

Zenith Report

By Michael Stirling

First Impressions

The first thing you notice is that the game is very colourful. The next things are that the graphics are very small and the engine draws well into the distance. The level seems very square - it is very obviously made from small blocks.

Control Method

The Knight Lore-style control method is easy to get the hang of but, again, it accentuates the squareness of the levels. I don't like the triple jump move as it is too easy to execute which will make the level design harder: platforms will have to be quite far apart if the player is not supposed to get to them (see Kid Kirby, where the hand slap ruined several levels). As in Mario 64, high jumps should be difficult to perform. When your character is near the edge of a ledge he/she wobbles nicely, but this soon becomes irritating as you cannot side-step and move forward at the same time. Another problem is that the character is not very responsive at the moment - the D-pad feels like moving through treacle, and it is virtually impossible to run towards a corner, turn left and keep on running without stopping to align yourself properly. Using the 3D stick to move around should improve things a lot, with less stop-start movement.

Fighting is rather pathetic, with only two ineffectual moves. While Tekken-style moves would look nice, they would only be effective against humanoid opponents. Trying to throw a gargoyle or bat could be a bit tricky, so I would like to see some projectile weapons for certain characters.

Graphics

Too small, especially when fighting. An automatic zoom would help this. I know that the main graphic was shrunk to increase the scale of the levels and so you could see further, but it removes all character from the game.

The way blocks' shadows lighten as the blocks move higher is a very nice touch, but the levels seem very square. The floor tiles need a better texture on top to avoid the "block" look. All the icons are rectangular blocks of varying thickness - the money icons especially could be improved as they are paper-thin.

A four-sided tower should add more scope for interesting level design, but it would be nice if there was more than one tower which the player could move between.

Effects like the crumbling blocks and the lava balls are very nice.

Gameplay

Currently, the game is a bit shallow. Some of the puzzles shown on the demo would be next to impossible without knowing what to do as the camera cannot look far enough up or down to see what blocks are available. The gun section is a nice change of control. I would like to see the tower split into two or three spires, with a grappling hook used to move between them. This would give the player much more freedom of movement. I feel that a coherent story, a reason to aim for the top would increase the player's motivation. To this end, I would like to see several changes to the game design, allowing more than one tower (as mentioned above), projectile weapons which can be carried, and grappling hooks. If the towers were turned into real buildings, people could lean out of windows, Crazy Climber-style, and fire weapons or throw things at you. The main character would have to be a lot more agile for this to be feasible.

Conclusions

As it stands, Zenith is much too simple. The goal of getting to the top, with a few puzzles and fight sequences in-between is not really enough. With a proper storyline and more strategy, it could be a winner.

Alternative Storyline

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In the pollution-ridden future, giant corporations battle for airspace. Ground level is inhabited by hideous mutations which destroy any attempts to lay communication cable, so all communication is done by satellite. Because of the radio-jamming effects of nu-smog, each company fights to build the tallest building, giving it a communication advantage. Of course, rival companies try to stop their competitors.

You are Sith Valise, a comm-cracker. Corporations pay handsomely for your services. Risking life and limb, you climb to the top of rival towers and disable their satellite dishes. As you climb you must avoid or disable traps (small puzzle games as in *System Shock*). Spy-in-the-Sky cameras are sent after you and will either attack you or try to negotiate a new deal - you may be offered more money to swing onto a rival tower and disable them. Some buildings are split into two or three towers, which you get between using a grappling hook.

At the start of each building, the weather is dark, *Syndicate Wars*-like. Further up, clumps of smog obscure your vision (see *WaveRace* for a good example of thick fog), making traps harder to avoid. Through the smog, the sky is bright and the buildings clean. On the way up, rival buildings are visible in the near distance and above the smog the tops of other buildings poke up through the clouds. Some buildings may be linked by pipes to aid crossing.

On the roof, you do battle with a boss creature (humanoid or mechanoid, depending on who runs the building) before blowing up the communications equipment. Alternatively, you may have to place explosives at certain weak points on the way up the building to ensure complete destruction. The explosive have to be placed in secure locations so that cameras do not spot and defuse them (or you placing them).