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Imagining Zork: Project combines cinema, animation, game design

By UW-Stout News Bureau

MENOMONIE — A classic game shrouded in mystery. A cold, deep west-central Wisconsin cave.

Two professors who wanted to experiment a little.

It sounds like the makings of a Halloween thriller.

For Kevin Pontuti and Dave Beck, faculty members with the UW-Stout School of Art and Design, it was even better. They devised a semester-long, innovative course project that channeled the power of the game Zork, challenged their students and used cutting-edge industry technology.

Pontuti and Beck brought students together from multiple classes last spring to explore the convergence of cinema, animation and games. Working in teams, students created an animated short film — or trailer — for Zork, one of the world's first interactive, computer-based fiction games.

Zork, created in the late 1970s at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, represents the dawn of game design. It is text-based; players respond to basic text commands. Although Zork does not include video, it remains popular in an age of video games.
Pontuti and Beck decided to use Zork as a point of departure for the class project.

'Next year, 2015, marks the 35th anniversary of Zork, so it seemed like a perfect opportunity to celebrate the game,' said Beck, an assistant professor and chairman of the design department.

With no imagery, students were forced to create a video interpretation of the game. Twenty students from two classes worked for four months on the project, creating live-action and computer-generated images.

'Since we were framing the semester around the idea of cinema and game convergence, we decided to craft a project where the teams would create film trailers or hook scenes for a game that was being adapted into a film, or basically a game-inspired short,' said Pontuti, an associate professor and director of the entertainment design undergraduate program.

Students working on the live-action teams used Crystal Cave near Spring Valley as a filming location. Cave owner Eric McMaster donated cave rental time, but students had to wait until spring when the cave’s resident bats were finished hibernating. One of the goals of the project was to have students collaborate in a way similar to the entertainment industry approach.

'The idea to team-teach our cinema and 3D animation courses emerged,' Pontuti said. 'Students had to adapt to team positions — director, cinematographer, editor, 3D artists, game engine scripter, etc, and learn how to best communicate and time manage these large multi-stepped projects.'

**Industry, campus provide help**

Another key aspect of the project was industry cooperation. Pontuti and Beck worked with Cinema Suite, which provided use of its soon-to-be-released Cinema Director software. Cinema Suite also provided its motion capture program, Cinema MoCap.

Cinema Suite allows a production team to previsualize all shots and sequences in a film. Traditionally, storyboards have been the primary pre-visualization tool for directors to help 'imagine' their films. Many productions are moving toward 3D visualization, allowing an entire film to be viewed in a format that resembles a low-resolution 3D animated movie, Pontuti said.

UW-Stout students used Cinema Suite during the beta-testing phase. They provided product feedback to a technical team at Cinema Suite.

'Our partnership with UW-Stout was critical for the future development of our cinematic tools. This collaborative project gave us in-depth feedback on our products and allowed us to make them even better for the general public,' said Dan Gamsby of Cinema Suite.

Along with Cinema Suite software, Canon contributed to the project by providing students a special cinema camera, a Canon C100, for filming in Crystal Cave and for other aspects of the project.

Students also used a UW-Stout high-speed camera, which records 10,000 frames per second, with help from Matthew Kuchta, an associate professor of physics.
Other faculty and staff who assisted with the project were Paul Calenberg, Roland Carter, Peter Galante, Ed Jakober, Beth Janetski, Andrew Mcintosh, Keif Oss and Steve Schlough.

Pontuti, who teaches in the entertainment design program, and Beck, from game design and development, plan to continue with their cross-course projects in the future.

A video interpretation of the classic game Zork was created by UW-Stout students studying cinema, animation and game design.

**Zork Project**

View videos of UW-Stout students' work combining cinema, animation and video games with the Zork Project and a documentary and blog about the project, both at LeaderTelegram.com/links.