Alex Builds His Farm
Interview with Catherine Roy & Kim Belanger - Project Managers

Why did Ubi Soft make the decision to develop CD-ROMs featuring the PLAYMOBIL® toys?

Both Ubi Soft Entertainment and PLAYMOBIL® have the same philosophy in regard to quality and excellence, our values are the same when we think about production and entertainment for the family. More than a simple license agreement we have forged a co-operative partnership that utilizes the expertise of both partners.

Why did you decide to create the game based on the PLAYMOBIL® Farm?

Through our research we found that the farm was the most popular environment amongst the youngest children so the idea behind *Alex Builds His Farm* was born.   It is a known fact that small children have always been fascinated by animals especially farm animals! We also took advantage of the expertise PLAYMOBIL® offered as they have found verified through years of experience that the farm collection is very popular among kids 3 – 8 years old.

Can you give us more info on how *Alex Builds His Farm* is specifically designed for young children?

Characterized as an explorative simulation, this game is an ideal introduction to computers that will capture youngsters' imagination and heighten their curiosity in an innovative way. The story revolves around helping Alex become the perfect little farmer! It offers children the chance to see the PLAYMOBIL® farm come alive as Alex makes his dream of living on the farm come true.

What is the difference between other children's titles and *Alex Builds His Farm*?

Alex Builds His Farm is different in many ways with one of the most important being that this is the first 3D game developed for very young children. The rich graphic quality and sheer number of animated sequences we have incorporated into this game out number any other title I have seen to date.

Did you test this title with young children? What was their reaction?

As soon as we had a section of the game ready to test, we took it into pre-schools. We found that the children were very excited about the title and interested in everything that was going on in the game. They loved the animations and quickly learned how to activate their favorites over and over again, always laughing. They were surprised with the graphics and with all the freedom they had in the environment. In their own words the examples of their comments were "Wow, did you see what I just did?" and "I just went into a new area, it's a corn field!" and "Wow, look at the cow!"

How did they manage the keyboard controls?

They all did pretty well!   Their parents were a bit skeptical in the beginning about their ability to manage with the keyboard but the kids adapted very quickly. The children who were familiar with the computer were, of course, quicker than the others were but in general it did not take anyone more than 15 – 20 minutes to learn how to control and direct *Alex*. The parents themselves were quite surprised. It showed us that kids really have adaptation capabilities that we sometimes underestimate.

0   Where did you begin the development of this game?

We took the game to focus groups of children in pre-schools and kindergarten classes to see how children react to computers and to observe how they handle and react to 3D technology. As far as computes are concerned, some children were unfamiliar with them while others were very much at ease. They were, however, very eager to learn and try new things. We found that the children who had never touched a computer caught up with the other children rather quickly. In terms of the 3D technology, we found that their perceptions of depth in the game didn't affect their ability to move in the environment and we found that they enjoyed the feeling of being immersed in a 3D world!

What are the basic differences between the original version and the Pentium® III optimized version?

We have taken what is already a graphically outstanding game used the increased processing power of the Pentium® III engine to enrich the game even further – pushing it to a whole new level in PC gaming. Some of the end user benefits of using the Pentium® III   engine can be summarized as follows:

1. More detailed and richer looking characters and levels through a substantial increase in the polygon count.
2. Improved shadow effects that will reflect the characters actual position.
3. Increase in the number of lighting sources creating more dynamic lighting effects.
4. Improved AI in the characters and the addition of new characters.
5. Addition of mirror effects creating reflections.
6. Improved surface appearance with the addition of multi-texture effects.

Do you think children will notice these differences?

I do.   Children are a lot more observant than we sometimes give them credit for! In *Alex Builds His Farm* one of the most noticeable differences for children will probably be the addition of over 20 characters that they can interact with around the farm.   This optimization aspect alone brings a lot more life into the game, adds more interaction, and enriches a game that was already complete in terms of scenario, gameplay, graphical richness and beauty.

The moving shadow is another aspect that makes the game more dynamic.   It has created a sense of realism that you will rarely find in games, let alone children's games.   When players play the game now they will notice a realistic shadow effect that respects the shape of their body and follows their every move.

How did you handle the adaptation of the original version into the Pentium® III optimized version?

We started with a real-time 3D game of superior quality and worked closely with Intel to create a game that is fun, interesting and user-friendly! We are among the first to make a game with these features for the children's market.   With the Pentium® III   versions of *Alex Builds His Farm* we have gone one step further in providing high-tech quality for children.

We can divide our optimization work into 2 sections: the engine and the data.   Where the engine was concerned, we studied the new PIII instructions and we rewrote our code in such a way as to benefit from these instructions.

Where the data was concerned, we have added new characters and new elements to the scenery, and we remodeled the existing characters and the 3D elements in order to make the game as realistic as possible.   For instance in the cow field for instance we have added 9 additional cows compared to the original game.

How long did it take?

The optimization process began in October of 1998 and is expected to take between 6 and 8 months in total. We started off slowly and learned as much as possible about developing for this new technology.   We did not want to rush the process in order to be certain about how far we could go with the game using the new family of processors; this way, we can avoid making mistakes and be sure not to repeat the same things 3 or 4 times.

Why was the decision make to develop for the Pentium® III?

The general Ubi Soft development strategy is to deliver top quality products and to be at the cutting edge of the technology.   Developing products for the PIII was a great opportunity for us to continue in this tradition.   We strongly believe that these games are the first in what is sure to be a wide range of Pentium® III optimized titles as the industry pushes forward and more families get high-end computers equipment.