Domain Track Status – Computer Graphics

What does quality mean in your selected domain?

Quality in computer graphics is determined by visual aesthetic, resolution, and rendering time. In both still images and animations, customers have high expectations for how accurately the graphics depict reality. Rendering time is not as much of a concern with still images, but is crucial to animations that must render several images a second. When the rendering time for each frame is too slow, the motion in animations becomes jerky and unstable. This delay in updating the frames is referred to as lag, and has perhaps the most egregious effect on customers’ opinions of graphics, particularly in games.

What are the important factors?

Rendering algorithms are the most significant factor in computer graphics. Two of the most common ways to render graphics are ray tracing and radiosity. These algorithms, because of their differences in implementation, can produce different results and artifacts (errors in the image) when rendering the same graphic. Thus, the algorithm chosen to render a graphic depends on the purpose of the graphic. For example, a slower but highly detailed algorithm might be appropriate for medical graphics, where the images are rendered prior to being displayed. On the other hand, a faster but less detailed algorithm might be appropriate for a video game, where images cannot be rendered prior to being displayed due to their dynamic nature. In this scenario, the number of frames rendered per second is more critical than the exact details of the graphics and necessitates a faster algorithm.

What processes are currently used?

Although time consuming, the most effective process of measuring graphical quality is via visual analysis, by both developers and customers. Visual analysis by the developers takes place to ensure some level of quality prior to releasing a product to customers. Developers also track resolution and frame rate, two quantifiable metrics that guarantee some level of quality. But in the end, customer opinions matter the most, and many companies have employed detailed processes for gathering customer feedback. These processes often involve releasing a limited number of trial versions during development to gather customer feedback before making a product publically available. The sooner customers look at the graphics, the sooner improvements can be made to the graphics.

What processes do you suggest?

As discussed in the previous paragraph, we recommend gathering customer feedback as a means of assuring quality in computer graphics. Beyond that, the quality assurance processes for computer graphics are largely similar to those of other software programs. In this field, it is crucial to have an excellent process for monitoring performance, as this is the primary criteria that customers use to judge end products. Although performance is less of a factor in generating still images, it is nevertheless important for both still images and animations. To that end, having a testing harness to run code in different configurations and gather performance metrics from is an absolute must. Furthermore, many graphics applications today rely heavily on complex algorithms. These algorithms should be thoroughly tested to ensure that they function as intended throughout the lifetime of a product.

Are there any regulations or standards?

Interestingly enough, there are few regulations and standards associated with computer graphics. A Google search yields a couple SIGGRAPH articles dated prior to 2000 that bear little relevance to current development. We hypothesis that this is primarily the result of two related factors: customer expectations and a rapidly changing industry. As computer graphics have improved, customer expectations for graphics have risen dramatically. Consequently, new technologies are being developed year after year and readily incorporated into the industry. Standards and regulations, which are time consuming to generate and come to an agreement on, simply have not been able to keep pace with the changing technologies. Features that are now commonplace is graphics APIs may not even have been present a few years ago. Therefore, the standards are more or less defined dynamically by the expectations of developers as new technologies and features are introduced.

Success Examples

The company Bethesda Game Studios created a game called *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim.* When the game first came out the graphics were pretty good. Once the game allowed customers to design their own modifications to the game the graphics to the game changed depending on which mod a customer chose. Some mods improved the graphics and others didn’t but the company no longer had control of the quality of their game. The game is still a success.

The company Mojang also created a game, *Minecraft*, where the customers are able to change the look of the game. Like *Skyrim*, the mods would improve the game or didn’t. The graphics for *Minecraft* are very different than *Sk*yrim. *Skyrim* has a more realistic look and *Minecraft* has a 3D pixel look. Each game has a significant difference in graphics but both games are successful.

Failure Examples

The company BioWare created a game called *Dragon Age Origins.* This game was a successful game but the graphics were rated very poorly. The game was trying to achieve a more realistic look but the game lacked a lot of depth. The characters that were supposedly wearing armor look like they were wearing a t-shirt. Not only were the graphics lacking but the animations for the game were stiff and lifeless.

It is actually common that good games have bad graphics. Graphics are very important for video games but if the game play is weak then it doesn’t matter. Like any other software, customers focus on how well the software works than the graphics or UI. Sadly, many video game companies forget that game play is more important than the graphics. Many video games based on movies have decent graphics but the game play is terrible. This is a case where the companies are exploiting a franchise in order to make a few bucks.