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IT 265 - Game Architecture & Design
Case Study 2: First Person Shooters (Immersion & Story)

F.E.A.R. (First Encounter Assault Recon) (PC)

A first-person shooter is a computer or video game which is characterized by an on-screen view that simulates the point of view of the in-game character and is almost always centered around aiming and shooting handheld ranged weapons. First-person shooters also give the player more control of movement over other shooters, like on-rails shooters. These games have become popular largely due to the increased realism that the first-person perspective brings. The first-person perspective helps to immerse the player in the story and gives the illusion that the player is actually in the game.

FEAR is a first-person shooter that I feel portrayed the immersion and storytelling aspects of the game very well. It helped that I usually played the game at night in a dark room, but when the scary paranormal stuff happened, I'll admit I got scared and would jump in my seat. Although there are many elements of the game that help to get the player immersed in the FEAR world, there are a few elements that can distract from it.

Let's start with what FEAR did right. As with Half-Life, the player never leaves the first-person view. During scripted events that might normally be third-person cut-scenes in other games, the player still experiences the world through the eyes of his character and can still look around the environment. For instance, when the game starts off, the player attends a briefing that gives the basic idea of the FEAR team's mission. Although the player can't immediately walk around, he can look around the room. Due to the lack of traditional cut-scenes, the player experiences the story as it unfolds almost as if it was a part of their own life.

The character's body is also fully present. While looking down, the player sees the character's legs and feet as well as a portion of the lower torso. The character's hands and legs are also seen acting as expected during events like punching and kicking, reloading, rising from a prone position, and fast-roping from helicopters.

Another element that can affect immersion is the ability of the player to affect the environment. This is something that FEAR does only average in. Much of the environment is affected by gunfire, so shooting walls for example will cause chunks of it to fall off, although these chunks also disappear. Other objects such as soda cans and boxes found in the environment can be knocked by the player. These objects can also be blown across the room by explosions from grenades and the like. However, only a few specific objects can be operated by the player, like specific (colored) laptops and switches. The player is not able to pick and throw any of the objects.

Not surprisingly, the biggest element of FEAR that helps to immerse the player is fear itself. The developers spent a lot of effort in order to sell the horror theme. FEAR strikes a balance between killing the horror by spelling things out too clearly and undermining it with too much ambiguity. The player gets enough clues to form their own theories as to what's going on, but in the end is left with many unanswered questions. The game also does a good job of avoiding predictability. It doesn't fall into certain patterns, and they try to mess with the player's head. The game sometimes sets up a scene where the player expects something to happen, and then it doesn't. For instance, the music might build to a terrifying point and then cut off without a corresponding event. The silence will then be broken later when the players least expect it. FEAR really keeps the player guessing while increasing interest in a very engaging story.

As with all games, FEAR isn't perfect and there are a few characteristics that can stray from the player's immersion in the story, although these are minor and exist in many first-person shooters. The first characteristic is the use of a keyboard and mouse to control the player's character in game. This control scheme is frequently used in many types of PC games and gamers are quite accustomed to it. However, this control scheme isn't very realistic. The wii remote (wiimote) for Nintendo's Wii game console and light guns are more intuitive and realistic control schemes for a first-person shooter, although they are not often found on a PC.

Another characteristic of the game is the constant heads up display (HUD). This is obviously needed to show important information like health and armor status, and well as the status of inventory items such as ammunition, grenades, and health packs. However, this information would not be visible in the player's field of vision if he/she was actually "in" the game.

There are two other characteristics that distract from immersion. Health packs conveniently and unrealistically provide instant relief to injuries to raise the health meter. Also, between intervals (levels), the player is transported (assumedly by helicopter) to the next area, however, all the player sees is a loading screen. These are all very common in other games, not only first-person shooters but also games of other genres so it isn't as distracting as I might have made it out to be. All in all, FEAR is a very engaging first-person shooter that handles immersion into the story very well. I look forward to seeing how future games build upon this concept.