The Design Game Project

Introduction

In the next six weeks we will inventing a new kind of software called a design game. Since this is a new kind of software it will be up to us to build a description of it. This process of definition will be carried out by writing, and refining, the software itself.

We can probably say a few things, however, about what a design game might be. While design software is used as a means towards an end, a design game should be played. Unlike a traditional video game it should produce – whether a finished design or the seeds of a design. More specifically for the purposes of this course, a design game should be simple, engaging, and instrumental. It should be simple in its design: focused in scope and easy to use. It should be engaging in its play. It should be instrumental by producing concrete products that can be transferred into further design processes.

The Process

Producing the software will follow a collaborative and iterative process. In teams of two or three, students will first sketch out their idea for a design game. At the same time we will be learning the basics of how to develop software, which will help us refine our ideas to realizable plans. After the sketch phase, an iterative cycle of software development and editing will proceed, leading ultimately to the final design game prototype. Through this process, the instructor will act as an ad hoc member of each team suggesting resources and providing programming assistance for more complicated problems. At the end of each week long iteration, teams will be evaluated on the thoroughness of their exploration and the refinement of their design game in terms of simplicity, engagement, and instrumentality. Team members should keep records of their contributions, whether these are in the form of research, critique, coding, or other types of work. Evaluation of each teams’ progress will be based on this work and not programming ability (or lack thereof). Software development and research that yields failure will be judged as favorably as that which yields success, provided that team members can demonstrate what was learned in the process. Despite these evaluative criteria, students are required to learn the basics of the tools and should aspire to learn them as best as possible in the short timeframe of the course. Putting this effort forth will increase the quality of work overall.

Tools

Our primary tool for developing our design games will be Unity, an emerging development platform for creating digital games for a variety of platforms. Unity presents an interface for creating games that should feel familiar to those who have used 3D modeling software. 3D models can be imported from popular modelers such as Sketchup. These components can then be animated and activated using a variety of tools in Unity to create the interactivity for the game. As soon as possible, students should download and install the free ‘indie’ version of the software at: http://unity3d.com/. Refer to the course website (http://wiki.umn.edu/DesignGames/) to get started learning Unity.