

## Future Visions - GDC '05

By Ian Hannigan

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San Francisco's Moscone Centre hosted the 19<sup>th</sup> annual Game Developers Conference from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> of March last. Ian Hannigan was there and compiled this report.

It's been 19 years since Chris Crawford gathered some game developer friends at his home to sit in a circle to discuss making games and inadvertently give rise to the GDC. These modest beginnings seem all the more surreal when one considers the scale and diversity of the event today. GDC has come a long way in those 19 years but this year's conference was not about the past; it was very much about the future.

The theme this year was "Future Vision" and while we all know that often woolly marketing taglines such as these do not have any genuine meaning, Future Vision was a deceptively accurate and concise summation of the proceedings that would take place over the course of a truly fascinating week.

It was a week that saw 10,000 attendees pass through the conference doors to take part in a sundry of lectures, workshops and events ranging in topic from visual arts, programming and game design to production, business & legal and audio.

In addition to the core conference, there were many other events taking place including the GDC Mobile mini-conference, the IGDA Quality of Life summit, the GDC Expo, the 2005 Game Developers Choice Awards, the Independent Game Developers Festival and the Serious Games Summit.

The Future Vision theme was also echoed throughout the conference schedule in the form of the debuting Future Vision track. This series of lectures by well-known industry figureheads such as Will Wright, Masaya Matsuura and Peter Molyneux was designed to provoke innovation among developers, inspire the creation of breakthrough content and drive the industry beyond the transition to next generation platforms.

The week's events culminated in a far-reaching announcement by industry legend and Sims creator Will Wright who completely stole the show with his

proposal for a new way to make games, holding up the previously unannounced title “Spore” as proof of the viability of his concept of procedural content (content that is created during the game algorithmically rather than in advance by a team of artists).

## The Irish Connection

This year also saw the strongest ever showing from the Irish contingent at GDC. With an air of growing confidence and maturity about them, the Irish companies attending made their presence felt. The middleware sector was the most broadly represented with Havok and DemonWare. However, it is also interesting to note that the other Irish companies in attendance neatly represented a cross-section of the growing game development talent in the country. Donegal-based Torc Interactive flew the PC and console flag, Nephin Games represented the mobile sector and Starcave Studios exemplified the growth of our independent developers.

## Havok

With their usual sense of style Havok launched the third version of their physics middleware solution at a party in San Francisco's hip Swig bar.

With this new version of the Havok engine, the famous Havok rag doll models don't just fall down anymore - they can now get back up to finish the fight! In addition, the rag doll models now react to in-game impacts and other stimuli, while the integration of animations with the physics package also solves a number of traditional game design problems. For example, simple game world objects such as steps are now handled automatically by the engine resulting in an altogether more realistic set of animations.

Havok's latest offering certainly offers a dynamic range of new gameplay opportunities for prospective developers and this was evident from the booming applause they received from the game developers in attendance.



Demonware's Hummer stretch Limo - part of the launch for 'Matchmaking+', a real crowd-puller.

## DemonWare

GDC provided an ideal platform for Network middleware specialists Demonware to reveal Matchmaking+. A new element of the DemonWare Netcode Suite, Matchmaking+ offers a set of tools for online titles on multiple console, PC and handheld platforms, including friends' lists, statistics, user management, content downloads and of course matchmaking. DemonWare's celebrations continued throughout the week and came to a head on the last day of the conference in the shape of a bar disguised as a bus disguised as a

tram! Demonware are still riding high following the high-profile appointment of Art Santos and their increasing profile and success in the American market.

### **Torc Interactive**

Donegal's middleware and game development studio Torc Interactive took time out from a hectic development schedule to meet with potential publishers for their forthcoming PC and Xbox titles. The company is currently focused on their biggest project to date - Dreadnought - a groundbreaking first person mini-game for the new AMD 64 bit processor to be launched at the WinHEC show in Seattle on April 22<sup>nd</sup> next, and with the official launch of Torc's Instinct Engine planned for E3 in May, expect to hear many more exciting things from Torc in the very near future.

### **Nephin Games**

Alan Duggan, CEO of Nephin games, the Galway-based mobile phone game developer was at GDC this year, meeting publishers, attending lectures and attending GDC mobile - one of the many mini-conferences to emerge at GDC over the years. Alan is buoyant about the level of traction received both at home and in the US following the triumphant launch of Nephin's latest title, WKN (World Kickboxing Network). WKN recently earned Nephin games the Digital Games Developer of the year award at the Digital Media Awards held in Dublin.

### **Starcave Studios**

Keith Killilea from Starcave Studios was kept busy hurrying from publisher meeting to publisher meeting while showcasing the latest edition of their first PC title Camelot Galway - City Of The Tribes.

### **Enterprise Ireland**

Jonathon & Maggie from Enterprise Ireland's Californian office were helping Irish developers to make vital contacts, helping Irish companies to establish a presence in the U.S. and making plans for E3 in May.

## Highlights



After the girl taking the photo asked, "which button do I press again?" Wright joked, "Press them all" she did and this is the result.

### **Will Wright, Spore & Procedural Content**

When someone like Will Wright gives a lecture on the future of content people sit up and take notice, the only problem this year was the sheer amount of people that did. People queued for nearly an hour to get into the auditorium, which quickly reached maximum capacity, then the floor of the hall outside filled with people jostling for position to glimpse the hastily erected plasma screens displaying a live feed from the swarming room inside. In any case, neither those inside or outside the auditorium were prepared for what Wright was about say and do as he presented his deceitfully entitled lecture "The Future of Content".

He began by giving a brief overview of his thoughts on the exponential growth of team sizes relative to the quality of the content they produce and how he sees this as an unsustainable situation. Wright made a projection based on the size of the current development team for The Sims and extrapolated - that if team sizes continue to grow at their current exponential rate by 2050, 1.5 million artists would be required to make a single game.

But rather than generally verbalising about the problem Wright went on to demonstrate the future of content as he sees it in the form of a previously unannounced game with the working title 'Spore'. Wright had to acquire special permission from the publisher (EA Games) to demo the game.

Spore is groundbreaking for a number of reasons - not least the fact that it allows the player to create their own content with an unprecedented level of control and flexibility, but also the ambition behind the game design is of epic proportions. Spore is one of few games that seeks to redefine interactive entertainment as an art form, taking the player on a journey from the dawn of amoebic life on a planet through to the interstellar level and everything that happens in between. All this is largely controlled by the player.

What is also unique about Spore is its use of so called 'Procedural Content' (which involves corresponding animations, models and sounds being generated automatically in real-time based on a set of algorithmic rules)

where players can develop their own creatures, buildings and vehicles in an infinite number of ways, giving the players absolute freedom in how they play their own game and simultaneously removing the need for hundreds of artists working endlessly to create the content for the player.

Because of the use of procedural methods, the file-size footprint for each player-created model is relatively tiny, only a few k, opening up the way for a huge asynchronous online database of player-generated content. This means the player can download entire galaxies of content generated by other Spore players directly into their game.

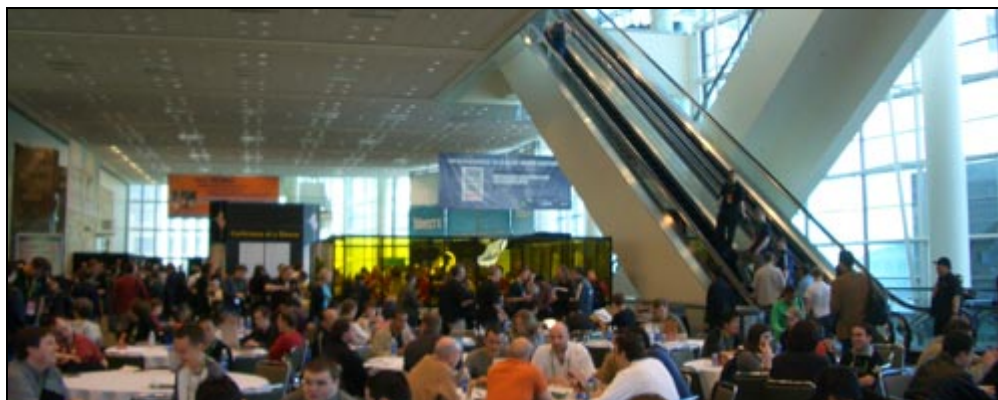
Wright likened these procedural tools to toys, such as Etch A Sketch where the player's drawings come to life! Beyond gameplay features however, the implications for how games will be developed in the future following Wright's announcement are truly immense and in many ways Spore is just the side-story here.

The term "artist in a box" was used to describe these tools, in that they should stem the exponential growth of team sizes while simultaneously providing artists and developers with a more liberating and powerful toolset.

Wright concluded his keynote with words of support for aspiring developers everywhere, encouraging them to persevere with original ideas. Citing the central stumbling block to the realisation of Spore as his own self-doubt, Wright recalled that after he convinced himself that it was actually possible to create this game it was a relatively simple task to convince the rest of his team that it was possible. Now all he has to do is convince the industry.

### **Peter Molyneux at the Movies**

To the delight of most attendees, the ubiquitous Peter Molyneux (Black & White) was not in short supply at this year's GDC. He gave several lectures, showcasing Lionhead's nearly completed titles "The Movies" and "Black & White 2". Molyneux also held a public post-mortem of his last title in his lecture "Fable – Lessons Learned". The session ranged from "making of" style comments to pure post-mortem material in the form of the rights and wrongs mostly centring on the conflicts between high-design concepts, schedules and budgets.



Some of the attendees between sessions at this year's GDC

### **The 5<sup>th</sup> IGDA Game Developers Choice Awards**

The 5th annual IGDA Game Developers Choice Awards featured few surprises with Valve's 'Half-Life 2' scooping up the awards for best writing, best technology and best character design as well as best overall game. The Game Design honour deservedly went to Katamari Damacy from Namco and CryTek creators of 'FarCry' took the honour for best new studio.

### **The 7<sup>th</sup> Annual Independent Games Festival & Awards**

The 7th Annual Independent Games Festival awards ceremony brought laughter, tears, and even an unexpected marriage proposal live on the big screen! Gish by Chronic Logic won the open category, while Reflexive Entertainment picked up two awards. 'Wik' won in the web downloadable category and 'Fable of Souls' took the overall title. 'Alien Hominid' by The Behemoth won the coveted Audience Award. All teams each received the \$15,000 Seamus McNally Grand Prize.



J Allard after delivering a typically polished presentation on the benefits of XNA and just before he gave away 1000 high-definition TV's!

### **XNA Microsoft -**

J Allard, Microsoft's chief XNA architect took advantage of his keynote to give a distinctly polished presentation on Microsoft's plans to tackle the growing demands of game development with more details on its XNA Studio and a imaginative outline of their strategy to transition into the "high-definition" era as Microsoft see it. Allard concluded the presentation by announcing that a third of the packed audience theatre (of over 3000 seats) had just won themselves a top of the range high-definition TV.

### **EXPO Floor**

With so many other events going on this year only a cursory glance at the GDC Expo was possible. However, amongst the customary recruiters and trade exhibitors on the expo floor, one exhibit that really stood out was the demonstration of Stereo 3D games - not the 3D first person games we have become accustomed to in recent years, but simulated 3D environments reminiscent of what you might see on an IMAX screen! While they are not exactly plug and play yet, 3D games are very much here! Using a polarised

screen, two TFT monitors and a pair of polarised glasses the effect was truly remarkable. Interestingly the 3D effect is applied at the hardware level, only requiring a driver update to play any game in full stereo 3D.



### **Back to the Present**

On the final day DemonWare held a party on a tram as it toured San Francisco to celebrate the successful launch of Matchmaking+ and it provided the perfect way to say goodbye to GDC '05. The lasting impression from the Game Developers Conference 2005 was of the focus on the future of content and the changing subject matter of games. Will Wright gave everyone plenty to consider with his proposal for procedural content. Also increasingly evident is the diversification in approaches to making and selling games - if this vision of the future is in any way accurate then the future of gaming is very exciting indeed!

Just as the jetlag was wearing off it was already time again to board the plane for the ten-hour flight to London and the relatively short hop to Dublin. The departure from San Francisco felt premature, the journey ahead seemed arduous but when you've seen the future, there's much to consider!

### **Author's Bio**

Ian Hannigan is a Dublin based designer.

## Related Links

Havok

<http://www.havok.com>

Demonware - Matchmaking+

<https://www.demonware.net/matchmaking>

Torc Interactive

<http://www.torcinteractive.com>

Nephin Games

<http://www.nephin.com/wkn>

Starcave Studios

<http://www.starcave.com>

Marc Ecko Challenges Industry

<http://xbox.ign.com/articles/584/584640p1.html>

Will Wright Presents Spore... and a New Way to Think About Games

<http://www.gamespy.com/articles/595/595975p1.html>

2005 Game Developer Choice Award Winners

[http://www.gamasutra.com/php-bin/news\\_index.php?story=5096](http://www.gamasutra.com/php-bin/news_index.php?story=5096)

The 7th Annual Independent Games Festival

[http://www.gamasutra.com/php-bin/news\\_index.php?story=5097](http://www.gamasutra.com/php-bin/news_index.php?story=5097)

Gamasutra - Full GDC Coverage

<http://www.gamasutra.com/gdc2005>

GDC Conference

<http://www.gdconf.com>