



Guest column - Mikkel Christiansen

AES 2011 AES 41st International Conference – Audio for Games
Design, discussions and dialogue techniques

London, Thai food, drizzling and exciting geeky sound topics. A wonderful cocktail to be enjoyed for three whole days. In February IO sound went to the AES conference “Audio for Games”, which was located within the inspiring buildings of The British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA). This specialist conference provided a relevant and in-depth look at game audio and a most needed forum for professionals and academics to communicate about issues that are pertinent in this field.

This conference dealt with issues like reverb calculations, education standardization and design discussions. From our perspective the most intriguing sections were discussions involving mixing standards, audio tools and context-based dialogue.

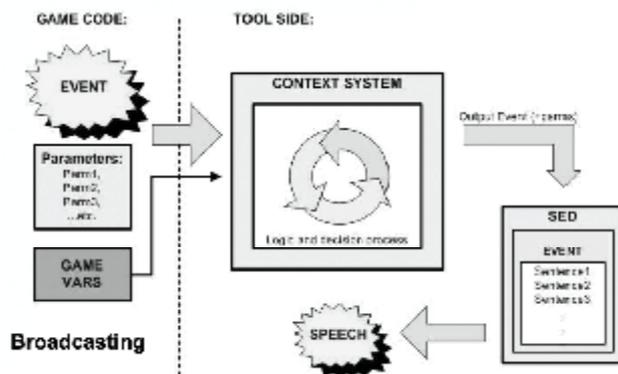
These are all topics which are relevant in a competitive industry, where the ability to remain in serious competition relies on technical complexity as well as emotional player involvement through coherent and memorable experiences.

Player involvement or emotional engagement is achievable through believable character behavior; created by animation, plausible AI and last but not least – dialogue which is authentic and accurate in both performance and context. This text is an attempt to describe the dialogue concept as it is used in the game FIFA and to designate the possibilities it holds for IO Interactive.

CONTEXTUALLY DRIVEN SPEECH

EA has maintained a historically strong focus on natural and context relevant dialogue to emphasize the gameplay in FIFA and to help create memorable moments. On the last day of the conference the workshop Contextually Driven Speech led by Gordon Durity (senior audio director from EA), exposed the techniques behind the commentators’ seemingly unscripted and context-based conversational threads.

In order to control the flow of dialogue in relation to the context, FIFA uses so called conditions as simple “rules” which, when satisfied, validates and picks the appropriate output.



The conditions listen out for game variables, parameters and history to work as part of the Context System in order to evaluate inputs and choose the most relevant thing to say.



These conditions are the fundamental building blocks in defining and creating the context and allow FIFA to keep track of game history, interrupt sentences and trigger passive context. These elements are all crucial in creating believable and contextually accurate dialogue.

With the ability to remember game history, dialogue can be used to link old events to the current situation. Thereby the game connects these events so they become coherent for the player which hopefully will perceive the game as rather intelligent and thereby more realistic and immersive. Dialogue lines taking into account previous behavior convey much more than deterministic one-to-one relationship. *“Great ball, hits it well!”* is not quite as powerful as *“Great ball, hits it well! The very best time to get in front, with a goal this late in the game! Well, this game has been so dramatic, I hesitate to confirm it, but that looks like the winner”*.¹

The example above does not only comment on the isolated action, but also brings a summary of the whole game as the player has perceived it and thereby creates high-level connections between player experience and game progress.

Interruptions are also a powerful tool, when used context related. FIFA is using phonetic analysis, sweet spots and quick cross-fades for an authentic performance. A goal from out of nowhere should be treated somewhat differently than an obvious throw and the following reactions should reflect the severity of the situation. FIFA also keeps track of interruptions, so earlier interrupted thoughts can be resumed or past predictions and analysis can be re-evaluated.

Furthermore FIFA will start or continue conversations based on passive game states or contexts without needing a discreet game code event. This contributes to eliminate tedious moments. *“A lot of talk in recent years of Arsenal’s style of football. The supporters, the die-hards; disappointed that the flowing game that they played hasn’t produced too many trophies...”*²

CONTEXT RELATED DIALOGUE

Using context-related dialogue gives you a more unpredictable, non-repetitive and logical varying conversational thread, which conveys a coherent and seemingly unscripted experience to the player. FIFA has a huge advantage in its commentator setup where there aren’t limiting factors for the design such as animation and random lethal bullets hitting them. The gameplay is linear in the sense that we are going from match start to match end and the game development is fairly predictable. And to add to this they have a dedicated department containing coders, dialogue writers and designers setting it up. This strong focus on having designers and coders working closely together is quintessential in providing a great result. EA uses customized tools for this process, allowing the designers to set up the conditions and thereby iterate, tweak and test fairly easy.

The player’s experience of accuracy and quality in the dialogue is very much dependant on the detail level in the condition setup.

1 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h34Rcsn0_Ow&feature=relmfu 00:10:30
2 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h34Rcsn0_Ow&feature=relmfu 00:02:00



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EMOTIONAL STATE

Using contextually correct dialogue in our products might be one of many methods used to create coherent, immersive and memorable experiences. Take for instance the Hitman 5 combat dialogue and add a layer of battle history, combat length and variables such as killed Npc's and the health level of Hitman. Let this define the conditions and building blocks, from where we choose which dialogue to play. The beloved lines *"I'm reloading"* or *"Call for backup"* should be accessible in at least 3 variations, where the emotional state of the Npc talking, is clear. Are we dealing with a guy feeling confident in his superiority or did he just realize that drinking Budweiser and beating up his wife finally caught up with him?

Engaging a contextually-based approach will furthermore allow us to expand the line *"I'm reloading"* to: *"I'm reloading, I think the bastard is badly wounded, let's finish him off"* - Using the health level of Hitman or; *"I'm reloading. I think you and I are the only ones left alive, so let's save ammo"* - Using the percentage of Npc's alive. Or combine them in a line of dialogue, if both conditions are satisfied.

EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT

We as players would appreciate that kind of information and if it reflects our current game perception and emotional state, thereby confirming our expectations, the game has succeeded in creating a high-level coherency between player choices and game behaviour - leading to emotional engagement and player involvement. Beating up our friends in FIFA always feels twice as good if the commentator confirms our awesomeness with comments like *"Brilliant goal! And it's one of the great sights in football to see a shot fly up into the top corner of the net"*.³

As of 2010, the FIFA franchise has been localized into 18 languages and is available in 51 countries. The series has sold more than 65 million copies worldwide, making it one of the best-selling video game franchises.⁴

For more information see [\\ioishare\Stuff\AES_AudioForGames_2011](http://www.ioishare.com/Stuff/AES_AudioForGames_2011)

³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=40msdiAkyIM&feature=related> 00:02:30

⁴ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/FIFA_\(video_game_series\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/FIFA_(video_game_series))