The past, present and future of the video game cinematic

A look at the evolution of the video game cinematic and its impact on the industry

Franck Balson
Blur, gtalmage@blur.com

Stuart Aitken
Axis Studios,
stuartaitken@axisstudiosgroup.com

Phillip Hillenbrand
Blizzard Entertainment,
phillenbrand@blizzard.com

Thomas Vu
Riot Games,
jpoehlmann@riotgames.com

Matthew Ward
Bungie, mward@bungie.com

Jakub Jablonski
Platige Image,
msalwin@platige.com,

Alex Rabb
Digic Pictures, alex.rabb@digicpictures.com

ABSTRACT

Balson, Aitken, Chamberlain, Vu, Ward and Jablonski comprise the top minds on the world of video game marketing and narrative content, having delivered trailers and cinematics for some of the area's most critically applauded work over the last three decades. In this talk they will discuss the tools, processes and technology that makes their work possible while also exploring a conversation that will seek to look at the creative and economic contexts that has underpinned their work. They will reveal the "what", "who" and "why" behind the creation of both game trailers and cinematics, shedding light on a growing sector that has often been applauded but rarely analyzed. Audiences will come away with a deeper understanding of video game trailer and cinematic animation; how the work in the area has crystallized into a distinct sub-genre; and why the future looks to propel this style of work beyond the boundaries of the video game and into new territory.

CCS Concepts:

• Social and professional topics→ Computing industry; Redundancy; History of computing; • General and reference → Surveys and overviews; Redundancy; General conference proceedings;

KEYWORDS

Video games, cinematics, animation, VFX

1 PAST

1.1 The journey of the video game trailer

The talk will commence with an exploration of previous highlights within the history of video game animation, looking at both in-game cinematics and trailers, which unlike film trailers are often self contained mini-films in their own right. The directors will discuss this journey in the context of their own body of work and the studios at which they work, looking at how both the in-game 'cinematic' and concept-led trailer emerged. and how the format has evolved to meet the changing needs of their clients.

1.2 The emergence of a genre

Panelists will dive into what comprises the 'look' that has emerged in their work for video games – highly rendered, cinematically filmed, complex, naturalistic yet stylised pieces that boast fantastic characters rendered with incredible detail and expressed through intense performances. The panel will discuss and debate the origins of this aesthetic and the various factors that led to it crystallizing in this form, alongside the characteristics that define it today.

2 PRESENT

2.1 Where are we today – the tools, technology and processes

Conversation will commence around the technology that has fed into the look and feel of video game trailers/cinematics. Initial discussion will focus on the differences in production approaches when compared to film/television or 'traditional animation', and the techniques adopted to deliver the enhanced sense of 'stylised realism' that links the panelist's respective work. Panelists will also discuss the need for more technological innovation in the genre, how its unique characteristics can be used to further explore what is possible in animation, and how intense competition between these studios has pushed their work into new places.

2.2 Seeking realism & the human form

The panel will discuss how this genre/aesthetic of the video game cinematic/trailer is increasingly seeking to capture the nuance and complexity of the real world – in a myriad of ways from physical lighting, facial rigging and skinning, performance capture, hair grooming and so on, but uses this in a stylised or 'hyper-realistic' animated context rather than seek to fit within a live action plate. This conversation will include interesting takes on the popular concept of the uncanny valley, and how it affects the participants' work especially. Does the notion that everything on screen exists within a conceived and rendered context without a direct reference to live-action 'reality' make a difference to how these works are perceived? How can creators overcome the issue of the uncanny valley and create experiences that truly connect with their audience?

2.3 The real-time revolution

The panel will side step into the increasing use of next-generation game engines and real-time game technologies to create linear stories and cinematics within a game world. Initial discussion will center around the technical/logistical challenges and benefits of this technology: how does a separate vendor studio technologically dovetail with a developer in terms of sharing technology? This discussion will look at how game developers and external 'cinematic' vendors are creatively collaborating and how those creative relationships might develop, and what needs to happen to make this more streamlined and effective, and how to create better content for all involved, in future. There will also be a philosophical discussion around pre-rendering cinematics versus the in-engine approach, and how this has evolved as engines have become tools and frameworks, not just the final destination for content. Also of interest is the use of real-time technology in the creation of non-game related content – are studios such as those represented by the panel uniquely positioned to take advantage of the ever-increasing visual sophistication shown by state of the art game engines?

3 FUTURE

3.1 Life beyond the games industry

Panelists will discuss how this genre can now stand on its own two feet in the marketplace, moving beyond the status of "video game narrative extension". The panel will discuss what this genre/aesthetic can achieve outside the realm of a video game. This discussion will be accompanied by reference to real examples of work that demonstrates this trend has already begun, including recent and ongoing projects for broadcast and streaming giants such as Netflix, spurring a wider conversation regarding what kinds of animation might be viable going forwards, that have perhaps been deemed commercially too risky previously. The panel will reveal why this could create a new renaissance for their sector, if the market is ready for it: a landscape beyond the traditional video game marketing cycle.