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Game Design
Glossary

Glossary of Video Game Terms

Achievement: A system installed by Microsoft which awards the Xbox 360 player with virtual trophies when performing certain feats in games.

AI (Artificial Intelligence): This term is descriptive of how smart CPU-controlled characters behave in a game. For example, if an enemy soldier runs for cover when he sees a grenade, it's an indication of AI. It's generally harder to defeat foes that display good AI.

Analog control: Unlike digital control, which simply registers as "on" or "off", analog control is highly sensitive and takes into account to what degree the button or joystick is pushed. It provides much greater precision, and in many 3D games it lets use the same joystick to walk or run.

Anime: Japanese cartoon drawing style typified by short characters with large eyes. In video games, this style in most common in RPGs, especially those released in the 90s.

Anti-Aliasing: A programming technique (or hardware capability) that automatically smoothes jaggy edges, and is often used for making low-resolution images look more attractive.

Attract Mode: Most present in early consoles like the Atari 2600, this mode causes a game not being played to cycle through colors on the screen to minimize the possibility of having images burn into the screen. It modern televisions and consoles this is done by dimming the screen after a period of inactivity.

Beat 'em up: Term used to describe side-scrolling 2D fighters such as Final Fight and Streets of Rage.

Bit: In the early 90's, this term was often used (and misused) to measure the technical capabilities of a console. For example, the NES was 8-bit because its CPU could process 8 bits of information at a time. The Genesis is 16-bits. As technology has progressed there are better ways to measure CPU power.

Boss: In many video games (especially fighters), each stage ends with an encounter with a creature or robot that is typically much larger and tougher than the normal enemies. Which begs the question: Why do they hire henchmen that are weaker than they are?

Bullet Hell: Term used to describe difficult 2D shooters with waves of raining missiles.

CPU: Technically it stands for Central Processing Unit, but in the context of video games it's a general term used to describe the elements of the game controlled by the computer program and not by the player. For example, when playing a basketball game you might control one player and the CPU will control all of the others.

Camera: In most 3D games, the player's vantage point tends to change, often on-the-fly. For example, in Tomb Raider you view the action from the back of your character, but during certain situations (like death-defying leaps) the angle may change to a side view to maximize the drama. Your ability to manipulate the view (swing, zoom) is "camera control".

Camp: Technique often used in first-person shooters, the player will hide in a corner or hard-to-see spot, taking out opponents from there.

Cel-shaded: Used to describe a style of graphics similar to classic cartoons, in which objects are outlined in black and filled in with solid colors.

"Charge" Attack: Typically found in fighting and shooting games, this is a move that requires the player to hold the joystick (or button) for a few seconds before unleashing the attack.

Cheats: Special codes that allow you bypass the normal limitations of a game. Typical cheats allow you to gain extra lives, become invincible, access different stages, give players big heads, etc. Some cheats are built into games, while others can only be accessed using devices like the Game Shark.

"Cheap hit": A danger that is difficult or impossible to avoid. Often used to describe traps or bosses.

"Cheated Death": A term used to describe how you miraculously survived a hopeless situation. Often seen in games like Galaxian.

Clipping: A 3D graphics technique used for hiding parts of objects that should be obstructed by another object. Clipping problems result in hidden areas being visible, and objects that don't overlap correctly.

Combo: In many fighting games this is a string of moves that can be executed in rapid succession.

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Component Video Cable: This cable separates the video signal into three wires that carry the red, green, and blue signals. A red and white plug are used to transmit the audio. Component is the next step up from S-Video.

Composite Video Cable: A video cable with a single yellow plug (usually along with the red/white audio cables). Produces better quality than RF but not as sharp as S-Video.

Console: A system dedicated to playing video games. This does not include PCs or hand-helds.

Cut-Scenes: Short intermissions typically presented between stages to convey elements of a storyline. These can be live or computer-generated videos clips, and are usually non-interactive.

Difficulty Switches: Available on certain Atari consoles (like the 2600), these switches let you to set separate skill level for each player. In general A is hard and B is easy. In some games, these switches serve other functions as well.

Digital control: Until the mid-90s, most video game controllers were digital, only registering each direction or button push as "off" or "on". Analog controls, which became popular on the Nintendo 64 and Playstation, provide a much finer degree of control.

Double-Jump: In certain platform games, you can perform a second jump after the first while in mid-air, allowing you to reach high platforms.

Easter Eggs: Undocumented objects or features hidden inside of video games. The first Easter Egg was a secret room in the Atari 2600 game Adventure (1980). These sometimes take the form of built-in cheat codes.

FPS: First Person Shooter. Examples are Doom, Bioshock, and Call of Duty.

Fatality: In certain fighting games this is a gruesome act inflicted on your opponent after defeating him. It was popularized by the Mortal Kombat franchise.

First-Person: A point of view which lets you view the action through your character's eyes. You never see you own body, except maybe your arms. It was made popular by flight simulators and shooters like Doom.

Flicker: Common in early video game consoles, this visual glitch made certain objects look transparent and hard to see. It was often the result of hardware limitations or poor programming.

Frag: A term associated with shooting something in a first-person shooters, usually a human-controlled opponent.

Frame-Rate: A term that describes the smoothness of motion in a game. The image on a television screen is really a series of still images shown in rapid succession. A normal television show is broadcast at 33 fps (frames per second). Certain games cannot display the action at this rate due to various reasons, and as a result the animation can appear choppy. Higher frame-rates (like 66 fps) result in more attractive, fluid animation.

Full Motion Video (FMV): Popularized by the Sega CD in the early 90s, FMV games allowed the player to interact (to a limited degree) with live or computer-generated video.

Game Genie: A popular device in the early 90's that allowed you to enter "cheat" codes into games on consoles such as the Genesis or Super Nintendo.

Game Shark: A product from the late 90's that let you use cheat codes in your games.

"Glory Seeking": Taking a particularly dangerous course of action for the opportunity to score bonus points. For example, pursuing the vegetables in Dig Dug.

Hack: A game that "reuses" code from an older game. Usually the hack plays much the like old one (except for some graphical tweaks), although some hacks incorporate extensive modifications to the original game. The Atari 2600 system is the system best known for hacks.

Homebrew: A game designed and programmed from the ground up for a classic system.

Hyperspace: Popularized in Asteroids (1980), this causes you ship to disappear and reappear in a random location. It's useful to escape dangerous situations, but can sometimes put you in a far worse predicament. Death on re-entry is also possible.

Invisible Wall: Often seen in 3D adventures, the player is confined to an area and pushing against a boundary results in walking in place.

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Isometric View: Instead of viewing the action directly from above or directly from the side, an isometric view allows you to look at the action from a diagonal, tilted overhead angle.

Kart Racing: A genre popularized by Super Mario Kart (SNES, 1992), involves a group of cartoon characters racing around in tiny go-carts.

Keypad: Many early-80s video game controllers had a 3x4 set of numbered buttons built into them. Other systems, like the Atari 2600, had separate keypad controllers.

Multi-tap: A device that allows you to plug in more controllers than the console has built-in controller ports for.

Noob (slang): An unexperienced player that foolishly goes on-line only to get "pwned".

Overlay: Included with many older console games, overlays are a thin piece of plastic that slide over the buttons on a keypad, labeling the keys for the functions that pertain to that game.

Pack-in Game: A game that comes packaged with a system. For example, the NES pack-in was Super Mario Bros, and the Genesis pack-in was Sonic the Hedgehog.

Paddle: Atari 2600 controllers that consist of a knob that can turn and a single fire button. These controllers allow for precise side-to-side movements.

Platform Game: A game that requires you to jump on platforms of various sizes. These games also typically involve collecting items and jumping on enemies. Examples include Super Mario Bros (NES), Sonic the Hedgehog (Genesis), and Jak and Daxter (PS2).

Polygons: Small individual shapes that fit together to form complex 3-D models. Detailed 3D objects are composed of thousands of polygons.

Power-Up: An item that gives you special abilities or makes you more powerful. Power-ups sometimes only last for a limited time.

Pre-rendered graphics: Used in many early 3D adventures, the scenery is static and viewed from a fixed camera angle. One advantage is that pre-rendered scenery is usually more detailed.

Pwned (slang): Owned, beaten, defeated. Originated from a typo of "owned".

RF (Radio Frequency) Cable: A low quality signal sent over coaxial cable (used for cable TV). These cables were commonly used for old video game systems. They produce the lowest quality video signal, and are susceptible to interference.

RPG: See Role Playing Game.

Rapid-Fire: Allows you to shoot fast and continuously by tapping the fire button, or in some games, simply holding it down.

Real-Time: Normally used to describe combat sequences in some RPGs, the action does not stop to allow you to enter commands. This is the opposite of "turn-based".

Resolution: A term that describes the level of detail in a game's graphics. An image on a television screen is actually a series of pixels strung together. High-resolution images look more detailed and lifelike, which low-resolution images tend to look blocky or jagged.

Respawn: A term oftened associated with first-person shooters, describes the act of returning to the field of play after being killed.

Role-Playing Game (RPG): Lengthy, slow-moving games with elaborate storylines that typically involve going on a quest. Although traditionally turn-based, modern RPGs tend to incorporate real-time elements.

Rumble Pack: A device that plugs into a controller to provide vibration feedback.

S-Video Cable: A video cable that produces better video quality than a composite cable, but not as good as a component cable. S-Video improves on composite by separating the color and luminance signals.

Sandbox: Describes an open-ended, go-anywhere style of play employed in games like Gran Theft Auto 3.

Shmups: Short for "shoot 'em ups". Often used to describe 2D shooting games.

Shoulder buttons: Found on the controllers of most modern systems, these are located on the side of the controller that faces away from the player. These are usually pressed with your index fingers, and are usually analog (touch sensitive). Also known as "triggers".

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Slow-down: When more objects are on the screen than a system can handle, the game tends to slow down, often to the detriment of the gameplay.

Smart Bomb: Popularized by Defender (1981), this weapon instantly destroys all enemies visible on the screen. Usually only available in limited supply.

Sprite: Animated images that form objects or characters in 2D games. These dominated video games until the Playstation popularized 3-D, polygon graphics in the mid-90's.

Survival Horror: A genre popularized by Resident Evil (Playstation, 1996). A survival horror game is an intense 3-D adventure involving encounters with zombies and other monsters.

Switchbox: Used with older video game consoles, this device allows you to switch between game and television signals.

"Tempting Fate": A generally unwise decision involving toying with an enemy in order to gain the opportunity to score bonus items or points. This is often seen in Pac-Man games.

Texture Mapping: The programming technique that draws graphical patterns on polygons. This allows smooth surfaces to appear bumpy or shaded.

Third-Person: Unlike first-person, this point of view lets you see the character you are controlling.

Track-ball: A special controller that contains a ball roughly the size of a cue ball that you roll with your hand. This provides a fine degree of control, and was made popular in early arcade games like Missile Command and Centipede.

Trigger: See "Shoulder buttons".

Turbo: The ability to speed up for a short stretch, this is common in racing games. In some games, it's known as "nitro".

Turn-based: Normally used to describe the combat sequences in RPGs, pauses the action to allow the user to enter commands between attacks.