



(In BattleTanx II Global Assault you can blow up historic stuff!)

If this concept is deemed worthy of 3DO development, a creative director is appointed to oversee the whole project and its execution. The director will then get a small conceptual team together consisting of an Art Director and one or two conceptual artists. The games concepts are then farmed out to marketing and sales people for some 'focus testing' (which I can only assume means grabbing kids in arcades and asking them if the idea sounds cool?) Then, once the green light is proffered the final team is built. At this point the technical director comes on board - the person who is in charge of programming the game engine. The Art/Creative Director now has a chance to run the game concepts past the guys who will actually be building the game engine and it is here that reality takes a hold. The Technical Director is given a deadline and then relays to the creative types how realistic (or not) their concepts are. Out of this comes (in theory) a rock hard plan of action and the game development begins in earnest. (For games like Army Men where there is much character development a large script is written which has to be approved, rewritten and then approved again before going to the professional voiceover talent. The Army Men script was 150 pages long)

Whilst the programmers beaver away at the coal face the designers flex their creative muscles. Amber Long was Creative Director on the project: "We work with the designers to determine what environments and characters we need for our storyline, or in the case of BattleTanx what type of tanks we want. This may involve a few field trips with a digital camera or just flicking through pages of archived 'Janes' issues". During this pre-production phase the traditional (some would say 2D illustrator) artists create many, many concept sketches while some of the more "technical" (not digitally challenged) artists work with the programming team to define the art path and figure out what can be done.

At 3DO this is an approach that gets some of the R&D done while other artists are still working on concepts. As Amber points out, this is where "Game artists have to be more than just good traditional

artists; they also need to be very technically minded to be a valuable member of the team".

As the work progresses and the core engine is built - the artwork is added to get all of the team involved in a prototype/hands-on-feel of the game.

To integrate the two worlds of code and 3D models, the artists are set up with a viewing station (as mentioned earlier) so the programmers don't get stuck with the task of building each individual artists' level every time a model development check is required (how the model looks and works in the environment). The viewing stations integrate the models and code for a quick on-the-fly production of how everything matches up thus far. These viewing stations are pretty expensive hardware though, so often artists are forced to share.

This carries on pretty much until the final product is ready. Bug testing and platform porting are all that remain (no small task as mentioned earlier).

A lot of research goes into defining the look and feel for every product the 3DO teams work on. Amber feels that "as long as you start out with a general direction, the look will naturally emerge from the development process, as long as everyone maintains consistency then everything will turn out ok."

Branded for life

One of the focuses of 3DO is that of creating marketable brands. As Michael Mendhein (Army Men Creative Director) puts it "If you care about a character you'll come back".

So it is with the popular Army Men series of games. Sarge and his buddies are now being marketed aggressively in an attempt to put the character brand in the same game cultural recognition leagues as those of Mario and Lara Croft. Army Men was originally Trip Hawkins' idea. He took the fun concept of those small plastic guys we all played with as kids and made a strategy game out of it. As this proved popular Trip decided a character based game would be the next obvious development tack and thus Army Men 3D was born.

The focus of development here was very much on the character of the little guys. Giving



distinct names and personalities to the lumps of poseable plastic was one of the first tasks of the team. The genius of the brand is its in-built retro youth toy focus as Mendhein says "we used the classic poses of the original toys and matched personality traits from films such as The Dirty Dozen and comic books like Sergeant Rock. From this mix we 'fleshed-out' the personalities". So they ended up with Sarge the leader, and Riff the bazooka man (who is a blues lover and part-time musician) and other members of the squad like 'Scorch' (the team psycho who is the only one mad enough to use a huge blow torch when made completely of plastic). With this character empathy built into the range of Army Men games, 3DO's long term goal is to make Sergeant Hawk as well known to the world as Mario.

Future perfect?

What next for the Trip Hawkins led 3DO? There are plans afoot to market merchandise and maybe even a movie based on the Army Men brand (there is actually a 23 minute 3D animated movie starring the green guys on the PSX Army Men 3D game). Army Men Air Attack should have reached the stores by now, and 3DO is continuing to crank out its focused "casual gamer" and family-oriented games with the emphasis on fun and minimum learning curves on game interface. As their logo says "We're here to play". ■

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