

'Horizon Zero Dawn' : A Game Design Postmortem

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Speaker: Eric Boltjes, Guerrilla Games

Abstract

1 Summary of Talk

Through the creation of early prototypes and design decisions or processes that shaped development of Horizon Zero Dawn, this talk takes us into the journey game design went through while moving from an ambitious paper concept to a finished open world action RPG. Thanks to Eric Boltjes' details, this talk helps us to understand how small and large design decisions and choices can improve a game and players' experience.

1.1 Early Concept

Guerrilla Games studio never did an open world video game before. Here was for them the challenge represented by Horizon. Indeed, the idea of the game came in 2001 with some important guidelines such as :

- Majestic post-apocalyptic wilderness
- Awe-inspiring machines (as an innovant concept)
- Exotic tribes
- And the open world idea

But like all beginners, they didn't know how to structure that kind of game development. So, they started with a really small team in 2011 composed by designers, artists, coders and animators. Each of them without a specific role. And, of course, with a lot of questions (how the open world is going to look like, what kind combat against machines and so on).

As they didn't have a global idea of how everything will work together, they decided to do different prototypes to test them and judge their reliability. The feedbacks were really good in the sense that these prototypes were really effective and helped them to really know what they wish to create for Horizon Zero Dawn. But it was costly in money and time. And also, prototype after prototype, the team started to think "Where is the game so?".

Thus, they answered two different fundamental questions before starting the pre-production:

- What Horizon Zero Dawn is
- What it is NOT

1.2 Pre-Production

As they started to know where they were going, they focused on three major parts of the game for the pre-production step:

- World systems and mechanics
- World building
- Horizon Zero Dawn story

They so improved the size of the team by adding new responsibilities in it such as Core Design, World Design, Story Design etc. Especially for the story. They didn't really thought about it during the concept step. Everything still needed to be done.

They also worked to answer a lot of different questions they had. At this point, the team still needed a context to be able to have the full game idea in their mind. So, they focused on different parts of the game which still needed to be improved.

- Riding (they wanted a special character so the normal horse has been replaced by a machine)
- The main character, Alloy (personality, style, gameplay...)
- Machines (behaviors, look and also "feelings")

Fixed contexts helped the team a lot. But in game development think about don't do it too soon or it will prevent cool ideas to come. Everything went well so they thought that they had enough answered to start the production in a good work environment. Unfortunately, problems started to rise.

1.3 Production

1.4 Polishment

2 Overview and Relevance

Research on the topic of the talk; overall overview and the relevance of the technologies/techniques; give a short overview on the state of the art of the topic, reference further readings and current developments.

Provide a list of further readings, links (websites, papers, talks, articles,...) in the bibliography

2.1 Subsection..

2.2 Subsection..

3 References and Further Sources

- [1] Leslie Lamport, *LaTeX: a document preparation system*, Addison Wesley, Massachusetts, 2nd edition, 1994.