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Myth: The Beaten Path Less Traveled By Bungie

Bungie Software has always been characterized as a company by their continuous innovation in the field of computer game design. Today that innovation has been changed to Innovation(TM) by Bungie's sale to software behemoth Microsoft, but in 1991 when Bungie was founded by Alexander Seropian and Jason Jones, innovation referred to the new ground they broke with each game. Bungie's first efforts, namely "Operation Dessert Storm", "Minotaur", "Pathways Into Darkness", and the Marathon Trilogy built their reputation to near divine levels with consistent quality, and novel approaches to each of the genres they explored. But unfortunately, from a business perspective, this fame was concentrated in only a relatively small subset of the gaming market: that belonging to the Mac platform. In November of 1997, Bungie released Myth: The Fallen Lords for the Mac, and for the first time the PC as well, and took their initial steps toward broader renown.

Myth: The Fallen Lords, and its sequel Myth II: Soulblighter didn't deviate from Bungie's habit of deviation from the norm. In fact, with a free-floating omniscient observer perspective and a focus on the tactical aspect of strategic warfare gaming which had never been addressed before, the Myth games scored even more uniqueness and genre-bending points. But the task of designing a game that breaks boundaries and explores areas of game-play in which no roads have been lain is not one which can go entirely smoothly. When a company designs a first person shooter game with an emphasis on free-for-all death match, they can be sure that hundreds of thousands of gamers all over the world will know exactly what keys they want to use to control their character. From there, it's just a matter of learning the new levels and new weapons for all those players to go from newbie to master, and the game company need only worry about making those levels and weapons worth learning. But when a newbie first sits at Myth, he immediately realizes that he has only the vaguest idea how to control the game at all, and the learning begins there.

Myth: The Fallen Lords   The Bleeding Edge.

The people behind Myth (Jason Jones, Jason Regier, and Robt McLees, to name a few) have become celebrities in the Bungie fan community that followed the game for their roles in its creation, and so they have often been asked in informal settings about just what they did. The most often quoted development process tidbits to come out of such conversations are the two infamous brainstorming lists, dubbed "Stuff that Rocks" and "Stuff that Sucks." These lists provided the basic inspiration for the game, and included such wholesome standbys as "blood and severed limbs" (under the Rocks category). Also in the lists were movies and books that had impressed the team with their depictions of the ferocity of battle, Braveheart among them. With these influences, the concepts behind Myth were conceived and solidified. Where traditional Real Time Strategy games took an almost text-book approach to battle with heavy attention to the development of technology and the securing of resources, and comparatively light attention to how individual units were actually employed beyond sheer numbers, Myth completely ignored all such considerations. Instead, it tried to focus on making the player the pivotal element of the game by giving him a beautiful world, and facing him with the need to beat his opponents with essentially equivalent forces at the disposal of each.

Perhaps the first thing a player notices when looking at a Myth game in progress, even before realizing that they don't know how to control things from past experience, is that it is truly three dimensional in presentation. Individual creatures are sprites (two dimensional pictures) but they are placed in a rolling polygonal landscape and rotated or scaled as appropriate so that the result

is perfectly convincing and quite graphically advanced for the era. The player views the scene from a free-floating camera which he can, and must, move and rotate around the battle field to view the action from all angles. The battle field itself is a small segment of land usually on the order of half a kilometer per side, and it consists of varying elevations and obstacles that each impact the utility of different units in different ways. For instance, undead units can sit submerged under deep water totally out of sight, and projectile units like archers can fire farther from raised positions. Finally, and perhaps most importantly to the dynamics of the game-play, there are no forests or crystal patches to reap, and no mechanism for construction at all. More units cannot be made; the player may select his force within limits before the game begins, but when time starts each unit that falls weakens his army irrevocably.

The critical acclaim Myth enjoyed was testament to its successes in so many of its goals. The mobile camera allowed skilled players to see their forces from every angle, so that they could maintain a mental image of the battle far greater in accuracy than that provided by any previous isometric perspective game, while at the same time allowing them to pick the most suitable perspective for their particular style and their particular gambit at each stage of the game. The lack of a resource model or tech tree p off in other ways as well, as players developed unique styles and gambits at an incredible rate. The maneuvering, placing and committing of one's forces attained the degree of preeminence that the designers had intended, and the small-field battle tactics of the real world popped up, equally applicable in Myth games. But, all was not good news. While the camera's freedom provided the skilled with an almost cinematic experience and a massive increase in the degree to which they were "connected" with the action on screen, it confused newbies to the extent that some never bothered to learn to deal with it. The camera, after all, required five more degrees of freedom to control. Most first person shooters have only four degrees of freedom (movement in largely two dimensions, tilting and panning) and suddenly gamers used to this level of control had to handle more than that amount with only one hand, while simultaneously issuing commands with the mouse. Add to this mix the wonderfully complex inter-relations between the many different types of units and between the units and the terrain, and Myth was plagued by a steep learning curve. And, ultimately, some things that Rocked just plain never made it into Myth: The Fallen Lords.

Myth II: Soulblighter   The Long View

Why did Stuff That Rocked not get into Myth? For a number of reasons, from lack of time to simple impracticality. Some of the features that got cut were nifty things like magic using characters or ambient life or fire, while other features were shipped with limitations to them that could have been removed with time, like terrain resolution, or the number of water-levels in any given map. So, when it came to making the sequel, Myth II, these unfulfilled wishes seemed like natural features to add, and indeed that became the goal. The Myth engine was still pretty solid technology wise, so the designers (this time with the addition of Tuncer Deniz, Mark Bernal and many others) could afford to focus on touch ups instead of re-writes... with one exception. Bungie always had a history of making games that were very accessible for constructive hacking. With sensible design decisions, malicious modification of the client for the purpose of cheating was simply ineffectual: the client program and data files were not assumed to remain un-changed, so there were no expectations to exploit. But, with the cooperation of all parties involved, Marathon had enjoyed a tradition of easily accessible mod-making. Indeed by Myth II's approach, the first, most skilled white hats were beginning to figure out how to mod the original Myth engine. But Bungie decided that it was time to fully support this re-emerging community and the ability to support third party plugins natively was added to the goal list.

When Myth II shipped, every feature mentioned above had been added. Birds flew through the skies (at least until an arrow flew through *them*, or they came too close to an explosion) and deer frolicked in the woods along with numerous others, all despite ruthless hunting by players in

moments of waiting. New hardware allowed fires to be modeled properly, so archers gained an extra use on the battlefield with flaming arrows. New magic using characters appeared which needed to recharge between uses, but could be devastating if employed properly. Unfortunately, all these super powerful units changed the dynamics of the game. Battles sped up, and more and more significance was placed on the use of just one or two units: fireball-hurling warlocks certainly do Rock, but sadly they do not make game-play more fun. Bungie learned a lesson over again that they had always shown every sign of having learned long before writing the first of their games: super weapons can make good cinematics, but when actually playing a game with a unit it is the unit's weaknesses and *in*abilities that make it interesting.

All was by no means lost, however. Myth II redeemed itself for the many default game-play weaknesses it introduced with the quality of its support for modifications. When the first few new maps and units were coming out for the original Myth, Myth II completely changed the scene by supporting third party maps, units, and scripting in an official, clean way with plugins. Perhaps the best early example of the engine's new found flexibility was an early plugin set known as World War II. A small team of no more than ten hobbyist fans headed by a man known as Santa's Head created a bit of new art, did a lot of scripting and unit and item building, made a map and ended up with a full-fledged world war II game. Where Myth II featured nothing more technologically advanced than the arrow, and almost all units fought hand to hand, WWII units wielded rifles, rocket propelled grenades and flamethrowers, and were escorted by cannon and tanks that could fire almost across the map if there was someone to call the shots. It is hard to imagine a more impressive demonstration of Bungie's accomplishment with Myth II plugin support than the implementation of such a shift in battle dynamics in such a short time, but WWII was not the only such modification. Indeed the Myth II engine turned out to be capable of almost commercial quality sports applications, with a relatively rigid unit AI as basically the only limit.

Post Mortem

As the mainstream moves on at the pace of several run-of-the-mill games per year, Bungie's famously loyal fan base is, in some ways, only just getting started with the Myth series' possibilities. Total conversions, like WWII but much greater in scope and scale, are approaching release. Next generation projects are constantly pushing the limits of the engine, extended though they already are, and it seems safe to say that a core group of players will still be playing derivatives of Myth and Myth II in several years, while many many more will at least remember it vividly. But what are the lessons to learn from Bungie's experiences with this pair of games? Most apparent is the balance of good and bad results that can be seen in each of the games. Myth broke step entirely with everything that had come before it, and while its game-play was almost without flaw, it suffered on the bleeding edge as gamers trying to decide between playing it and playing something else gave it only a brief shake before giving up on the investment of time and thought necessary to start receiving its full benefits. Myth II, on the other hand, had the benefit of a large group of gamers who already knew how it would play from long hours on its similar predecessor, yet suffered from what was perhaps an overzealous attitude toward the incorporation of whimsical ideas. The creative drive that made Myth so unique got perhaps a bit carried away. Yet in both cases, downfalls aside, the results were spectacular and timeless, and deserved the credit they got.