



Usability Review – Red Steel (Nintendo Wii)

Introduction

PlayableGames ran a usability review of Red Steel on the Nintendo Wii. We wanted to see what issues were affecting the user's experience. In particular, the use of the Wiimote and nunchuck; novel control mechanisms that look like they should be intuitive to use, but which are breaking new ground and may require user research to ensure they do what users expect.

This short review is a taster of what we discovered and our recommendations on how issues could be caught and prevented during development. If you would like us to tell you more about this research, what we do, and how it can work for you, please let us know. Our contact details are at the end of the document.

Gameplay

We noted the following issues with the gameplay. They were drawn from our own user testing and from follow-up interviews. The issues are then followed by our recommendations for redesign for future game iterations. If this research was performed at the development stage, alterations could have been made before release.

User-centred issues:

1. It took users a long time to get used to the controls. After a while they began to feel a little disillusioned. In particular, the method of controlling the character's orientation with the Wiimote took some getting used to. Users commented that they would prefer if they only used the Wiimote as a gun or sword, and used the nunchuck to deal with the body movements, rotating left and right and up and down, as well as using the analogue stick to move. They felt that using the nunchuck to open doors was a waste of its functionality; this could have been done automatically.
2. Use of the gun when standing was a strange experience for most participants. They found it much easier to sit down, as when shooting, they often ended up staring at the ceiling or down at their feet. Sitting down allowed them to rest the Wiimote on their lap, or chair arm, which steadied it.
3. Users appreciated the end of level sword fights, often feeling exhausted afterwards. The amount of physical movement required made the experience extremely engaging.
4. Users were unable to speed through cut scenes if they had already watched them. This was very frustrating and led to users looking around, feeling bored, and not immersed in the game.
5. Some participants, who felt that the sword did not accurately reflect their movements, questioned the accuracy of sword fighting, and felt that winning was often down to chance or perseverance, rather than skill.
6. Users appreciated the in-game instructions on how to use the controls. However, often these instructions stayed on the screen and obscured waiting baddies.

Recommendations:

1. Consider revising the control mechanism. It may be the case for all first-person shooters on the Wii that using the Wiimote as the controller of character head movement, as well as the main weapon, is combining two concepts in one control, and confusing players. We would recommend that the head movements be not incorporated into the same control as for the weapon. Ultimately, novel control mechanisms such as this should be fully user tested at a prototype stage, in order to ensure they are as intuitive as possible before release.
2. The Wiimote seemed to be overly sensitive to the movements of the user. As mentioned above, we would recommend not incorporating the character's head movements in the same controller as the weapon, and feel they might work better if they were driven by the nunchuck's orientation, as the analogue stick already controls user direction. Opening doors could be achieved by button presses, or simply automated, rather than the up/down movement of the nunchuck, as they did not seem to be integral to the game itself.
3. End of level sword fights were well received and their physical nature should be maintained in future releases.
4. Allow users to skip cut scenes, especially if they have already seen them.
5. If possible, allow the Wiimote to follow a series of simple strokes, more accurately reflecting the user's intentions. This can only really be created through further development of the code behind the control mechanism, but it should be tested with users to ensure it is of a sufficiently accurately standard before being released.
6. The combination of unusual control mechanisms, with the difficult use of the Wiimote to control the user's head direction as well as weapon, make for a very steep learning curve. We would recommend that if this game were still in development, earlier levels were graded to allow users sufficient time to familiarise themselves with the control mechanisms before they reached more difficult levels.

Menu structures

The game began slowly because of its complicated initial menu structure. This was partly why users were less clear about the overall game concept, as by the time they had begun the game, they were itching to start shooting straight away, and paid little attention to the background cut scenes.

User-centred issues:

1. Important navigation menu text was written in Japanese and required holding the Wiimote over them to read them, which took time and frustrated users.
2. Selecting an option required picking it up and dropping it on another part of the screen. An interesting, but overcomplicated approach for users.
3. Some introductory screens were felt to be unessential, such as the screen asking users to check that the nunchuck was attached, preventing users from playing the game as quickly as possible.
4. The calibration option for the Wiimote, which involved pointing at fish in a fish tank, was thought to be a clever idea, but users did not feel that the mark on the screen that they were controlling was responding clearly enough to their movements before it moved on to the next scene.

Recommendations:

1. Although it is important to give the game an authentic air, and keep the Japanese look and feel, ensure that key navigation items are not written in a language foreign to the main audience. Our users found this frustrating, as it took them a long time to get into the game.
2. Utilise the tools of the Wii, such as the Wiimote to make the users life simpler, and to access the games quickly, rather than adding in unnecessarily complex selection mechanisms. Allow users to play the game as quickly and simply as possible.
3. Ensure that the user's route to the game itself is as short and simple as possible. Automate or remove any unessential screens, such as the nunchuck attachment screen.
4. Consider allowing users longer to calibrate their Wiimote. Also, users would have liked to have had some form of target practice at this stage, to familiarise themselves with the controls before the game began.

All of the issues with the game menu structures could be simply identified through user testing of either prototype builds with 6 – 8 users, or through simple Flash-like mock-ups.

Concept

Red Steel is a first-person action adventure. This type of game drives users' expectations of what they should do (i.e. it is first-person action, therefore one is required to fight/kill a series of 'baddies'). However, we found that the overall goal of the game was unclear, and as such users felt little incentive to continue playing; there was no greater goal to keep them performing the same action of moving and killing.

The goal of the game is the foundation on which it sits. If this is misunderstood, or missing, often a game seems quite shallow, and users are less keen to play it in the long term.

User-centred issues:

1. The overall game objective was not understood clearly enough to provide users with an overall objective for their character. They therefore felt less compulsion to keep on working through to complete it.

Recommendations

1. An excellent way of understanding the users' appreciation of the game objectives is to perform user testing of a prototype during development. User testing could have recommended a subtle rewrite of the introductory story and different visual direction to emphasise moments of pathos or sentimentality.

User testing can also measure any improvements to these, after the developers make alterations.

Another excellent technique, which can also analyse and understand user feedback on concepts, is group discussion. Group discussion is suited to gathering feedback and creating ideas at early stages of development, often before anything more than flat, static imagery is created.

Summary

Throughout this short review, we have briefly discussed the user-research techniques that we would recommend be used in the games development process. Even a cursory use of these techniques would have helped address the user issues that we found with Red Steel, producing a better game, creating better reviews, and ultimately better sales figures.

These techniques include:

- User testing with a prototype of the game to uncover and iron out issues of gameplay and controls.
- Focus groups to gather user opinions of new game features, and background concepts.
- User needs analysis to uncover the features of the game that most appeal to users, to understand what priority they need to be given in the games development process.

This is just a selection of the techniques we use, which are always tailored to answer the questions that our clients want answered.

We perform this form of user research in depth throughout the games development lifecycle. This is just a small sample of the depth of findings we could gain from a single study. We would be happy to discuss our findings with you in more detail, to discuss other research we have performed, or to discuss future research that you would like to talk about.

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