SMBA DEV DIARY #1

The Brief

The challenge for Super Monkey Ball Adventures was an interesting one; 'We want to move Aiai and his friends away from just the puzzle stages and in to more of an adventure.' This was an intriguing proposition, how to take a well-known and popular franchise and take in a different direction. A large undertaking given the short amount of development time proposed!

Two things were definite from the start as we began to investigate what this new project would entail. We wanted to ensure that you could swap between the different ball modes during the adventure and that the environment was fun to play in. If we had a standard two-legged character this is fairly a straight forward proposition but when that character is in a ball the dynamic of the environment changes. For example, in order to travel the different levels we have to design each level with a ball in mind that cannot jump, double jump, swing, etc. from the environment. We also have to ensure that the environment is kept realistic to the main inhabitants of that world without too many ball-friendly mechanics such as ramps and lifts.

Another challenge we had been given was the look of the game. Our previous project was Crash: Twinsanity where the graphical look was very much in keeping with previous Crash games. With Super Monkey Ball Adventures we we're asked to create an environment that was bright and colourful – the reference for this was the Honda advert with the flying engines and the cute little bunnies!

The Prototype

Keeping in mind the above considerations we set about developing a six-week prototype to give an idea of what the game and the environment would feel like. Jungle Island was the first world that we would develop as we had a fairly good idea of what was required. It also turned out fortunate that one of senior artists was involved with the Honda advert!

We set about designing a small task within a basic environment that allowed the player to roll around and collide off of the environment to perform jumps. As the prototype developed we began to look in to what the other worlds would look like and what the influences for those would be. In the past, trying to get across the idea and flavour of any particular area of a game was done through concept artwork. We had a number of ideas on how to achieve the required feel to the worlds and ended up using a style sheet like those off of the house makeover programmes! That actually ended up working really well! We picked the focal points within each world and gave examples of how this would look and what inspired us for those areas. The result ended up with each sheet having concept game artwork accompanied with real world photos etc. The result was that Sega knew exactly the kind of environment that they would get in each area. In a couple of cases they came back with comments and requests of slightly different influences and these were then reworked with these influences in mind.

It was important to Sega that rather than just provide a basic story we also include some depth. To this end each of the worlds has a slight touch of a moral story, not enough to ram down the player's throat but hopefully enough for them to think that it's a nice little touch.

At the end of six weeks we had a proof of concept showing how the game would progress and the style of gameplay. With the style sheets for each world we had a clear idea of each location and what it would look like and we had a design that still needed further detail but was enough for us to begin production on the game.