

Eureka!

Understanding Innovation

Damion Schubert
Principle Lead Systems Designer
Star Wars: The Old Republic



IGDA Microtalk June 2011



An Introduction

- 12 Years design experience
 - *Meridian 59*
 - *Shadowbane*
 - *Star Wars: the Old Republic*
- <http://www.zenofdesign.com>
 - Blog devoted to good design practices
- “Design of the Times”
 - Column in *Game Developer* magazine



Why Is Innovation Important?



Our top 10 lists right now are driven by sequels and franchises, but some of us don't have that luxury.



If you aren't one of big franchise games, novelty is your only hope of gaining buzz.



However, a lot of failure in this industry comes from 'innovation misfires'.

10 Simple Rules to Innovating in Games





1. Swing Big.

If innovation is what you're selling, it needs to be big enough to sell.



The Sims – like nothing else on the market (well, at least going back to *Little Computer People*).



Wizard 101 – a freeplay collectible card MMO for kids – was a pretty vast departure from what was previously on the market.



PuzzleQuest rose above all the other *Bejeweled* clones by adding a full-featured RPG layer to it.



2. Seek Resonance.

If something speaks to your audience, chase it.



Activision's *Spider-man* focused on fulfilling the fantasy of webslinging.



Thief wasn't originally a stealth game. They shifted design once they noticed it resonated.



3. Support your Innovation

One or two homerun features are better than a handful of lukewarm innovations. Focus on your best innovations, and focus on features that support it.



Braid isn't the first game with time travel, but its one of the first to push to its logical, mind-melting extremes.



Eve is successful because it's *not* a WoW clone, but rather chooses features that reinforces space trade and combat.



Portal has a small feature set, that they slowly build upon and stretch new ways.



4. Simplicity can be innovation.



The iPod was not the first MP3 player. It was the first simple one.



Some say *World of Warcraft* didn't innovate, but its focus on simplicity was a major innovation for the genre.



Civilization: Revolution innovated on its classic design primarily by reducing play cycles so a game fit into 2-3 hours.



5. Be sure players see your innovation.

Their patience is limited.



In *Shadowbane*, city sieges were our unique selling proposition. You had to get to level 35 to see them.



Player-created content games (like *Second Life* and *Neverwinter Nights*) need emphasis on putting good content forward.



Lots of *Eve* players quit before seeing a single space battle. (Yes, MMOs have a real problem with getting players to the innovation).



6. Changing emphasis can be innovative



Coop play has been in shooters for a decade, but *Left 4 Dead's* innovation was a single-minded focus on it.



Diablo focused on action combat, and resurrected the dying RPG market.



Burnout takes the crashes incidental to most racing games, and makes it a central design feature.



7. Challenge assumptions.

Anytime a designer really wants to do something that another designer tells him he can't do, there's an opportunity for true innovation.



“Games with peripherals never sell.”



“Girls don’t play games.”



“Hardcore gamers demand realistic art.”



8. It's possible to innovate too much.

Over-innovation can detract resources, steal marketing focus and in some cases weaken from a design sense your key features.



Gears of War cut several features (squad control, more vehicles) because they fought with the key innovation: cover.



Ultima Online innovated in so many features that developers had real troubles tracking their interactions.



9. It's only innovative if it's better.

Designers have a real knack for falling in love with ideas, without necessarily thinking through the ramifications of them.

Sometimes the change is good, but requires serious followthrough.



The intricate physics in *Trespasser* was interesting academically, but difficult to control and frustrating to play.



Burnout: Paradise's open world feature made it harder for players to repeat challenges they just failed.



In *Playstation: Home*, you had to walk to the movie theatre to see a movie – less efficient than choosing from a list on Xbox.



10. True innovation can be *less expensive* than making a me-too product.

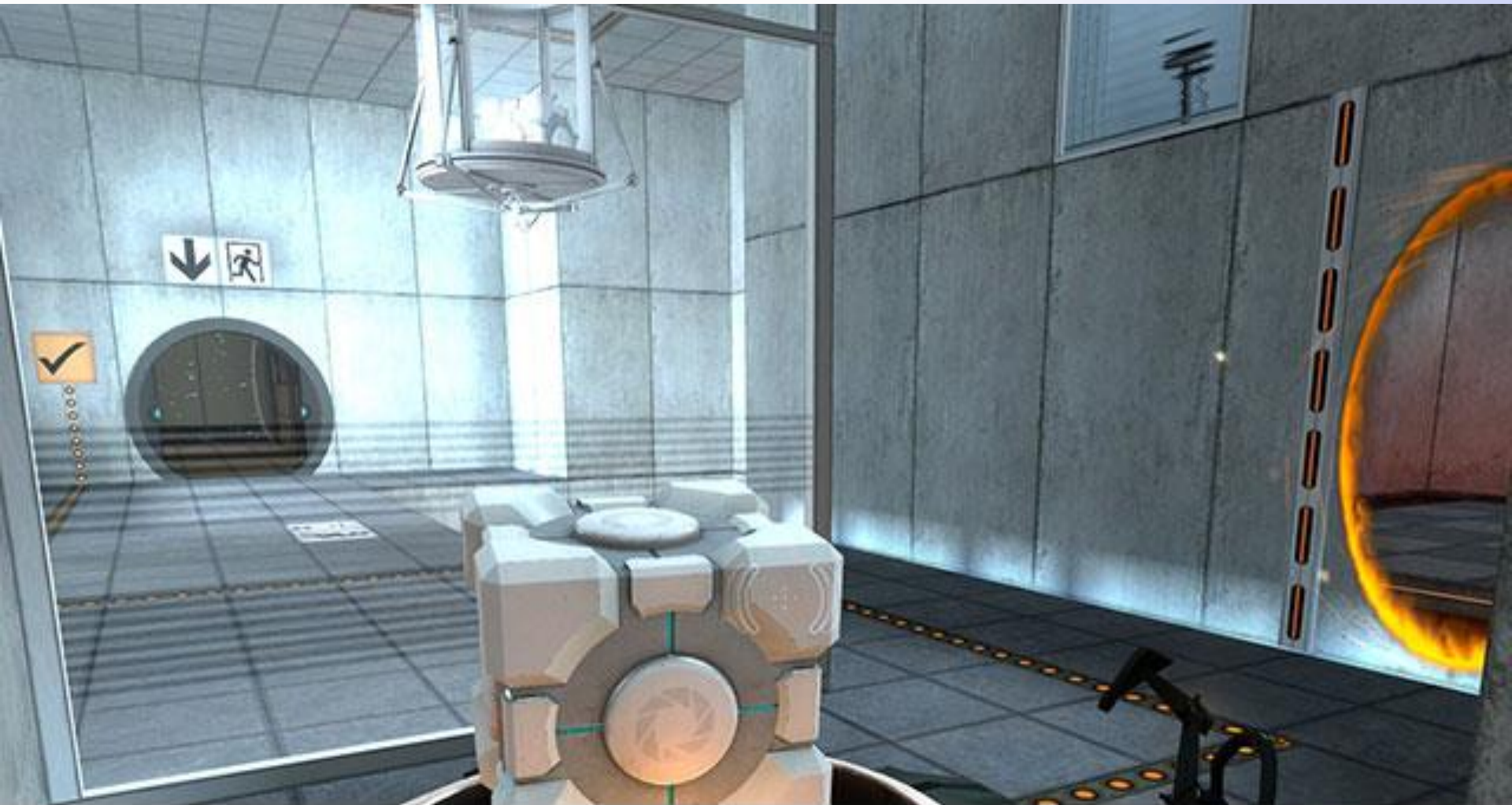
If your idea is truly innovative, you're not competing anyone, and therefore you can dial back your feature list.



Left 4 Dead has fewer features and lower quality art than the FPS giants – but its not competing directly with them.



Boom Blox and *Katamari Damacy* both have crude, effective art styles. They have no competition, so why compete on art?



Portal's team describes being madly envious of *Half-Life 2's* resources. *Portal* is the far more memorable game.



Conclusions

Good games Innovate.

Great games swing for the fences!

But good designers also avoid over-innovation.

They focus on their true innovations

And cull out any features that undermine them.

Questions?



Damion Schubert
damion@zenofdesign.com
<http://www.zenofdesign.com>