

SMBA DEV DIARY #4

Character Development - How different are the characters in this game compared to last, what about the villains or antagonist in this game?

Hyper-Realism?

Don't you just love the Marketing-types that come up with funky new terminology that sounds like it's just come straight out of the mouth of David Brent?!

Hyper-realism - that's what we were asked to provide. We kind of panicked as did we not know what was required but having discussed it further with Sega it became fundamentally clearer; 'We want a style that looks realistic yet cartoony and colourful at the same time. Sort of like that Honda advert with the engines flying through the sky!'

Fortunately one of our artists had worked on the Honda advert and understood roughly where Sega was coming from. Whilst the style from this advert suited what we needed to achieve for Jungle Island we struggled to get across the ideas for the rest of the worlds.

We began with sketches of the areas within the game that we knew were likely to go in as this had been described in the game design. Each of the worlds were primarily designed around a number of key aspects such as Main Street in Zootopia, Arrival Park for Moonhaven and the philosophical ying-yang design of Monkitropolis and Kongri-la.

Each bespoke area generated a number of different sketches with notes as to the gameplay and tasks that the area could be used for. Once Sega had signed off on these preliminary ideas we then had to generate the art style for these areas. Rather than completely rework each of the sketches for different ideas we decided to approach it in a slightly different way. Taking our lead from the house make-over programmes that seem to inundate our screens in the evening (PVR is such a great development!) we used different references to get the ideas for the levels across. In this way we could portray the palette we wanted to use along with the varying design influences for each of the areas. Getting all of these down on paper then allowed us to ratify each of the areas to give it one unique feel and style that was coherent, colourful and 'hyper-realistic'!

Looking back on this process and the finished article, we're very pleased with what we've achieved. Undoubtedly there are areas that we would like have reworked or approached in a different way but that's all necessary experience that can be put to use the next time round.

Monkey See, Monkey Do

One of the most recognised aspects of the game are the monkeys themselves. We wanted to portray the actual world in which Aiai and his friends inhabited which meant coming up with a style guide for the development of the monkeys. Initially this was a little perplexing but we eventually narrowed it down to a number of characteristics that we could carry through in to the design of the other characters; curly ears, design of the eyes, etc. Once we had each of the characters designed they were sent over to Nagoshi-san with notes as to who they were within the world and over a number of iterations they were approved with some small amendments. We knew where each of the characters would be in the world and the kind of job they were employed to do as this was driven by the tasks that they would give the player.

The bigger problem we had was the Naysayers. We were asked to add in a form of antagonist to appeal to a wider audience. The nature of the game from the very beginning was somewhere that was pleasant to be albeit that each world had its own set of problems and it was felt that these characters would help emphasise these issues.

The Naysayers became a facet of the sorrow that existed within the world and not the reason that the sorrow was there. However, trying to get the right look for the Naysayers was extremely problematic and it ended up taking about three months to get these characters correct. Ideally SEGA wanted ghostly type characters which caused massive problems as the engine was never designed to handle this type of character. We tried various methods of achieving this aim with different uses of alpha channels and blending techniques but these

never really worked properly. We also tried making the characters out of particle effects and no matter what we tried either we weren't happy with them or SEGA disliked the look.

The other problem with the Naysayers was that there was not mechanic within the game for combat as these types of character were never envisaged from the game brief. We looked at different ways of allowing the characters to inhabit the world and the way in which each Naysayer could be defeated. As previously mentioned one of the biggest design considerations was the use of the minigame mechanics and their crossover in to the adventure world. Considering these mechanics we looked at how they could be used to defeat each of the Naysayers. This was prototyped relatively quickly and we had the game mechanic for the Naysayers completed way before we even knew what they looked like! Eventually we ended up with the characters not being ghostly but rather reflective of the ability that was needed to defeat them.