BLAST THEORY

Unit 5, 20 Wellington Road, Portslade, Brighton BN41 1DN   tel & fax: 00 44(0)1273 413 455   info@blasttheory.co.uk www.blasttheory.co.uk

EDGE, 12/2003

The future of electronic entertainment issue130   www.edge-online.com

EDGE®

XBOX | GAMECUBE | PLAYSTATION2 | PC | DREAMCAST | GBA

December 2003 £4

Codeshop ▷ ▷ ▷ ▷
Tracking developments in development

Release the smarts

Simian Industries is creating a new style of game development tools, thanks to research from BT

www.simianindustries.co.uk
www.btexact.com

Who is Uncle Roy?

Hosted at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London during June, 'Uncle Roy All Around You' was an interactive event mixing realworld participants with virtual helpers thanks to Smart Content technology. Organised by art grouping Blast Theory, together with Nottingham University's Mixed Reality Laboratory and BT Exact, the objective was for the online players, who saw a virtual representation of London, to help the connected street players to find a particular location, known as the Office. Together they searched for clues, communicating by audio and text messages.

BT Exact designed interface components for the fixed and mobile devices used by the players, including a 3D virtual world navigated by online players, and an interactive PDA interface for the street players. These interfaces allowed players to see each other's virtual and real locations while deciding what their next moves should be.

The players of 'Uncle Roy All Around You' may appear to be more suited to the pages of 'i-D' magazine than Edge but the innovative interactive event demonstrated the potential flexibility of the Smart Content concept

While the cool-looking street players of 'Uncle Roy All Around You' were running around the streets of London, the less comely were tucked away in the comfort of their own homes, aiding the quest thanks to this virtual representation

Smart Content sounds like the kind of buzzword tossed around the members-only clubs of Soho with careless abandon. In this case however there's something behind the facade.

Created by BT's R&D arm, BT Exact, the concept of Smart Content was developed to give content providers new ways of offering device-independent experiences. Already in use in the video-editing market, the system was also used in the interactive multi-location event, 'Uncle Roy All Around You' (see Who is Uncle Roy?). Now it's the turn of traditional gaming. Dundee-based Simian Industries is in charge of turning Smart Content into something useful for hardnosed game developers.

"Smart Content is a completely new concept," explains managing director **Mark Ettle**. "Compared to current middleware, which is limited on a platform-technology level, this separates technology from the game. It will allow smaller devices to take advantage of other platform strengths." By comparison to existing tech, he says it will operate more like a realtime version of digital asset management system alienbrain than RenderWare.

"What we're concentrating on is features that give developers a huge amount of control over their data," Ettle continues. "This isn't something that has been done before in game development so it may take people a while to realise what they can get out of the tools." One example of this new approach will be the ability to allow users to personalise their gaming experience. By authoring content with this in mind, developers could allow users to alter characters and or even generate levels as they see fit.

"Smart Content is exactly what it says," says Ettle. "The content has enough information about relationships, constraints and linkages that it can be used to explore and express the set of information that describes how a game works. It enhances the abilities of traditional game development to cope with detailed complexity, while enabling players to interact with the game in a much more user-friendly way."

Another area being explored is inter-device connectivity. "It's not vital to the overall concept," says Ettle. "Games can be standalone or networked, although allowing multiple device types such as consoles, phones and PCs to talk to each other and compete will, of course, open up new possibilities." Simian, which has a strong relationship with the 3 phone network, is also looking into the possibility of streaming Smart Content data across 3G networks.