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How Linger in Shadows Came to Be

by Axel of Brainstorm

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Plastic is one of the demoscene groups that enjoys a lot of respect outside the demoscene as well. Demos like 195/95 and Final Audition were visual milestones, and the hardware industry took note. Therefore, it doesn't surprise many that Plastic's latest production, Linger in Shadows, is a milestone yet again. For the first time, the team has created a production on the PlayStation 3, in close collaboration with Sony Computer Entertainment Europe and Sony Computer Entertainment America, and released it commercially on the PlayStation Network (PSN). ZINE wanted to find out how everything happened and sat down with the programmer behind it all - Michal "Bonzaj" Staniszewski.

Blessing and curse

"We used to say that this project was cursed," he starts his retrospective on the development of Linger in Shadows. "Luckily, we managed to remove the curse and finished the production. Now I can feel the biggest revelation of my life. This project has changed me. I believe that the others that are still struggling under the curse have also changed. In the end I'm really happy and I've already forgotten all the breakdowns that 'Linger In Shadows' had in store for me."

Rewind. The year is 2005 and Final Audition has just been released at Evoke in Germany, where it has easily won the demo competition miles ahead of every other production. Bonzaj was at a crossroad after Final Audition's release. He was in the process of finishing his master degree thesis and didn't know very well what he wanted to do with his future. He could stay at the university which would give him some spare time for coding. The problem was that he was studying maths and he didn't really see himself as being an academy teacher in the future. Another route he could have chosen was to go into game development but - ironically in retrospect - he didn't really like this industry. So he was finishing his studies while thinking about what to do with his life. It was the first time in his life that he, along with his girlfriend Kinga, were mentally ready to travel abroad.

Sony had perfect timing in its approach to Plastic. "In retrospect, their timing was perfect indeed," confirms Bonzaj. "I had scheduled a trip to Coburg, Germany, where the development studio Crytek ("Far Cry", "Crysis") was residing back then." Crytek was still working



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on its debut game Far Cry back then, trying to make its mark in the multi-billion dollar games industry. The company was looking for engine developers and Crytek had observed the demoscene over the years. It was exactly then that Sony contacted Plastic.

"SONY HAD PERFECT TIMING"

Whether it was the technical prowess of Final Audition that caused the initial contact remains unconfirmed. "Let's say that we were just lucky," explains Bonzaj with a smile. "Sony was preparing for the launch of PlayStation 3 and the team responsible for the PlayStation Network was looking for something different than the regular games to lure people, other than hardcore gamers, to their platform. So they picked the five most active groups of 2005 and, since we won both Breakpoint and Evoke in that year, we were on the list."

Sony evaluated many demos of that year's parties. Of the five groups they selected, they only could make a deal with three of them, due to budget constraints. "I cannot blame them for that because it was a very risky project," recalls Bonzaj. The entertainment giant had never before worked with such small independent groups. Bonzaj adds: "What I do blame them for though, is that they just cut off all contact with the dismissed groups. It was not the nicest way to do it. However, taking into consideration what happened after that, I can say that the dismissed groups don't blame Sony for what they did."

Getting an offer from such a big corporation surely increases your adrenalin level. "I was of course very happy," confirms Bonzaj with a nod. "Having the possibility of working on a highly anticipated platform was an incredible feeling. I learned two things. First: never lose your head when getting an offer out of the blue. Second: Do not turn the offer down because there might not be a second chance."

The original schedule for Linger in Shadows was ambitious, but also "plain stupid", as Bonzaj puts it. Bonzaj had no experience whatsoever with planning, nor with writing design docs or leading a company. He didn't understand how the tax systems work in Poland and in US. He also didn't know how fast his team would progress with the project. So it was bound to happen: the project schedule was a disaster which had fatal financial consequences. "I planned the project to be finished within five months, but we ended up working on it for twenty months and of course with the primary budget," explains Bonzaj. "After one year I wrote the first mail to our producer and explained that the situation is critical and that I wouldn't know in which direction everything was going from there." It was a scary confession Bonzaj had to make at the time. He didn't get any reply from Sony. One year later, when the Plastic gang was visiting Sony Computer Entertainment America's Santa Monica studio (where games like the blockbuster-series "God of War" is developed) the producer said that he remembers that e-mail. "Today I can smile when I talk about it," says Bonzaj - indeed with a smile.



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SCENE MACHINE - YOU HAVE SO MANY DIFFERENT

The reasons for the massive delay of Linger in Shadows are manifold. The lack of experience, the lack of knowledge of the PS3's cell-architecture, the problems with the PS3's memory, they all contributed to a pile of trouble. But the most disastrous of them all was one key feature of the game: the player's ability to control time. "It basically meant that we could only use functions driven by time," elaborates Bonzaj. "There couldn't be any iterative animations, nor could there be any cumulated user input. And I decided to load everything in one go, like we do it in the demoscene." And then he laughs.

Once the team was at Sony's Santa Monica studio, it all went smoothly. "We had the best communication after we reached the moment when we needed direct support from Santa Monica," remembers Bonzaj. "They supported us with a sound technician, professional sound recording, interactivity design, quality assurance and everything we needed. At some point they took care of us like we were little babies and I really appreciate that. We never had any deadlines from them. One of the most important decisions was to show the demo at Breakpoint. It felt like putting all on one card. This was our only deadline that I chose."

The whole scenario begs the question: How well was Sony informed about the demoscene? "Their knowledge is quite impressive but not scary," laughs Bonzaj. "Our producer Rusty and designer George always take a look at what the scene releases at the important events. The Scene.org Awards further help them in checking out the prods from a whole year. So I can say they know quite a lot and understand what is impressive and what is not." Therefore it can be guessed that the studio in Santa Monica may not be the only one that keeps observing the groups of the demoscene.

Dealing with the new hardware also took some time to get the development of Linger in Shadows off the ground: "It's a hard machine to work with," comments Bonzaj. "Currently it is much easier and I start to calculate in parallel whatever I can. I guess it's a real demoscene machine - you have so many different possibilities to optimize. On the other hand it's just a waste of time that you could spend on design." The other groups that work on PS3-demos these days are in close contact with Bonzaj. "They share the same problems that we had. That is why I fully understand their current situation."

The story behind Linger in Shadows



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The story behind Linger in Shadows, or rather, the basic idea behind it, was a mystery to many PS3-owners, causing many question marks to appear subsequently. Then again, maybe people were looking too far. "The story is quite simple," says Bonzaj. "The demo is about evil. I was trying to distinguish two types of evil. One is brute force shown as a tentacle robot. And the other one which is pure and dark is represented as a cloud. I wanted to say that evil which grows in your mind over time is much more dangerous than an evil which is created suddenly, driven by emotions." Sounds complicated nevertheless? Bonzaj is quick to add with a grin: "Don't take it too seriously."

"THE DEMO IS ABOUT EVIL"

Bonzaj had some images of a dog and a cat in his head when the project started. At first the cloud was designed to be a form of black liquid. And in the end, the cloud was born by surprise as a result of an artifact in the particle system. "At the Plastic HQ we keep saying that the only good things in our demos were born of some kind of accident."

As far as creative freedom goes, Plastic had it all. The only requirement Sony had from the start was that it had to be interactive in some way. Can't blame them, can you? Plastic's biggest problem was that the team started thinking about interactivity after it had a complete story and half of the content done. And then they thought that controlling time could be one of the main interactive elements. And that's when things started to get complicated.

"The first challenge was to forget how you work on regular demos," admits Bonzaj with a smile. "Normally you can choose the best perspective where there are no artifacts or it just looks good. When you have an interactive camera, you need to design scenes so they also look good from different angles. Of course that's obvious when you work on a game. Another issue was the logic. You need to handle the logic between scenes. When the user turns off the light in one scene it should be turned off in the second one. This is also a plain simple thing when you work on a game. When you code a demo you just don't bother about such things."

Besides the game logic issues, there were also challenges of artistic nature. "When I saw the first game on PS3 ("Ridge Racer") I thought that it looked like a typical game and there were a lot of aliasing artifacts. So I decided that we should concentrate on how to make 'Linger In Shadows' not look like a PS3 game. At first I was thinking about a paint filter similar to 'Facet' in Photoshop. Then I came across the 'Kuwahara' filter. It's a median filter, so I got all the edges blurred. It looked good in full-HD so the problem was gone. Next thing was the cat. We had about 10 different models and the last one was what we were looking for." There also was a second cat in the early version. It was meant to be young so it would have required a lot of animation. Plastic decided to cut the young one out of the script.



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CHALLENGE WAS TO FORGET HOW TO WORK ON RE

Plastic also cannot be accused of fanboyism. The reasons why the team worked on the PS3 is plain simple: They were offered to. "I chose PS3 because Sony contacted us," explains Bonzaj naturally. "If Microsoft had contacted us in the first place then I would have chosen Xbox. I don't want to sympathize with a particular next gen platform. A long time ago I was an Amiga fanboy - these were some of the most foolish days of my life and I feel ashamed about it. Since then I don't stick to any platform. I just choose the hardware which suits me best. Currently I feel quite a bit for the PS3 because I like what the platform has to offer and because I did spend some time programming it."

In the days of the original PlayStation (now referred to as PS One), Sony had a hardware-option for bedroom programmers, the so-called Net Yaroze. It was a regular PS One but offered a card that allowed you to connect it to the PC, also giving you access to Sony's libraries and development environment. With this initiative, Sony was looking for homebrew-games from talented hobby programmers. Net Yaroze was only a very minor success. Sony's outreach to demoscene groups could now be seen as a renewed interest in this type of talent pool. And there are plenty of other groups with great potential. "I believe that the group with the biggest potential would be Fairlight," adds Bonzaj. "It's just because Smash is a part of Sony's R&D department and I actually read all his published papers. I don't think that Sony will open the platform to the public though to be honest. The current situation suits them well. They managed to launch an entertainment system directly from Utopia. There is no piracy on the PS3 so the market can observe for the first time how people behave in this new environment."

Currently, Plastic is working on internal tools for Sony and recharging its batteries before making another demo.