Patchwork Playgrounds Post Mortem

Introduction

Patchwork Playgrounds is a party game where players are able to collect new rules and objectives as they roam an arena. These rules alter the context of the game and allow for endless hours of exciting gameplay. Objectives are multiplayer in nature, giving the player's extended interactive time. This creates a different play experience each time. Some of the objectives the players will be faced with could include but are not limited to: Tag, King of the Hill and Dodgeball. As players complete their objectives they receive points which are tallied at the end of each match to determine who the winner is.

Insatiable games consists of four team members from varying backgrounds who came together to create a game with a unique play experience for many different audiences. The four of us are Sean Bosshardt, our Lead Programmer and Project Manager, Tom Munro, our Art Director and Programmer, Jimmy Steorts, our Level Designer and Sound Designer and myself, Brian Chong, the 3D Lead and Quality Assurance Lead. Along with the Insatiable Games, we utilized the help of our 3D and sound collaborators from Vancouver Film School to deliver all of our character models, sound effects and our music.

The entire project timeline for Patchwork Playgrounds was spread out over a period of 20 weeks and consisted of an 8 week pre-production period, Milestone 1, Milestone 2, Alpha, Beta and Final. All dates for these milestones were set by our mentors and helped greatly to define what tasks were to be completed by each milestone.

This post mortem for Patchwork Playgrounds lists aspects of our project which were performed particularly well as well as those which could have been improved upon.

What Went Right

Integrated testing

With our aim to make an extremely polished game to truly showcase our talents as designers, we implemented an integrated testing approach. We would sit down at least once a week and play through our game, followed by a team meeting. During the play session, we would take note of any bugs we may find and documented them to be fixed by whoever was responsible at a later time. During the team meetings, we would discuss these bugs and any design changes which we may have to bring up to the rest of the team. Additionally, we would discuss what made the game fun for us and anything which may have had a negative effect on the overall play experience. Taking all of the input from other team members, we would then implement any changes which were necessary to produce a successful end product.

Along with having our team test our game, we made sure to have other people come and test as well. This allowed us to see how others felt about our game from a fresh perspective and provided us with information about any areas which may have been unclear to the player at any time.

One time in particular, this strategy proved to be extremely helpful. After implementing many of our objectives and making many changes to our Mountain level, we found that something had began to cause a network de-sync and crashed the game on various occasions. This called for us to test every possible cause of the problem and eventually we found that the problem was a combination of our patchwork ball and the level terrain. After we found the problem we quickly fixed it.

Without our testing approach, we may have found this problem at a later date when many more components of the game were already added, creating a very difficult bug to troubleshoot.

Ability to scope and focus design

Midway through the development of Patchwork Playgrounds, two of our mentors, Devon Blanchet and Shane Neville had played though our game for the first time and given us their initial reactions. At this point, we had thirteen objectives which meshed single player objectives and multiplayer objectives into the same gameplay experience. After playing through the game, the two of them explained to us that our game was too confusing and that we should find what was most fun and develop that to a high degree of polish.

With this advice, we held a meeting in which we decided that we would scope down our game from our original concept with five levels to one level of a very high caliber and to take our four favorite objectives and focus our attention on designing these objectives to be as fun as possible. As well, we found that with single player and multiplayer objectives together, we would limit the amount of player interaction which was the point of making a multiplayer party game.

This ability to scope down and focus our design allowed us to make a product that was very easy to pick up and play due to the fact that these four objectives were either playground games or derived from existing games which players would be able to easily understand.

Scheduling

With the limited time which our group was given, our scheduling had to be very well planned in order to produce the game effectively. Our target was to make sure that we had completed the game with a long period of time left over to work on and polish our presentation.

We first laid out an initial schedule with rough estimates of what we would have completed by each milestone. Since the first iteration of the schedule, we updated it constantly in order to make it more accurate and to reflect what we could achieve for our final deliverable.

Contingency plans were a big concern for us as our team was inexperienced in a game development environment so we knew that our estimates from the beginning may be a bit off. We looked at every risk we could think of and made some sort of contingency plan in the case that any complications were to arise.

Something which proved to be very helpful in the end was our use of milestone checklist charts. These charts contained titles for portions of work for each team member along with the dates which they were to be completed by. This assisted in the development of our game by making sure each member of the team knew exactly what they needed to complete for each day. Furthermore, this informed all other team members about what each other's duties were in order to prioritize our tasks and further refine the project schedule.

Due to the fact that we altered our schedule so often and had contingency plans for any possible risks, we managed to consistently stay on time or ahead of schedule and finish our game early.

What Went Wrong

3D Collaborators

With our experience outsourcing to the 3D department at VFS, we found that communication between our two groups was very difficult. Instructed to only communicate with them through web based productivity software called project path, we tried numerous times to send messages to them but with little success.

As our schedule required them to make our character models for us, we had to formulate a contingency plan in the event that they were unable to provide us with these crucial assets. We enlisted the help of our 3D mentor, Darcy Patko, to make two of the character models for us and in the time which we had no response from our collaborators, we began to rig, weight and animate these characters.

Eventually we contacted the collaborators directly to try and set up a meeting and make more of a personal connection. This proved to be very important as after this meeting, we began to receive beautiful character models which were later put into the game.

3D Studio Max 9 upgrade

With the upgrade at VFS from 3DSMax 8 to 3DSMax 9, we overlooked the possibility that our old files would have compatibility issues with the new software. Two of our character models which we had finished rigging, weighting and animating on, still needed UVW maps to be completed. Unfortunately, with these files which were edited in 3DSMax 9, we were unable to work on UVW maps.

We were forced to work off of our original 3DSMax 8 files in 3DSMax 8 to complete the UVW maps and then redo the rigging, and weighting. Fortunately, we had no work scheduled to be finished during our spring break and this did not sacrifice too much of our production time.

Late external testing

The much needed input provided by Shane and Devon as mentioned above, could have been given to us at a much earlier date if we had began to allow external testing much earlier in our development. This would have given us much more time and we would have been able to produce another level for a much fuller play experience.

Conclusion

Although we had a couple hiccups along the way, the production of Patchwork Playgrounds went very smoothly. Our ability to work well with others in a team environment truly showed with the Insatiable games team dynamic. Even under the stress of our tight deadlines, we managed to maintain our light hearted, fun work environment enabling us to create a finished project which we could all be proud of.