

Deer Hunter Bucks the Trend

Myst is no longer the number one selling PC game in the US; it has been replaced by *Deer Hunter*, a hunting simulation game. An add-on to the game, "Extended Season", is currently at number two. However, my interest in the game was not piqued by this fact, or by an interest in deer hunting, which I've never been a fan of. I became intrigued when a colleague claimed that game players would sit in front of their computer for hours waiting for deer to come along. I imagined, impossibly, players down on their bellies, staring intently at the computer screen, waiting for a 12-point buck to pass their way. Such a striking claim deserved a closer look, so a few weeks ago I bought the game and tried it for myself.



Figure 1: The opening screen of the game includes the option to start a new hunt or to look at your top five kills. The placement of the credits button is odd

After playing a few times, it is clear that I won't have to worry about withdrawing from friends and family to satisfy a newfound Deer Hunter addiction. The game, however, is interesting in the issues it raises for interaction design and user experiences.

The Game

The game, as it turns out, is fairly simple. The game opens with a splash screen, gunshot, and main menu in the form of a wooden sign. To begin play,

you choose Start New Hunt (figure 1). In a series of dialogs, the game asks you to choose your weapon (a bow, rifle, or shotgun) and whether you want to use any other hunting aids such as attractant scent or a tree stand (figure 2). Next, you move to a dialog

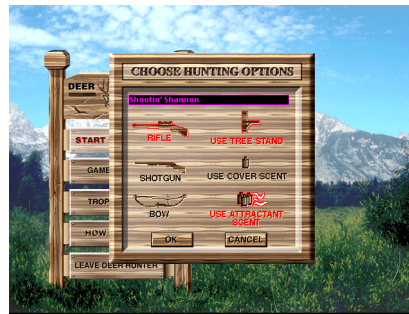


Figure 2: Choose your tools; the dialogs are clumsier than they need to be

screen from where you can choose the locale of your desire: winter in Indiana, a Colorado alpine forest, or autumn woodlands in Arkansas (figure 3). You can also choose to engage in



Figure 3: Choose your hunting spot. The game has four options; add-ons provide additional hunting spots

some target practice in "your own private shooting range", which, I'm told, is useful for those times when your hunting grounds are a little more empty than you had hoped. When you

have chosen your options, the hunting session begins.

The first screen for the hunt is a map of the terrain. The interaction is extremely awkward here; the idea is to tramp around the map using a sighting scope until you find some signs that animals are in the area (these include droppings, bedding areas, and tree rubbings). Using the mouse to locate the scope, you click in a new destination, then click again to simulate walking (along a straight path) to that location. When you arrive, if there are any animal signs there, a rather boring representation appears in the window to the right (figure 4). This way of moving



Figure 4: Map view of the hunting terrain; the screen real estate is not used very effectively

through the map seems to serve no purpose, although I later inferred from the instruction booklet that it might be bad to traipse right out through the open meadows (you might scare the deer). When you do find a place that you want to try, you click the Hunt but-

ton from the control bar at the bottom of the screen. Again, one could imagine a more elegant solution, such as using double-click to enter the hunting scene.

You have finally arrived on the scene of your chosen hunting spot (figure 5).



Figure 5: Winter in Indiana; the control bar is at the bottom

The control bar along the bottom provides information and tools: wind direction, compass, your weapon, binoculars, antler rattle and guttural deer call. The compass simply notes the direction you are facing; the wind direction is relative, meaning that as you rotate it changes, which I found utterly confusing; the binoculars look interesting, but tend to pixilate the scene rather than provide any additional clarity; and the antler rattle and deer call will attract deer if used “correctly” (you have to look for the tips section to figure out what that means). The most interesting tool is your weapon, which provides a sightline view of whichever type you chose (figure 6). To add a touch of realism, the weapon wavers slightly, and takes into consideration its particular loading action. The rifle, for example, can be shot five times in a row before it lowers for reloading, but the shotgun lowers after each shot.

As the hunter, you basically can pivot 360 degrees, and wait for some movement. You move left or right by pointing the mouse at the left or right edge of the scene; the closer to the edge, the faster the scene rotates.

And you wait. And scan. And wait. And scan. If you get bored, you can switch back out to the map view to change your position. On my first

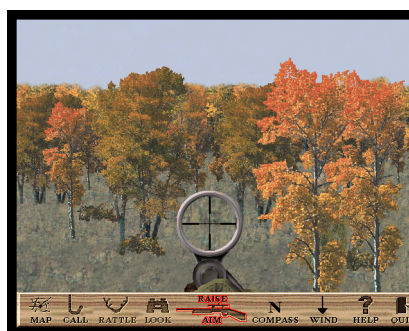


Figure 6: Waiting for the game to come along; the sightlines of a shotgun

play, it took over an hour to see my first deer, and that happened only after I became desperate and doused myself with attractant scent (which I had to back all the way out and start over to do).

The inability to move more gracefully through the landscape is one limitation of the game. Returning to the map view, traversing to a new spot, and re-entering the scene can be disorienting. It's as though to move through space, instead of simply walking forward, you have to transport yourself to an abstract representation of space and traverse that. If you figure out how to do this successfully, you may be able to super-humanly fly over the buck that is running away from you and plant yourself down in front of it, like the Wicked Witch of the West (“Come here, my pretty!”). It is one reason, I believe, that game reviewers have suggested that the game would be better played in 3-D. However, the interface could have accommodated this problem within the current scheme, perhaps by a more judicious use of the screen space in the map view (using some of the deer droppings space for a preview of the terrain), or having a less striking modal change between map and scene. In moments of frustration, I also wished for some way to cheat, perhaps by being able to see how many deer were in the area and where, approximately, they might be.

The Visual Interface

In the few gaming reviews I've seen on the web about this game, the reviewers have rated the game some-

what poorly, and this seems most influenced by the graphics, which are criticized as being too sterile and flat. However, I think these criticisms need to be looked at relevant to the business objectives of the game (keeping the hardware requirements and game price low) as well as the type of experience it wants to simulate. Deer hunting as an activity is far more temporal in terms of hiding and waiting, and technically, the visual component only needs to support this enough to maximize this kind of interaction and experience. Perhaps 3D graphics and fancier scenes would be nice (perhaps – 3D always disorients me, and I don't always like the aesthetics of most 3-D worlds), but in terms of playing the game, they wouldn't necessarily add anything toward helping you succeed. There is an issue, however, mentioned earlier, about finding a more elegant way to move without using the map interface, but this doesn't necessarily require a full 3-D interface. This may be in contrast to such games as *Dungeon*, which, although it was successfully and engagingly played via command line interface, was enhanced by the addition of richer graphics because they provided more opportunities to place and manipulate objects, like coins, rings, swords, etc.



Figure 7: The binoculars don't actually help you see better

While the scenics and maps seem fine, the navigation and control visual metaphors are overwrought, in my opinion. The faux woodgrain dialogs and the sign stand out in their cheesiness, and are clumsily laid out. For example, it seems ultimately self-serving for the credits button to be displayed just under the start game one. A more sub-

tle visual design and dialog construction, following more closely the visual language of the packaging, could have been more effective. Another particularly objectionable practice is how the help flings you out of the application, back to the desktop, for a very basic level of help that would have been much more useful had it been integrated into the interface.

The Aural Interface

An important part of the game is its use of audio. When you reach your hunting destination, the ambient sound simulates the sounds of that particular environment: wind, birds singing, a creek, or the occasional gunshot of another hunter. This very simple soundtrack provides a feeling, as much as possible in a game like this, of actually being out in the woods, and makes waiting slightly more tolerable. This strong aural presence does more, perhaps, to set the scene than expansive 3-D graphics would have. Cooley [1] points out how, in *You Don't Know Jack*, sound effectively replaces the need for complex graphics; and *Deer Hunter* also makes good use of sound. What that little bit of sound does far exceeds what even the best graphics would do to set the mood for the game.

Very occasionally a disembodied voice, sounding a lot like Johnny Cash, makes some brief commentary on the action of the game. At the beginning of the game he says, "Alright, let's get some bucks". Or, when you've been sitting in one place for a while, he says, "No luck yet". When I actually shot the deer, he said, "Right in the kill zone". I noticed that some reviewers (obviously male, or female with very deep voices) assume that these utterances come from themselves, a lone hunter in the woods muttering to himself. I prefer to think of the voice as my hunting buddy (I certainly don't need the game to mutter for me), and wish he were perhaps a bit more chatty, or at least helpful. In my mind, an interesting addition to the game would be the ability to choose some friends to go hunting with, one of whom might actually be an experienced hunter who could act as a teacher and guide you in your play (or, if you prefer the strong, silent type,

you could choose the Johnny Cash sound-alike).

The Conceptual Interface

Other criticisms by game reviewers tended to fall in a general bucket that I will call the conceptual interface. For example, they complained that, since only the deer move, it is too easy to spot them; that there are only bucks and no does; and that tools such as the tree stands have little effect on how the game plays. Another flaw that I would lump in this general category is that it is difficult to develop any causal relationships between your actions and your subsequent hunting success. You aren't really learning anything about hunting, or even the game, by playing. For example, if traipsing across the meadow while in map view really will scare the deer, it would be great to find out about that through some concrete experience (deer fleeing on the radar?) or advice through the interface. Or, it would be great if you actually could learn the firing ranges of the different weapons by having the distances mapped on target range targets so that you could begin to develop a feel for how close the deer need to be for you to shoot them.

Despite these criticisms, the game is intriguing precisely for this little snatch of reality: you wait. Just like the real thing, game is scarce, you may wait around for a long time without seeing any action, your feet may get bored, and you may decide you want to move on or give up for the day. The game-makers showed guts in the way they used time to support the user experience. Most computer games have used time very differently; for example, by providing non-stop action (*Deer Hunter*, if it had taken this tact, would have been more like a shooting arcade), or by wildly compressing time (as in *SimCity*). Even exploratory games like *Myst* or *Puppet Motel* reward constant probing, not waiting. How successful the game was with this tactic of simulating the waiting part of hunting remains to be seen (I wasn't able to talk to any hard core hunters or players of the game). However, promotions for game add-ons promise "more game", leading me to suspect that there have been com-

plaints about this particular element of the interaction design.

Regardless of whether this instance is successful, I think it shows that we could become much more sophisticated in how we use the element of time – and sound and rhythm – in interaction design to affect peoples experience with software. The producers of *Deer Hunter* do deserve credit for thinking about how these could be used to support the user experience of virtual hunting, and they have thought beyond the most obvious part of the interaction – shooting – to the other things that make hunting what it is: the nature, the sounds, the waiting, and even the presence of a laconic hunting buddy. Sensitive visual interface designers should be able to understand how different types of interaction and experience require different types of visual, aural, and conceptual aids.



Figure 8: My trophy room; the visual metaphor is a bit overwrought

The Deer Hunter Experience

I bagged my first buck approximately an hour and a half after starting the game. I must admit, after waiting so long, that seeing the deer gave me a prickle of excitement. The deer trotted straight towards me. I had plenty of time to aim, think about it, and finally shoot. The buck crumpled to the ground, and I felt, well, ... sick. The emotion wasn't surprising – I would never shoot a real deer – but it wasn't one I really expected to have over a virtual deer. I scared my second deer away by shooting into the sky, then got over my squeamishness and quickly shot two more. I wonder if kids killing bad guys in other games ever have a

moment of remorse after their first hit, whether that moment becomes one they remember: an experience.

Acknowledgments

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Note: Johnny Cash is an American Country and Western singer with a very deep voice.

References

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Auditory Display), Glasgow, Scotland, November, 1998.

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About this Column

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