

Zenith Report

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Introduction

This is a short report to give my opinions, and suggestions for improvement, on the game "Zenith" currently being developed on N64 for Nintendo by DMA.

All my comments on "The current version" relate to the rolling demo version, which was sent to Nintendo.

Q : What image is conjured in one's head when a climbing game is spoken of ?

A : The film Cliffhanger !

Gameplay

I feel that currently the pacing of the game is too slow. It is pitched as a climbing game, but as it exists at the moment owes more to the "block movement / puzzle" type of game. As all of the enemies in the game are of the area effect type, it does not feel as though you are being chased. I feel that a "climbing" game should be as much about being chased by enemies etc. as it is about climbing.

Perhaps the game could have an opposition team competing against you to reach the pinnacle fastest (and in one piece). This "opponent" would in actual fact be a computer controlled player 2, and this would also be the format for the 2 player game, although in 2 player mode you would obviously have both players in their own split screen. This approach has the disadvantage that a route finder will have to be programmed for the "opponent" player 2, but I feel that this will introduce a great feeling of competition and also a sense of urgency to the player.

If an opponent team is impractical, then perhaps we could have enemies which are released from cages at the bottom of the level, at a predetermined time after the player starts climbing or when a specific flag is passed. These enemies would try and fly up to where player character is climbing, and try to attack him. These could also be viewed as "Camera Men", who would transmit their picture to projection screens dotted around the tower as background items, allowing the player to view the enemies progress compared to his, again helping stress the urgency.

If there were shadowed areas where the player could hide from the attackers, then the player could duck down into a shadowed area, and watch the view screen for the attacker to pass past his present position, then jump up and grab him from behind and throw him off of the platform. I think that lighting and other environmental effects (like rain, mist, snow, lightning) should be used as gameplay elements (You can hide from enemies in shadowed areas)

The current level structure, with a one sided wall, is being changed so that levels can be four sided. This will be OK if you can have 45deg corner blocks, thus making it actually look 8-sided. This will be a great improvement, allowing for such desirable features as :-

- Multiple routes (At the moment everything is too linear),
- Routes which only certain characters can traverse,
- Narrow sections (Tightrope style),
- Tunnels through the tower,
- Rope swings to secondary towers,

If the levels were to include more than one tower structure, then the player could travel between each tower, and indeed the secondary towers could be branches from the main tower, with only the main tower anchored to the ground.

At the moment the level appears to be designed so that most falls from the wall are critical. I think that, especially early on in the game, falls should be designed so that platforms are under potential fall spots to catch the player. Critical falls should only happen on the top sections of towers, with the frequency increasing as the towers increase in difficulty.

At the moment, the fact that there seems to be little discernible difference between characters is a big problem. Each character should have some skill or ability that they, and only they, can perform the best, and also something which they perform the worst.

This gives the game a reason to have different characters, and also will make choosing the characters for each level a skill in itself. Once a player has played, and been beaten by a level a couple of times, then he will suss out that he needs a certain character to get himself past a certain section or situation.

We also need to have more areas in the game which are unclimbable, and more methods of making sections unclimbable, to force certain characters to take different routes,

such as :-

- Unclimbable wall tiles
 - (slippy , sharp, razor blades etc.),
- Unwalkable floor tiles
 - (sharp, razor blades, crumble by weight of character etc.)
- Wall based enemies
 - (area based, Homing to main character)
- Wall based traps
 - (things like triggered projectiles - poison darts etc.)
- Unkillable enemies
 - (which you need to go around, not kill)
- Player characters abilities limiting things
 - (e.g. - low stamina - can only climb vertically for distance of 16 blocks upwards(max.) - need to rest or collect health power up before climbing vertically again).

Of course this will be set up so that different characters will have different routes up each tower. It also follows that there would be an "optimum team" of characters for each level, having the best chance at completing / completing in fastest time the level.

I feel that the controls at the moment are not responsive enough. I also hate the rotational nature of the left and right controls. I know that the game has been changed so that the camera and movement controls have been swapped, and I am much happier with this arrangement.

I also do not like being able to push "forward" on the pad to walk along a platform into the screen and then straight up the wall. I would prefer to see a jump being required to jump onto the wall, and indeed perhaps this instead of being a button jump could be a special type jump (activated by quickly pulling down then up on the analogue pad??).

I do however really like the diagonal jumps and side-steps. I think that although control has changed to the analogue stick, side step movements should still be left on the left / right flippers to allow yourself to quickly get out of danger. Obviously diagonal jumps can be still done if control is now totally analogue.

The camera needs to exaggerate the feeling of height in the game e.g. when you climb over a ledge, the camera should move to above the player, pointing over the players shoulder to the ground, allowing for a "vertigo" type feeling.

The section where you control a "Rock Thrower" is a nice idea, but I can't say that I like the graphic for it! I also think that having infinite projectiles for this is a bit much. I would prefer something more strategic like:

- Rocks are bouncing over the players head. He has to time a jump into the air to catch a rock. He takes the rock to the "rock thrower" loads up the rock, and tries to hit the trigger point. If he misses, he has to go back and get another rock.

Front End

Menu screen - OK

Character selection - Great except for the actual model of the character selected. These models need to be high polygon versions of the models in the game. They also need to show off all of their moves, abilities and specials. Perhaps even this screen could be used as a training screen, allowing players to practise moves with each character before actually selecting that character.

Level Graphics

I must say that, while I think that it's a nice graphic, I don't think that the background present in the game is in keeping with the rest of the games graphics. I think that it's too bright and colourful. I can't suggest what to put in, just that it should be subtle when compared to the foreground blocks and characters.

The graphics present in the foreground blocks look good on the whole, but generally the textures are repeated too often. Another problem is that most textures are of the type that fit one block. This very obviously gives away the fact that the level is made up of texture mapped blocks. The game really needs textures both larger than and also smaller than the block size of the game (I know that the textures are all the same size, but what I mean is textures which look like they go over more than one block or are repetitions of smaller blocks). I especially liked the wood texture, the repeated green pebble texture, the shields and heraldic type textures

I spotted that for example there are blocks with wooden sides and a wooden base, but the top is the standard green shaded tile. Surely in situations like this the whole block should appear to made of the same texture? This to be fair is the way that the level designers have put blocks together.

The water effect is quite nice, but unfortunately there is still a degree of tiling present in the lava effect.

Character graphics

This is one area where unfortunately the game does not stand up. The characters have very little detail to them.

The main characters in the game, model wise, should be *roughly the equivalent of VF2* on Saturn. At the moment they are *very original VF* on Saturn.

I would like the game's camera to be quite intelligent in its implementation. I would like it to zoom in on the character when fighting occurs. Maybe we could use the same system as Mario where each character, enemy, etc. has two models:-

The first is a "zoomed out exploration view".

The second is a "zoomed in fighting view".

I believe that we will have to have the fighting elements of the game at a standard where it could be compared to a fighting game. (i.e. separate special moves for each character, different punches, different kicks, signature moves)

Rotate entire tower via triggers
like a Rubic's cube.

Enemies

Of the enemies present in the current level, the bats look fantastic, the spiders look quite good, the gargoyles look great, the water based mines look OK, the fireballs coming out of the Lava look great.

I would like to see lots of different variants of each enemy, perhaps signified by a different colour body. I would also like different sizes of spider. I would prefer to battle maybe half a dozen small spiders, rather than one at the present size.

Sound / Music

No music or sound effects were included in the current version of the game, so I cannot comment on these.

In game music should be used to increase the feeling of urgency as the height of the player increases. All of the standard music tricks should be used for this (increasing volume, pitch, tempo etc.).

Conclusion

I like the idea of Zenith. I think that the game is begging out for a proper story line. A good story line will dictate the pacing of the game, and also give potential purchasers a “hook”. After all, how successful would *Syndicate* have been if it wasn’t set in a dark cyber-punk future with a compelling story line??

My want list for Zenith

Faster pacing,
Bigger characters for fighting,
More combat,
More strategy,
Team of opponent characters
more different devices to operate, like the “Rock Thrower”
Less repetitive looking levels and textures,
Multi-sided walls,
A reason for having different characters,
Story line,
Practise / tutorial mode in front end
Better models on character select screen, with possible training mode,
2 player simultaneous mode,
(needs to be competitive, split screen - NOT Co-operative)
Main character control with analogue stick.