Pushing to Alpha – Condemned 2: Bloodshot

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The butterflies start to grow in my stomach around this time every project cycle – and it's a good thing. It always happens with every project – no matter how much planning, schedule updating, and iteration on features has been completed; time is rushing quickly by when you're 'pushing to Alpha'. If any Producer says they're not feeling any butterflies, or strain for that matter, during this time, then they are either lying or don't care about the game they are producing…so I'm glad to feel those old familiar flutters.

The halls tend to get rather quiet as everyone starts to get their 'focus-face' on. We've just recently completed our internal Engineering – Content Alpha. This means all primary and secondary game systems have been implemented and a primary amount of content has been created to allow the Level Designers to create their core gameplay experiences in the levels they own.

We're now pushing forward with our Game Design Alpha. It's at this phase that we've turned our attention more closely to the specific needs of the Level Designer. All the models, animations, engineered systems, audio files, world art prefabs and environments are now coming together to hopefully give us that gameplay experience that we all want so badly. If the Level Designers find themselves with a blocking issue (i.e. an animation doesn't play properly or an engineering bug prevents a feature from working properly), we all do whatever we have to so they aren't blocked. There are occasional verbal blurts as a blocking bug may pop up or a final implementation of a sub-feature isn't quite working out and a decision is needed quickly – but the focus remains strong and people continue to move forward as we all know our dates can't, and won't, change.

Keeping the balance in the tasks on everyone's plate becomes very critical. For example, Michael Drummond, the Lead Level Designer on both *Condemned: Criminal Origins* and *Condemned 2: Bloodshot*, had a last moment request for two thrown weapons to help further flesh out some gameplay on a garbage scowl: a skull with a skull pile and some metal trash balls for any AI type. Of course, once the skull is created, there is a push to have it as a player-side weapon. Even though, as a Producer, I want everyone's final weapon requests to have been done by our Engineering-Content Alpha, there is always going to be needs for assets and iterations

for ongoing gameplay creation and tuning. It really becomes a balance between 'art' and 'business'... The 'Art' is finding that compelling, beautiful, strong gameplay experience that is fine-tuned and enjoyed by all and the 'Business' is keeping it on track and within budget – and many times these two goals collide. So this means trying to leave some schedule room for iteration and evolving the gameplay experiences – even though usually the schedule is tight already at this phase.

As we move into Alpha, and then through Alpha into our final Beta, we're going to give you some 'inside views' as to what each team is working on here at Monolith Productions and how we strive to bring it all together into one product. We hope to give you some insight as to some of the common issues that creep up and how we deal with them.

Here's a breakdown as to the various disciplines that work on the Condemned 2 team:

- **Character Art**
  - o All game character and enemy models plus numerous weapons and the evidence movies are created by our Character Artists.
- **World Art**
  - o All environmental shell work and nearly all the prefabs (i.e. individual models of items such as desks, lamps, posters – nearly any objects that are found in a level) are created by World Artists.
  - o We've also outsourced some of the prefabs we need for this project.
- **Level Design**
  - o All level layouts, gameplay implementation, combat encounters, performance and optimization. This is an immense task as nearly every component of every discipline comes together in a mission or level in a game.
- **Animation**
  - o Every single animation you find in *Condemned 2: Bloodshot* has been created by the animation team.
- **Principal Technical Art Lead & Art Director**
  - o The Principal Technical Art Lead maintains the workflow for all visual content creation. He knows the engine inside-and-out from a creative and technical standpoint and is essential in keeping production running smoothly.
  - o The Art Director is completely responsible for the vision of the game: what does the main protagonist look like, what do the enemies look like and potentially act, the weapons, the UI, the environments – they all fall under the domain of the Art Director.
- **Engineering**

- o All primary and secondary game systems are created by the team's game engineers. They also help 'evolve' the game by iterations and suggested changes that come back from playtest sessions.
- **CTT**
  - o We have a *Core Technology Team* at Monolith Productions. Our large internal Engineering team updates and supports our engine and tools that we use to create our games.
- **Audio**
  - o Nearly every piece of audio comes from our internal audio team.
  - o Most of the voice-acting is recorded by an outside contractor with direction from our Game Designer and Audio Lead.
- **Game Design**
  - o The complete game design is created internally. Our Lead Game Designer pushes forward with design concepts that are fleshed out by the various teams and the game designer as they implement the various gameplay scenarios and features.
- **Multiplayer**
  - o The Multiplayer team is a subset team of the C2 team. This team has engineering, level designers and production support. The level designers in Multiplayer have some different responsibilities than the Single Player level designers. There is a different gameplay focus on multiplayer levels and the MultiPlayer Level Designers also do the environmental art for their levels.
- **QA**
  - o The QA team is always essential but their word becomes stronger, their decisions more final as we approach critical dates such as Alpha and Beta. Their core responsibilities are keeping the team up and running with stable builds and to continue finding bugs that will prevent our game from not only shipping but running properly as well.
- **Production**
  - o The production crew includes myself, a Senior Producer, an AP (spell out title name) and any support staff I can get my hands on. We're focused on removing any roadblocks that come up for the team and keeping them set up to succeed with realistic schedules and milestone dates.
- **Playtest**
  - o At Monolith Productions, we're blessed to have an internal playtest group and playtest lab setup. They've already done some extensive Mission One playtest sessions as well as some playtesting on our forensics systems.
- **Publisher**

- No team is complete without the appropriate publisher support – in our case, we've got the long arm of SEGA around us, giving us the support we need. The publisher not only usually pays development costs but they also bring distribution, marketing, hard-core testing and all forms of external playtesting and PR support to making the game sell as best as possible.

There are quite a number of individuals who comprise the teams to ship a next-gen game across two platforms, Xbox 360 and PS3. My job is to keep the schedule real, keep expectations where they need to be, keep the people focused, maintain the publisher relationship (making the Milestone dates with quality drops helps immensely) and support the overall team as much as I can.

With our next posting, we'll take a closer look at the position of the Art Director and go over some of the types of feedback that he provides and why. We'll also touch on some of the multiplayer testing that has been currently going on and give you an 'inside peak' at what we're doing to make sure multiplayer is a big part of the Condemned universe.