can determine at what depth he/she wants to experience the story. A player less interested in the story will not be forced to read or listen to everything encountered and still be given good overview of the story and a compelling sense of narration. For the more plot interested there exist a lot of bits to give extra depth to the story and enhance the narrative experience.

Story & Narration

Background & Overview

Unknown takes place in Prussia during the late 18th century and begins with the protagonist having to investigate an old castle, as a favor for a paranoid Nobleman. With the revolution raging in France the Count is deeply concerned that his minions are going to rebel against him. The Count is convinced that horrible plans are plotted against him and those in power, with the abandoned castle being used as the base of operations.

As the player starts investigating, he slowly gets dragged into a world beyond his wildest dreams. As he struggles to survive he also feels drawn to the old castle, realizing he is more connected to that strange place and the events that occur there, than he ever could have imagined.

Unknown tells a story of conspiracy, alchemy and strange historical events, spiced up with a large dose of dark lovecraftian horror.



Main Characters

The player will encounter different NPC characters through out the game. Their purpose is to drive the story onwards and to interact with the player by helping out, giving hints and/or trying to stop the player's progress. Some of the characters will be antagonists and are wickedly playing with the player, at times helping, other times trapping or even trying to kill him/her, all due to what's in their best interest at the moment. They also fight amongst themselves and the player character becomes a brick in their game, something the player will need to take advantage of in order to survive and reach his/her goals.



Narration

There are four ways in which story is narrated to the player, each with its distinct function and depth of story telling. They are also designed to give layers of story and to allow players to get involved with the story as they please. The main story is told through the player character's own narration and NPC dialogue. Visions and diaries expand and, in most cases, give optional story bits. Finally the notes are purely there to give all sort of extra details (this we have found to be a prominent feature that some players enjoy, based on our experiences from Penumbra).

Player character narration

During the game the character will narrate his adventures in past tense, giving brief statements and overview of events that led him to his current location or of the events that occurred there. The main purpose is to give background story and to give the player character a presence by reflecting on what he experienced and felt.

"The rain was pouring down, that dreadful night, as I stood there looking at the endless darkness of the tunnel lying in front of me..."

"There was an awful stench of death in the room; hopefully I would be out quickly."

NPC dialogue

The NPC characters of the game will talk to the player and their main functionality is to tell ongoing story of the game. They will act as a force to drive main story forward, giving missions and so forth. The player character himself will at times talk back to the NPCs, and while the player can not choose what to say, actions performed will affect the dialogues.

Old man: "Use the key I gave you and open that door."

(Player opens door at other side of room)

Old man: "Now you need to enter that dark tunnel and remember to always have the torch lit!"

Player: "I will do my best, thanks for your help."

Visions

As the player enters certain areas or interacts with a particular object – a vision will appear. These

visions will tell of an event that occurred at the area or reveal something connected with the object. The main function is to give a history to the places that the player explores, the tools that he/she use and to connect the player to the different areas, which is crucial for the story.

The vision itself is told through positional sound, dialogue and is often further detailed by the look of the area. For example if a vision is of a gruesome murder in the kitchen – the player will find blood, broken dishes and other signs telling of the act committed.

Diaries

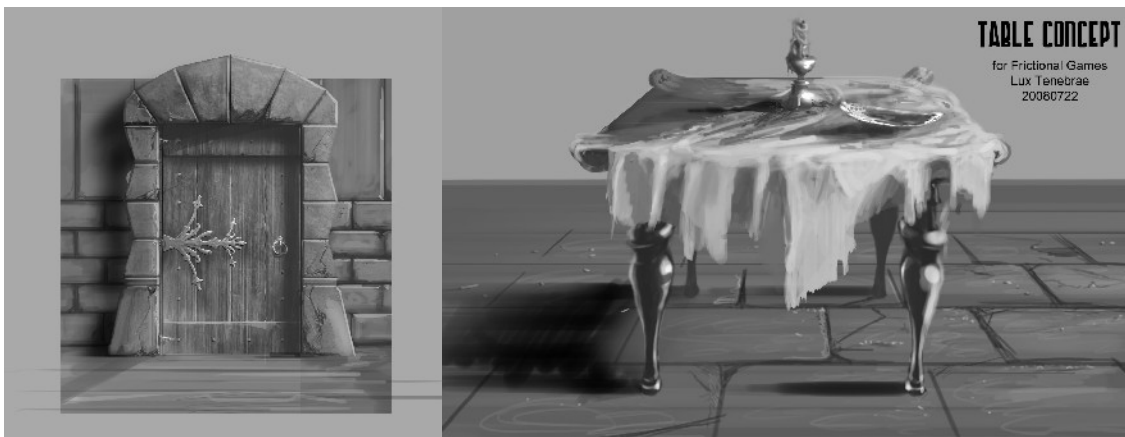
Diaries are written by the NPC characters in the game and when picked up they are narrated to the player along with pictures and if appropriate sound and music. Each diary has certain a number of entries, each entry spread out over a number of levels. To assure a specific flow of events, the entries are always played back in a certain order and not connected to the actual entry item picked up. This is accomplished by letting the game give the entries in a predetermined order; the first entry item found will always correspond to the first entry and so on. Most entries will also end with some sort of cliffhanger, as a motivation for the player to find the next one.

Diaries are there to expand on the ongoing player centered story, as well as events that occurred before the player came to the castle. They will reflect the thoughts of the NPCs, giving a more personal and alternate view on the story than what the NPCs say to the player when in direct communication. Diaries will be a sort of a peak into the thoughts and true objectives of the characters encountered.

Notes

Notes are text only pages of varying length that the player will find throughout the game. Often they give additional details on a current event, room, NPC or side-stories and add a further sense of depth to the world.

Gameplay



The following chapter will be a brief overview of the gameplay and is meant to give a summary of the actual experience for the end user. All specific details and stats have been left out for the sake of clarity and to better demonstrate the core gameplay. Presented below are the main parts of the game and not a complete guide to what the player can do in the final product.

General

Unknown is a first person survival horror game and key elements for the player will be:

Exploration, overcoming physical obstacles, solving puzzles, avoiding darkness, collecting and some combat and sneaking elements.

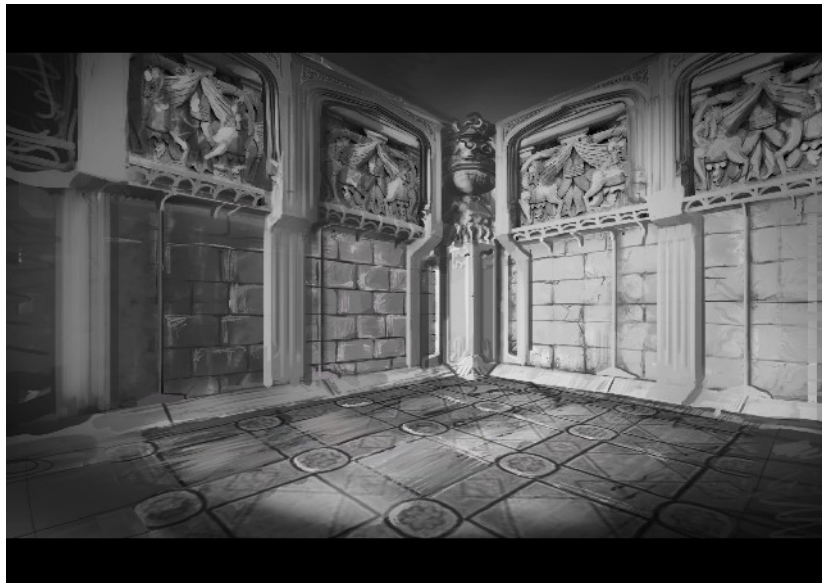
Movement & Controls

As a first-person game the controls are the standard keyboard + mouse input, as well as gamepad support and perhaps other devices too (we have previously collaborated with the haptics developer ReachIn and support for the Novint Falcon might be possible).

Main basic movements for the player are walk, run, crouch/sneak, jump and being able to grab ledges to pull up. The aim is to have a scheme that is very easy to get into and the player should be able to start playing instantly without struggling with the input system (given he/she has played first person game before).

More advanced controls involve various forms of interaction. The player will be able to interact with objects in the world in numerous ways, for example: picking up, throwing, pull/push, rotate and much more. These actions are always case sensitive, making it simple and intuitive by always consisting of a mouse click and/or mouse movement. The goal is to let the player intuitively interact with the surroundings and thereby be able to use a vast range of objects, without having to learn new rules for each type. All objects also have a realistic behavior and will give the player an intense physical experience. He/she will be able to feel a large difference when manipulating smaller objects like levers as opposed to large and heavy machinery.

Hubs & Levels



The game is divided into 6 "Hubs", each a starting point that connects to a number of levels where the core gameplay takes place. At the Hub the player has a safe haven, a place where he can gather his thoughts, have the game saved, chat with any characters available or try to figure out the next move. Almost always several levels are open to the player and he/she can choose the order in which to tackle them (and even skip some!). **The Levels are meant to be bite-sized chunks of gameplay and after completing one the player will be thinking "just one more..."**.

Each level will have a distinct theme and setting that always fits well with the Hub they are linked to. This distinct theme is not in the sense that a Library Hub would only have Library levels to explore but rather that the Mansion Hub has a library level, an outside in the park level, the wine cellar and a level with the secret quarters of the house's master.

The levels are designed to be revisited and as objectives change, previously inaccessible parts are made accessible on the next visit. An event in one level, for example starting a machine, could active the ability to use an elevator in another level.

To complete a Hub the player has to complete a certain amount of the tasks, missions and other challenges that are connected to the current Hub by the ongoing story. The tasks and mission changes through the playing of a Hub and depending on how the player plays the Hub future events and missions can come out different.

The player can always chose they order in which he/she want so play the levels; the game does not progress by a strict “complete level 1 to 5 and go to the next Hub”-formula. Neither does the player need to do everything in order to advance; only a certain amount of tasks has to be completed for the story to progress to the next Hub.

Events

While an event is not an actual gameplay element it is something that is important to mention. During all events in the game, whether it is a dialogue or a scene of a bridge falling to the ground, the player will never be locked and he/she will always stay in control of the player character. The goal is to create a game where the player is always active and free to move about and at times this freedom might even change the current event. As a simple example: If the player does not feel like listening to a character he can simply walk away from him and the character stops talking.

In our previous game Penumbra, we started to explore this way of always making sure the player is in control and not to rely on cut-scenes that use a static camera to tell story elements. Rather we tried to let the story be told through the gameplay and the world you explore as a player. In Unknown we are taking this further as much as possible, as we believe a large part of the horror comes from not being distracted by events that tells you ”this is only a game”. Loosing control of the character is exactly one of these sorts of events.

Detailed gameplay

Puzzles & Physics

The main part of the gameplay is to overcome challenges, which can be viewed as the gameplay that replaces the most common gameplay of first person games - the shooting. Often the challenges are physics based, with solutions that are logical and natural. They consist of problems, obstacles and difficulties that has to be overcome in order to go further in a level, help someone, deal with an enemy or in some other way advance in a level.

The goal is to create a game with “action puzzles” and not a game with riddles and solutions that require heavy thinking. The challenges faced will include everything from slow puzzles, such as repairing a big and old machine, to quickly running from danger as you break down obstacles and other “think fast to find the solution”-puzzles. As the game is survivor horror a portion of the puzzles can at times be horrific in themselves – use parts of a corpse to create a potion, save a prisoner from a “Saw”-like deathtrap and other disturbing situations.

Light & Darkness

Tied to the story there is an element of darkness sensitivity for the player character. He needs to be in the light to be in full health and physical readiness. When in dark areas he will start to get weaker, slower and have an increased number of psychological effects tearing him down.

The main reason for the system is to increase the player’s fear of the dark. By giving an actual

penalty when in the dark, the player's tension will heighten even more when entering gloomy environments. If the only way forward is through a dark and moist tunnel, where ominous animal sounds are heard from, the player is in a tough position. Perhaps he/she can lure the creature out of the darkness and take care of it out in the lit room? Or is it worth the risk to enter the darkness, increasing the chance of sneaking past unnoticed?

This mechanism also serves a secondary purpose, as hinted above, by introducing choices and puzzles for the player. Perhaps a dark hallway can be lit up by starting a fire and thereby making getting past the creatures up ahead a simpler task. Also because of the weakness induced by darkness, certain passages can only be climbed, jumped across, etc when in light - giving the opportunity to create various puzzles from this gameplay mechanic.

Enemies



Although the game does not focus on combat the enemies still play a crucial part. Most importantly, the various creatures encountered are there to heighten the feeling of dread and have the player guessing what is behind the next corner. Enemies will not be coming pouring in numbers at the player; rather they are strategically placed at various spots or traveling along certain routes, making the player feel insecure from their presence. Enemies can be dealt with in numerous ways, some can be killed, some must be sneaked past, others can be incapacitated and for some... the player simply has to run. There is almost never just one way to deal with an enemy and the player must use his wit and cunning to get past.

Most of the enemies in the game are in the form of experiments made on humans and animals in the castle. The appearance of these creatures hints of some plant like features, this is connected to the story and events that have occurred behind the walls of the castle. As the game progresses the creatures take on more disturbing and strange forms. There are also hints that under the hideous surface there are innocent human beings. This is meant to confuse the player and make it more unnerving when having to resort to violence. Also, to further enhance the creepiness of enemies, they are not always shown in fully lit environments and the player needs to fill out the blanks for him-/herself. This will play with the player's imagination and he/she will be able to build a mental image more horrific than a clear view could ever create.

Combat



Combat is not a large part of the gameplay, but still exist as a final resort and also as a way to complete non-violence related puzzles. Example of this might be a bridge that can be brought down by destroying a chain, one of the possible solutions can be to use a weapon to destroy it. The types of weapons available are close ranged melee weapons, bow and arrow, various bottles of alchemy potions that can be thrown (think grenades with different effects) and a very rare flint lock gun. Most of these weapons also serve a secondary purpose apart from fighting, for example bow and arrow can shoot switches from afar and a potion can be used to set a rope on fire.

Using weapons is not the only way to kill enemies; often the best way is to use the environment to take them down. For example, the player can lead electricity into a pond of water that a creature is standing in or cut a rope that makes a large boulder fall on the head of an unsuspecting foe. To make killing harder for the player many enemies are only vulnerable to certain elements, some enemies can only be killed by fire, some by electricity and so on. This adds another layer of strategy to the combat and makes it more desirable to find another route instead of charging a direct attack.

Items / Collectable

A major part of the gameplay is to investigate the environments and play around with the interaction. Because it would be impossible (and not desirable) to fill every compartment and container with some story item (note, diary, etc) there needs to be some other motivator for searching around and exploring. This will be in the form of various types of collectables that also serve the purpose of giving the player rewards and to be used for puzzles and missions.

Mission/puzzle items

These are items that are needed in order to complete a certain puzzle or mission. It could be a cogwheel for a machine or an amulet that needs to be brought to an NPC. There are quite few of these and they are often found in obvious places.

Player resource items

Health potions, ammunition and other expendable resources are found in this category. These types of items are essential to gameplay and also provide a large motivator for exploring environments. There are quite a lot of these in a level and they can be found on regular basis, but some are rarer than others.

Coins

Coins are the main item found when exploring the environment and can be found in nearly all containers and compartments. They come in various value sizes and can be used to unlock doors, by bribing characters, or to open special treasure chests that require a certain amount of coins (varies from object to object). The doors unlocked might lead to secret areas and enable the player to progress without completing some missions. Treasure chests contain player resources and some times puzzle items and are meant to give the player a boost. Only in very rare cases is a coin-locked chest or door compulsory to open.

Strange Statue

These are hard to get items that act as a special collectable that are hidden in the levels. Each level only contains a few of these and once all have been found in a hub some kind of secret is unlocked. This might be a secret level, some more story bits or something else. The game shows the player how many he misses in each level and once the game is completed the player can go back to old Hubs and search for more. This collectable also serves as a way to give the game replayability.

Saving

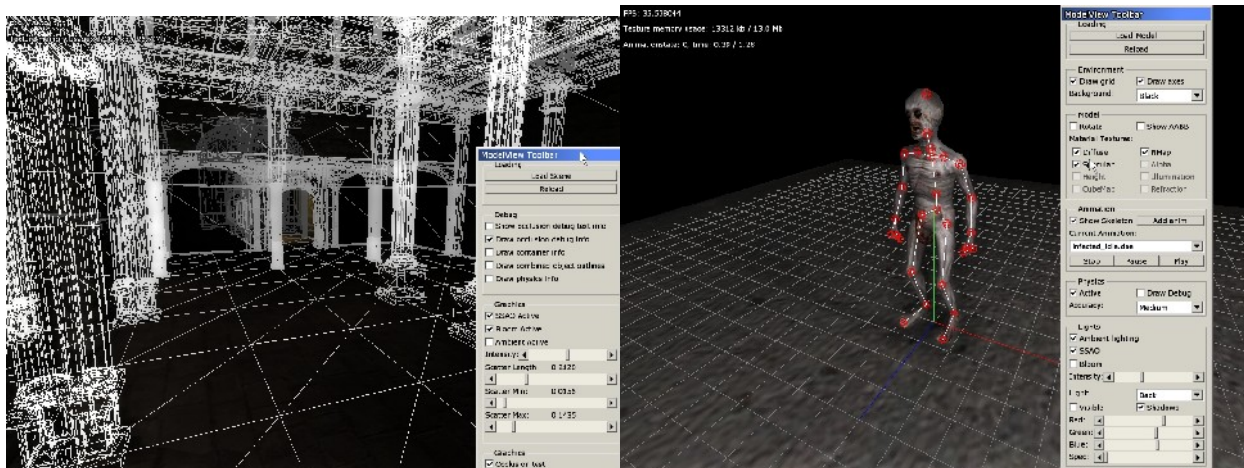
When playing a level there are numerous checkpoints that auto save the game continuously. When the player completes a mission and returns to the Hub, the game will automatically make a proper file save. It is these file saves from the Hub that will be loaded when the player continues a game after having quit. Our goal is to make saving as simple as possible and the player should never think about saving the game and is hence yet another trick to keep the player “in the game” at all times.

Technology & End user content

The following is a short overview of the technology that is used, why it is used and how it will be taken advantage of when the game is released. Please note that all tech is in development and are planned to have a mature status at the end of January 2009 together with a full featured game prototype.

The main reasons for using an in-house developed engine is to keep the costs down and to, much more important, enable the sort of physical interaction that we want in our games. That physical interaction is not possible with any other engine without severe modifications. The interaction in our previous game Penumbra was unique and in our new engine and game we have developed it even further. We strive to continue being at the forefront of making physics a part of the gameplay and not only as something that helps creating visual effects.

Engine



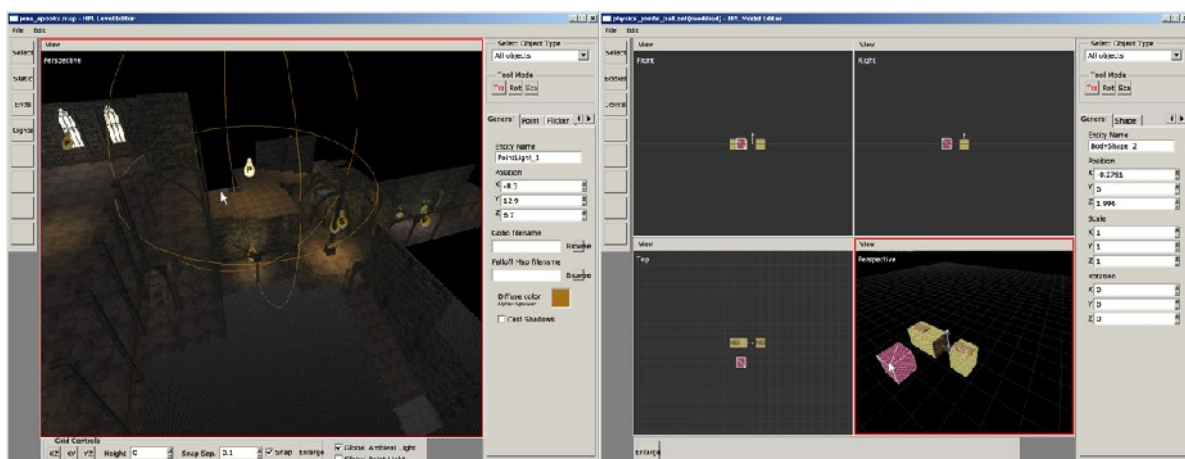
The engine used for previous games (Penumbra series) has received extensive updates and feature improvements, with a lot of new technology and functionality added. The most important change would be the use of a deferred shader, allowing for scenes with huge amounts of lights, which in turn also makes map editing a lot easier. Dynamic soft shadows, parallax mapping and real time ambient occlusion are only some of cutting edge visual technologies added.

The engine has also received new methods for optimizing levels automatically. It can automatically combine objects to optimize the levels, something that previously required a lot of manual labor. Even more important is the use of “coherent hierarchal culling”, which makes the process of visual culling entirely automatic. Previously we have devoted huge amounts of time for this task, but with this new system we will save time and let artists create much more complex and interesting level structures.

Other new and expanded features include a fully implemented GUI system that gives a much greater control of how menus in the game will look and work. It will also allow various in-game tools to be created with ease. By using an advanced skinning system the GUI can be made to look like Windows if required, but it could also be something entirely different.

Finally the great physics seen in Penumbra are also present, but are now using a more modern and much faster version of the Newton Game Dynamics engine. This will allow for a more stable physical interaction and behavior of physical objects, it will also support calculation on multiple CPUs enabling higher frame rates and more exact simulation.

Editor & Tools



New for this project are numerous new tools that make the development much more efficient. Not only for us, but also for outsourcing and the tools are even so easy to use that user-made content will be possible.

Level Editor

The main tool for the new engine is the Level Editor. It has been created to give non-artists the ability create advanced and good looking levels. This has been done by taking inspiration from traditional 2D editors, where the artist creates a set of tiles that can be combined endlessly when making levels. A great example of this would be the 2D/3D editor created by Blizzard for “Warcraft 3”, great looking graphics that could easily be used by the developers, as well as end users, to create completely new levels from an original set of tiles.

In-house artists can create tile sets from scratch, but the technology will also allow artist to create the basics for a tile set and then let an outsource company fill in the details. The final completed tile set can then be used by anyone on the team to create numerous original levels, with lots of variations. This new production method reduces the time required considerably compared to the old

method of making each level entirely in a third party 3D editor. It also removes all the “hacks” needed when working with a third party editor and artist can concentrate on making nice looking levels, instead of worrying about technical aspects.

The Level Editor also takes care of adding in lights, script functions, entities and all other gameplay related content. This gives us one central tool that is specifically designed to create the game we are planning to do.

Model Editor

Previously all gameplay specific modeling (physics bodies, etc) had to be done in a third party 3D editor. While this worked it did require quite an extensive knowledge of the editor concerned and special hacks for going around certain issues. The model editor is designed to be a tool specifically created to make changes and settings for objects that will then come to life in-game.

The editor can be used to add the simplified geometry that is used for physical collision, add joints and split the model into parts to give dynamic behavior (for example have a door frame and a door, that are connected by a joint so that you can swing the door open while the frame stays put). You give the model all its physical properties: mass, what material it is made of and so on. Much is also done automatically and will further reduce the workload.

The model editor will also do tasks that previously were done by editing a lot of text files. This makes model editing a lot easier, not to mention much more user friendly. The editor provides options and settings that are specific for the current task, so the user does not have to deal with all the redundant information available when using a third-party tool.

Post release usages

The main reasons for creating the tools are to improve the work pipeline from previous projects. The tools will allow more people in the team to participate in creating actual and usable game content on their own in more detail. A script coder can create levels that used to be the graphics artist domain and the graphics artist can add script and gameplay functionality that previously was too difficult to master. The freedom of creativity that comes from this will help in creating a really great game experience.

The second and equally important usage of these tools is to make sure users can create their own content as easy as possible. The game will come with user created content support and a community site will be available, making it easy and swift to exchange and play each others' creations. This is part of an effort to bring extra value to the game only accessible to those with legitimate copies. Copy protections that so far has been used in boxed releases of our games have been counterproductive, it has been more difficult and sometimes even impossible for a user to play the game due to the copy protection - while an illegal copy simply have worked "out of the download". What we want to achieve is a way to battle piracy without using copy protection, but rather create additional value that is only accessible by having a purchased copy of the game.