http:/www.eludamos.org

Pure Hardcore?
wipEout HD and current game design
Fares Kayali
Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture. 2009; 3 (1), p. 103-106

Pure Hardcore?

wipEout HD and current game design

FARES KAYALI

In 2207, races are fought at ridiculous speeds with ships zooming along tracks that match the wildest roller-coaster rides. Wipeout HD (SCE Studio Liverpool, 2008) is an anti-gravity racing game taking place in a futuristic setting that might well have influenced Star Wars Episode 1's pod races. By collecting power-ups, Wipeout's ships can be armed with weapons like machine guns, rockets and bombs. Power-ups also include shields and turbos, all critical to success in a race. The gameplay in Wipeout HD is remarkably responsive. The game runs in Full HD resolution at 60 frames per second. Therefore the game provides extended range of sight and the ship reacts to input with an immediacy that is not only welcome but also needed to complete tracks on the highest speed setting. In contrast to other racing games, Wipeout HD features two analogue air brakes (mapped to the left and right triggers of the Playstation 3 controller) that enable swift exact movements to the left and right and add to the kinesthetic experience of the game.

In 1995, Sony bought small Liverpool-based company Psygnosis, at the time best known for their game Lemmings (DMA Design, 1991). 1995 also marked the year Sony launched its first Playstation console in Europe and the US. That year Psygnosis (later renamed to Sony Computer Entertainment Studio Liverpool) released the initial game of the widely successful Wipeout (Psygnosis, 1995) franchise as the first title for Sony's Playstation developed outside of Japan. Set to attract a broader, more mature audience, the game was styled by graphic design studio tDR (the Designer's Republic) who are known for their subversive, minimalist designs for big brands like Coca-Cola, Marlboro and MTV as well as more niche brands like British electronica label Warp records. The idea was to attract the clubbing scene to the game and therefore Wipeout was also promoted in clubs, on screens on the side of dance floors.

The music and sound design of the Wipeout games matches their visual style. Although Liverpool is mostly known for the Beatles and its lively rock and pop music scene, a tasteful choice of electronica tracks was made for each game. The original Wipeout featured artists like the Chemical Brothers, Leftfield and Orbital and a soundtrack album was also released alongside the game. A usual practice in Japan, but not for a European game, even now.

In 2008, Wipeout HD was released as a download-only title on the Playstation Network. Not very much has changed over the course of thirteen years between the original Wipeout and Wipeout HD. The techno-culture influenced, minimalist, yet detailed design evolved but stayed true to its roots. Yet, the pounding of the beat then was a bit more relentless, as was the difficulty level.

Wipeout HD features a selection of music tracks by renowned electronic music artists like Ed Rush, Optical and Kraftwerk. All songs were mixed in 5.1 surround sound especially for the game. Additionally, Wipeout HD quietly introduced custom soundtracks⁻ on the Playstation 3[1]. The game also manipulates the songs provided by the player with effects, in order to integrate them more with the game's experience. A prime example for the use of custom music is Grand Theft Auto 3 (Rockstar North, 2002) that tightly integrates user selected music tracks by playing them on a radio station, thus submitting them to the rules of the game world (for example they can only be listened to when driving a vehicle). Music integration in Wipeout HD is achieved by applying audio effects that connect with the racetrack and gameplay. These include reverb when flying through tunnels (an effect that was already present in the original Wipeout), a hi-pass filter when jumping and characteristic changes in volume and sound texture when hit, in critical condition and upon enabling a shield. Thus Wipeout HD adds aspects of interactive music to its style and experience.

Interactive music dates back to classical composers like W.A. Mozart and the playful aleatoric waltz composition "Das musikalische Würfelspiel" that is attributed to his works. Aleatoric and thus dynamically recombinable music characterised some of the influential works of 20th century composers John Cage and Karlheinz Stockhausen. To let the audience interact with music has also found many applications in media art. In videogames, player interaction is mostly at the centre of the experience. Dynamic audio and adaptive music react to player actions. The boundaries between these academically well-researched kinds of interaction with audio (e.g. Collins, 2008 and Grimshaw & Schott, 2007), art- and playful interactive music games like Toshio Iwai's Electroplankton (see Pichlmair, 2007 for a review of the game), and the wannabe musical interaction (Kayali & Pichlmair, 2008) provided in rhythm-based games like Guitar Hero are fluid. Current game design starts to recombine these established practices. Wipeout HD features several of the above aspects as users not only get feedback from the game's sound effects but also its music and are invited to playfully experiment with their own music collection. Wipeout's use of music thus greatly adds to player immersion.

It is no coincidence that Wipeout's most remarkable game mode is called *zone mode*. Just like thatgamecompany's flOw (2007), both use names that signify states of immersion - and deservedly so. The same way flOw puts you in a meditative, flowing underwater journey, Wipeout's zone mode requires players to be "in the zone". A phrase mostly used in sports to reference streaking players who can't miss a target, zone mode's psychedelic hue-shifting tracks that feature visual effects synchronised to the background music, put players through the same courses known from regular races, yet without opponents. The only adversaries are the track itself and the player's own hunger for speed. The audiovisual overload of zone mode was also rumoured to be the reason that Wipeout HD initially failed epilepsy testing. Starting out at a yawning pace, the ship picks up speed by crossing turbo pads. The increase in speed is lasting and more importantly, there is no way to slow down again. Zone mode is Wipeout at its purest - it is satisfyingly ambiguous, it gets too fast yet you want it to go faster. You don't now how to catch the next corner yet you can't resist to speed up with another turbo. This way zone mode not only suggests a state of immersion, it demands it as the only means of survival. Only when completely in flow it is possible to react to turns on the higher speeds. I also found

myself specifically selecting custom songs for zone mode not according to taste but according to their length and repetitiveness to maintain the state of trance necessary for playing zone mode. The experience reaches a state of synaesthesia only matched by audio-visually polished experiences like Kandinsky-inspired 3D-shooter Rez.

Due to its steadily increasing pace, zone mode has an intrinsic, scaling degree of difficulty. As such it can also be experienced by beginners but demands that advanced players play almost without any mistakes in the beginning to save hull integrity for the higher speeds. Just as in this example, several aspects of the gameplay in Wipeout HD evolved to make the game more universally accessible. The most apparent casual player oriented feature is "pilot assist", a disengageable navigational aid that automatically steers the ship away from the sides of the track. Other features like side-stepping (activated by double-tapping an air brake) need only be used by expert players. This manoeuver is necessary to get gold medals late in the game and a dedicated higher value trophy.

As Gonzalo Frasca (2008) addressed in his talk at Vienna Games Conference 2008, hardcore gamers have to "roll over" to the *"the hordes of regular people [that] are taking videogames to a mainstream level".* This does not necessarily mean obliteration but is proved by the subtle additions made to the Wipeout franchise to bring the game to a broader audience. Current game design allows players to play a game as a hardcore or casual game. Wipeout can be casually enjoyed using pilot-assist and split-screen two-player gameplay and it can be played as a hardcore game, competitively battling for lap records in the game's online mode. Just like the epic setting of Gears of War 2 (Epic Games, 2008) that can be satisfyingly experienced as an interactive Hollywood movie or can be played as an extremely challenging hardcore game, Wipeout HD is a good example of contemporary game design. By remaining the hardcore game it once was it would now be an example of a dying breed, yet the subtle additions to its gameplay and presentation make it a modern game experience. Still, Wipeout HD has managed to stay a game that always feels pure. It's all about the one race, the next corner to take.

Cited Games

DMA Design (1991) *Lemmings*. Psygnosis (Amiga).

Epic Games (2008) *Gears Of War 2*. Microsoft game Studios (XBox 360).

Psygnosis (1995) *Wipeout*. Psygnosis (PS).

Rockstar North (2002) *Grand Theft Auto III*. Rockstar Games (PC).

SCE Studio Liverpool (2008) *Wipeout HD.* Sony Computer Entertainment Europe (PS3).

thatgamecompany (2007) *flOw*. Sony Computer Entertainment (PS3).

References

Collins, K. (2008) *From Pac-Man to Pop Music - Interactive Audio in Games and New Media*, Ashgate Publishing, Burlington, USA.

Frasca, G. (2008) *Roll over Beethoven: how human nature took over the hardcore game world*, keynote at the Vienna Games Conference 2008 'Future and Reality of Gaming' (FROG) Vienna, Vienna, October 17th-19th, 2008.

Grimshaw, M. & Schott, G. (2007) *Situating Gaming as a Sonic Experience: The acoustic ecology of First-Person Shooters*, paper presented to the Digital Games Research Association 2007 Conference - Situated play, Tokyo, Japan.

Kayali, F. & Pichlmair, M. (2008) *Playing Music, Playing Games - Simulation vs. Gameplay in Music-based Games*, paper presented to the Vienna Games Conference 2008 'Future and Reality of Gaming' (FROG), Vienna, October 17th-19th, 2008.

Pichlmair, M. (2007) Electroplankton revisited: A Meta-Review, *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture*, 1 (1).

Notes

[1]   Players can transfer music files to the PS3 and compile playlists. These playlists are then accessible from the game.