



Coding right for design

by Chris Keegan, Climax

Don't get me wrong: I like a good whipping boy as much as the next guy and a level designer is always a good target. In life, few things are as satisfying as breaking the spirit of a bright-eyed industry neophyte and seeing that initial hope turn to naked cynicism. And when such sport aligns itself with a seemingly worthy goal, that of creating a fully data-driven engine, it's easy to get carried away.

In our rush towards the ultimate data-driven engine we must recognise that we're asking more and more of level designers by giving them access to more and more powerful scripting languages and this often makes demands of our design team that they're ill-equipped to deal with.

Designers are a curious mix of artist and programmer with demands made of them from many directions. They're required to write captivating prose to describe the game before taking up a 3D modelling tool

"Use a visual interface, because of the discipline it enforces on the code team..."

to set-up the environments, create complicated scripts to describe NPC behaviour and set-up interesting puzzles to solve. This is a lot to ask of a person. As arbiters of the scripting interface we would do well to consider to make designers effective.

In our drive to give more creative control to designers it can be seductive to simply plug in something like, say, *Lua* and expose the engine innards to the design team. But deciding just how much of the game engine to reveal is a fine art where less is definitely more. I believe that the best way to help designers is to provide them with a minimal set of building blocks preferably presented via a visual interface. Utilising a visual interface is helpful not just because it's nicer for designers to work visually but also because of the discipline it enforces on the code team when adding extensions.

By far and away the biggest problem with scripting systems seems to be with the code team adding more and more complexity without giving due consideration to the implications. Keep it simple and we make it both easier for the designers to create complexity whilst at the same time protecting them from the horrors of race conditions and deadlock. Unless, that is, watching the producer's anger vein throbbing is as satisfying for you as it is for me.

■ www.climaxgroup.com

CLIMATIC MOMENT

Emergent's re-emergence

GDC will mark the public rebirth of Emergent Technologies as it reveals its new product suite for next-gen development...

Product TBA
Company Emergent Technologies
Price TBA
Contact +01 818 222 5355



■ The exact details of Emergent Technologies' tools will remain a secret until GDC but automated production tools, online hosting services and graphics are all expected to be key features

When it was news back in the summer of 2005, the merger between graphics provider NDL and Emergent Technologies, an outfit with a somewhat troubled history in the online infrastructure space, seemed like a chalk-meets-cheese match. But eight months on, CEO Geoffrey Selzer is quietly confident the joined entity's announcements at GDC will surprise even the most cynical.

"Anytime you combine two companies there are problems, so I won't say it was easy, but overall I think it's been a very smooth integration, both in terms of staff and the direction we're taking," he says. "We're excited with what we have to offer. At GDC people will see how productive we've been."

Wanting to keep his powder dry before the actual announcement, Selzer will only discuss his plans in general terms. The *Gamebryo* graphics engine remains a key of course, particularly now Emergent has licensed Ageia's physics engine; the first time such an integration has been offered.

"We see *Gamebryo* as a fantastic wedge for the start of some of our pipeline solutions," says Selzer, emphasising the modular framework approach (or the "a la carte menu of products," as he likes to call it) Emergent will be taking, making the company relevant for all games production, be that single player, multiplayer or MMO.

"Our vision is to provide a flexible approach throughout our product line; all the way from the rendering engine and

production tools to the server side, whether that's live or managed services," he reveals. Other options will include automated in-game testing, to iterate gameplay and find exploitable bugs, and technical and gameplay metrics.

These are important because the online space, in particular, is changing fast. Long gone are days where developers would buy in a monolithic engine and build a game, as the anecdote puts it, by checking a few tick boxes and adding some art assets.

Says Selzer: "We're seeing a blurring of the line between MMOs and multiplayer games. Titles like *Guild Wars* have some elements of MMOGs but also have instanced-based gameplay. Asia is also seeing the growth of casual game lobbies, so we want our framework to provide that level of flexibility."

But it's not just about tools either. Selzer says one of the company's core values will be a commitment to customer service. "It's an easy thing to say but we're determined to make sure Emergent builds on the reputation NDL had for support," he states. To reinforce such a commitment, a customer engineering group is being set up. He says: "It will allow us to work closely with developers and publishers, either to customise our tools for their needs or perhaps even accelerate the development of products already on our roadmap."

■ www.emergentgametech.com

Hansoft



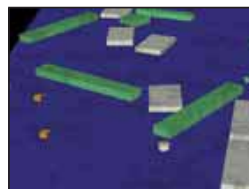
Price: €25 per user per month

Company: Hansoft
Contact: +46 18 10 90 90

Empowering developers and increasing their agility is the goal for the latest version of project management tool *Hansoft*. Key to this is the new delegation feature. This enables producers and project managers to delegate responsibility for planning, tracking and managing to project leads. *Hansoft* also improves flexibility through the dev team with new support for multiple resource groups. With resource usage functionality, this makes it easier to manage the changes and resource relocations that every game suffers from.

■ www.hansoft.se

PathEngine v5



Price: from €4,000

Company: PathEngine
Contact: +33 4 72 87 03 36

Release 5 of *PathEngine* brings new collision features to its existing navigational smarts. Designed to provide point-of-visibility pathfinding on 3D ground meshes, *PathEngine's* movement models enable you to handle the movement of agents over static terrain, as well as dynamic obstacle avoidance. Additions include generating curved paths, support for a tokenised XML format, and the ability to define transverse costs for obstacles and surfaces. Other improvements are a streamlined interface, plus performance and memory footprint optimisations.

■ www.pathengine.com

Perforce v2005.2



Price: from \$800 per seat

Company: Perforce
Contact: +44 845 345 0116

Both sides of the *Perforce* asset management system have been improved in v2005.2. The *Perforce Server* has enhanced security, as well as more flexible administration features, thanks to support for external authentication triggers. Support for *Visual Studio 2005* has been added to the 2005.2 version of the *Perforce SCC* plug-in (P4SCC), while the plug-in for *WebSphere Studio (P4WSAD)* has been reworked to provide a better offline experience.

And finally, the visual client (P4V) lets you compare local workspace folders with depot folders.

■ www.perforce.com