
Phantasm: Using Player Communication as Key Source of Gameplay

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Abstract

Many cooperative games share a common drawback: they are not entirely cooperative. These games usually highlight some form of personal gain, diminishing potential for positive interactivity. *Phantasm* is a game where players' skills are measured by how well they can communicate together. Players take on the roles of either *special agent* or *master hacker*. The goal is to get the agent to an exit. However, there are many enemies and obstacles that only the hacker can see, through various security cameras and filters. The agent, however, can hear sounds emitting from the walls and other objects. Both players must keep a constant flow of communication in aiding the agent of what routes to take, what and how to interact with the environments, and where, precisely, to shoot at *invisible* threats. This game will help bring players closer, as they will need to understand each others way of thinking in a tense and suspenseful gaming environment.

Author Keywords

Video Games; Communication; Cooperation; Strategy; Quick Thinking; Spatial Awareness.

ACM Classification Keywords

K.8.0. General: Games



Figure 1: The agent interface. Dark and simplistic. Highlights action.

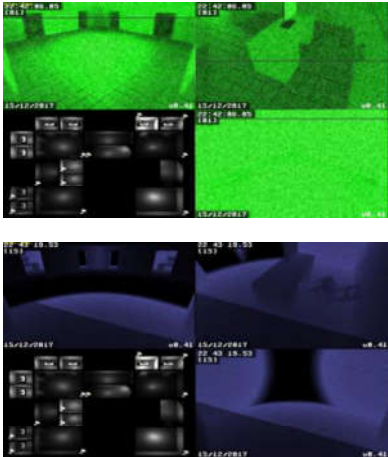


Figure 2: Two iterations of the hacker interface. Top shows cameras in night vision mode, bottom shows cameras in sonar. The map is shown in the bottom left corner. Camera icons are dragged from the map to one of the 3 quadrants, displaying the camera views.

Introduction

Throughout the project, the key focus of this game has been to create a multiplayer experience with as little animosity between players as possible. There has always been, and will always be a difference in skill level between players. Although games are balanced for a wider range of skill sets, higher-skilled players still tend to have better overall experiences.

The key skill that players will need in *Phantasm* is communication. Players who can provide quick and precise feedback and directions will do well. While there does still exist some form of challenge within the game (navigating the world, navigating the User Interface (UI), shooting, etc.), most of the challenge relies on players' ability to understand each other's speech outside it. *Phantasm* uses two computers, and neither player can see exactly what is happening on the other's screen.

This game explores player communication as a leading game mechanic, and focuses on only the spoken word for player interactions.

Overall Gameplay and Progression

The game features two roles: *Agent* and *Hacker*.

It is the agent's job to find an exit and escape a strange world. He or she, maneuvering in a first-person perspective, must navigate the many potentially dangerous rooms, with only a gun, and a limited number of bullets.

The hacker doesn't move through the world, but rather interacts with it from afar. This includes swapping through security camera footage, swapping camera filters,

analyzing maps, and hacking into the functionality of objects.

As the agent progresses further toward the exit, the wandering enemies become harder to see, and will eventually be entirely invisible. At this point, only the hacker is able to see them, and must quickly describe their locations and movements to the agent before they attack. Both the agent and hacker must also be aware that the further along they go, the darker the world will get, and the more invisible enemies and traps there will be.

Most of these threats can also only be seen through different filters of the hacker's camera system. By pressing a button, the hacker player can swap through different modes of vision of the security cameras, including night vision, thermal vision, and sonar.

Each filter emphasizes a stylized view on each of the rooms, and enables the hacker to find things that were previously missing in the others. The filter system exists to increase the speed at which the hacker must analyze the territory. It limits any drops in pace that may occur within the less crowded rooms of the game.

While the hacker has a greater control of sight in the world, the agent alone experiences the world's sounds. The agent may hear a noise or feel a pulsing vibration, and must work with the hacker to find the source. This could lead him or her to a computer, giving the hacker access to more cameras. There also exist telephones that ring when the agent is within proximity. If interacted with, these phones provide information. This information can come in the form of warnings, tips, codes, or clues leading to codes. The two partners must work together to obtain these codes, for when the

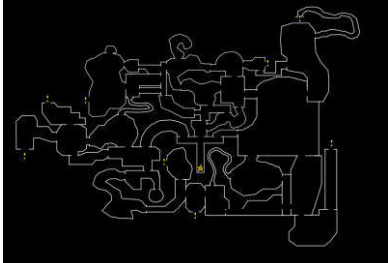


Figure 3: An example game map. Players can choose to lead their partners from the center to any of the possible exits on the outside.

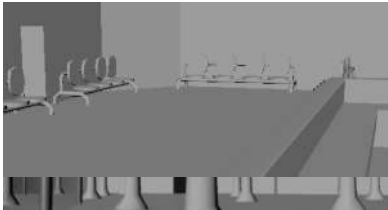


Figure 4: Example Rooms currently in progress, each with their own distinguishable attributes.

hacker types them in to his or her console, certain doors in the world will unlock.

Use of Style and Theme

Although the game features an agent and hacker working together to navigate multiple rooms, the theme is not of espionage. *Phantasm* sets out to produce a deeper level of player immersion, with an even deeper level of apprehension.

The style of *Phantasm* plays with the *strange, unusual, and unpredictable*, similar to the plots and settings of Rod Sterling's *The Twilight Zone* [1]. This is to remove the expected. If the agent player is confident of what will be in the next room, then his or her dependence on the hacker player wouldn't be as high. Conversely, if the agent is left in a constant state of uncertainty or aversion, then he or she would be much more encouraged to wait for assistance.

To achieve greater player reactions and louder, more timid dialogue, we've introduced a darker, more suspenseful tone. The game will slowly increase in tension as players progress. This is through darker atmosphere, smarter enemies, and unnerving sounds to be placed throughout. If players can remain stable and logically work through the obstacles, they wouldn't have had as memorable an experience. However, if the two players are in a situation where they feel the need to quickly scream their information out toward each other, then they would certainly have a longer lasting memory of their time playing the game.

Phantasm, however, should not be interpreted as a horror game. The core of *Phantasm* is communicative cooperation between two players in a tense

environment. We are not going out of our way to make the game frightening, just suspenseful enough so players will feel uneasy about any potential dangers awaiting them.

Advances in Game Design

Most cooperative games feature two or more players locked in the same game world, working together toward a similar end-goal. Because two players are performing similar tasks together, one will usually appear to be performing at a higher aptitude. This differentiation will spark a form of competition between players in what should be a cooperative experience. This has been a key issue in even the most 'family friendly' of Nintendo multiplayer games [2].

Both players in *Phantasm* take on two entirely different roles. There's no possible root for competition, because there's no way they can assess their overall individual abilities. If a player's partner does not understand the given directions, then perhaps the directions may need to be improved upon, rather than their receiver. The game's goal is to get the agent to an exit. Either both players succeed, or both players fail.

Two completely different play-styles within the same cooperative experience is also territory that hasn't been ventured much an extent. *Phantasm* is split into two halves: first-person action-shooter, and real-time strategy. This allows players with different tastes in games to be able to enjoy the same game together.

Moreover, *Phantasm* introduces a greater focus on communication between players. Cooperative games thus far do encourage people to talk over strategies with each other, but these games can still be beaten without any dialogue. It acts as more of a supplement

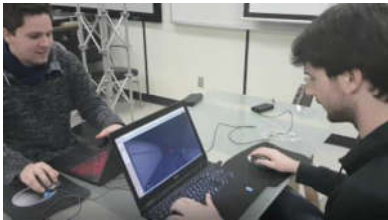


Figure 4: Two partners working together to complete the game.

to gameplay, rather than the root of gameplay, itself. *Phantasm* allows both players to see and interact with an entire game world. The hacker must also not only explain to his or her partner of the actions needed to be completed, but must describe to an essentially blind player of the entire surrounding world.

There are games where a hacker-type player guides a partner through a world, including *Black Hat Cooperative* [3], *Mayday! Deep Space* [4], and *Republique* [5]. These games all however feature more of a delegation from one player to another. The ‘hacker’ guides his or her partner, but the ‘agent’ can’t return the favor. In *Phantasm*, one player has more sight, while the other experiences more sound. The two players have to explain what they see and hear, and work together to solve puzzles and defeat enemies.

User Testing and Feedback

Our recent user testing [6] session took place on February 5th, 2017. Our result suggests an almost even divide between those who preferred playing as the agent, and those playing as the hacker. It has been of the highest importance that we make sure both roles are equally as enticing, and we will continue to balance the game as needed.

Each pair of players seemed to adopt their own strategies for quickly communicating larger quantities of information to one another. We have been using this data to help optimize the in-game UI to better supplement players’ conversation patterns. We have been working to further increase the game’s back and forth communication, so both players will be completely reliant on the other’s flow of information, and there is a steady balance of knowledge.

Conclusion

Phantasm facilitates an experience that multiple players can enjoy outside of the game world. It requires a great amount of communication and understanding of the other’s way of thinking and special reasoning. It is a new form of cooperative play endorsing equal and positive, meaningful interactions between players.

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