



John Carmack Archive - .plan (2006)

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Chapter 1

May

1.1 Orcs & Elves (May 02, 2006)

I'm not managing to make regular updates here, but I'll keep this around just in case. I have a bunch of things that I want to talk about – some thoughts on programming style and reliability, OpenGL, Xbox 360, etc, but we have a timely topic with the release of our second mobile game, Orcs & Elves, that has spurred me into making this update.

DoomRPG, our (Id Software's and Fountainhead Entertainment's) first mobile title, has been very successful, both in sales and in awards. I predict that the interpolated turn based style of 3D gaming will be widely adopted on the mobile platform, because it plays very naturally on a conventional cell phone. Gaming will be a lot better when there is a mass market of phones that can be played more like a gamepad, but you need to make do with what you actually have.

One of the interesting things about mobile games is that the sales curve is not at all like the drastically front loaded curve of a PC or console game. DoomRPG is selling better now than when it was initially released, and the numbers are promising for supporting additional development work. However, unless I am pleasantly surprised, the hardware capabilities are going to advance much faster than the market in the next couple years, leading to an unusual situation where you can only afford to develop

fairly crude games on incredibly powerful hardware. Perhaps "elegantly simple" would be the better way of looking at it, but it will still wind up being like developing an Xbox title for \$500,000. That will wind up being great for many small game companies that just want to explore an idea, but having resource far in excess of your demands does minimize the value of being a hot shot programmer. :-)

To some degree this is already the case on high end BREW phones today. I have a pretty clear idea what a maxed out software renderer would look like for that class of phones, and it wouldn't be the PlayStation-esq 3D graphics that seems to be the standard direction. When I was doing the graphics engine upgrades for BREW, I started along those lines, but after putting in a couple days at it I realized that I just couldn't afford to spend the time to finish the work. "A clear vision" doesn't mean I can necessarily implement it in a very small integral number of days. I wound up going with a less efficient and less flexible approach that was simple and robust enough to not likely need any more support from me after I handed it over (it didn't).

During the development of DoomRPG, I had commented that it seemed obvious that it should be followed up with a "traditional, Orcs&Elves sort of fantasy game". A couple people independently commented that "Orcs&Elves" wasn't a bad name for a game so since we didn't run into any obstacles, Orcs&Elves it was. Naming new projects is a lot harder than most people think, because of trademark issues.

In hindsight, we made a strategic mistake at the start of O&E development. We were fresh off the high end BREW version of DoomRPG, and we all liked developing on BREW a lot better than Java. It isn't that BREW is inherently brilliant, it just avoids the deep sucking nature of java for resource constrained platforms (however, note the above about many mobile games not being resource constrained in the future), and allows you to work inside visual studio. O&E development was started high-end first with the low-end versions done afterwards. I should have known better (Anna was certainly suspicious), because it is always easier to add flashy features without introducing any negatives than it is to chop things out without damaging the core value of a game. The high end version is really wonderful, with all the graphics, sound, and gameplay we aimed for, but when we went to do the low end versions, we found that even after

cutting the media as we planned, we were still a long way over the 280k java application limit. Rather than just butchering it, we went for pain, suffering, and schedule slippage, eventually delivering a game that still maintained high quality after the de-scoping (the low end platforms still represent the majority of the market). It would have been much easier to go the other way, but the high end phone users will be happy with our mistake.

DoomRPG had three base platforms that were customized for different phones – Java, low end BREW, and high end BREW. O&E added a high end java version that kept most of the quality of the high end BREW version on phones fast enough to support it from carriers willing to allow the larger download. The download size limits are probably the most significant restriction for gaming on the high end phones. I don't really understand why the carriers encourage streaming video traffic, but balk at a couple megs of game media.

I am really looking forward to the response to Orcs&Elves, because I think it is one of the best product evolutions I have been involved in. The core game play mechanics that were laid out in DoomRPG have proven strong and versatile (again, I bet we have a stable genre here), but now we have a big bag of tricks and a year of polishing the experience behind us, along with a world of some depth. I found it a very good indicator that play testers almost always lost track of time while playing.

This project was doubly nostalgic for me – the technology was over a decade old for me, but the content took me back twenty years. All the computer games I wrote in high school were adventure games, and my first two commercial sales were Ultima style games for the Apple II, but Id Software never got around to doing one. Old timers may recall that we were going to do a fantasy game called "The Fight For Justice" (starring a hero called Quake...) after Commander Keen, but Wolfenstein 3D and the birth of the FPS sort of got in the way. :-)