

Tech Talk Episode 11: Video Games

In the beginning

(Video of Pong video game. Text appears on the screen...)

Tech Talk

Next

Tech Talk introduction plays.

Susan: Hello and welcome to Tech Talk, your source for information on digital technology from the University of Minnesota. I'm your host, Susan McKinnell. Today we are going to talk about computer games. With the technological advances in graphics and imagery, these games are more realistic than ever before, plus they're more exciting to play. Today we'll look at how they've changed not only the way they look and the way they're played, but also discuss the current rating system used by the gaming industry and whether or not this rating system works. Some of the tech terms you'll hear today include: console, immersive environment and simulation.

Kurtis Scaletta knows a lot about games. He not only plays computer games, but he's designed a few himself. But more than that he has a master's degree in English and will soon complete his master's in Instructional Systems and Technology. Here at the University, he works in the Digital Media Center where he consults with faculty on ways to make technology a tool for education. Welcome to Tech Talk, Kurtis.

Kurtis: Hi, Susan.

Susan: It's nice of you to be here with us today.

Kurtis: Thanks.

Susan: Now, I know you brought some games with you. Did you want to start talking about this first one, Myst?

Kurtis: Sure. Yep. The first game that I'm going to show is called Myst. It's about ten years old and at least at the time it was the best selling game of all time. I don't think it is anymore, the next one I'm going to show is, but it's extremely popular and I think it's a good example of a different kind of game than people might know exists because Myst is a completely nonviolent kind of game. It's got a good story line behind it and it's all intellectual challenges. You don't have to be fast with a joy stick. You don't have to kill anybody.

Susan: This is not one of those eye-hand coordination games?

Kurtis: It's definitely not. It's all brain stuff.

Susan: When you say it's brain stuff, is it like puzzles or...

Kurtis: Yes. Well, that's what they call them, but it's not the kind...A lot of computer games take, kind of, existing puzzles and they just put them on your computer, examples being like solitaire-type games.

Susan: Card games?

Kurtis: Yeah. But this is a pretty original concept, where, first of all completely immersive. You're in, as you can see, there are no controls except for your cursor as a hand and that shows you which direction you can go. You're basically walking around in this different world.

Susan: Mm. Hmm. And by where you click, you can choose where you are going.

Kurtis: Right. And being about ten years old, this isn't the same kind of 3-D environment that people are used to now, where you can turn around 360 degrees. It's really a series of screen shots. Sometimes you'll see things and you can pick them up. These are clues you're going to use to solve your puzzle.

Susan: It's kind of like a mystery.

Kurtis: Yes, hence the name, Myst.

Susan: Of course. I didn't pick up on that earlier.

Kurtis: Right. So, for instance, as you walk around and interact with different things. Here you can pick up books.

Susan: Mm. Hmm.

Kurtis: If you pick up the right book...

Susan: Which may take you a while to get there.

Kurtis: Which, hopefully, I'll be able to do soon...

Susan: Mm. Hmm.

Kurtis: Some of them have actual writing on them. This is a good one. (Image of open book with cursive writing)

Susan: There we go.

Kurtis: So, just to show you something exciting. If you walk up here, this picture...well, maybe it was the wrong one. One of these pictures opens up a secret doorway.

Susan: Obviously, you need to remember a lot with this.

Kurtis: Yes.

Susan: This isn't at all what a lot of people think of when you think of action games where they're a race car driver or shooting other players and so forth.

Kurtis: Right.

Susan: And you say this was the most popular when it came out?

Kurtis: At one time it was the most popular game of all time. I think it just shows that there's a big audience, as popular as the violent games are, there's a bigger audience for people who just want fun little fantasy worlds and intellectual challenges.

Susan: Are there lots of games like this out now?

Kurtis: Yeah, it's pretty much a whole genre now. Like I say, the graphics have gotten more immersive. One thing about Myst is that it's a pretty lonely world, because it's basically just you and you very rarely encounter other people.

Susan: You don't see very many other characters.

Kurtis: Right. Some of that was due to the graphics and stuff of its time. There was a popular, even before this came out, there was a popular genre of games called text adventures games. All it would be is just text. It would tell that, "You're standing in a field." You would say, "Go North" and you would just type it out. Well, that's kind of actually more of the genesis of this type of game because it was problem-solving in a storyline. Games I've played recently, one really good one is called, Siberia; have actually characters you can interact with throughout and it makes it a very fun experience.

Susan: And one of the things that you said with this is that it's an immersive environment. And what you mean by that is that you don't have any control except for your one little mouse, and you're just in this different world.

Kurtis: Right. If you have the sound on this, it actually has very good music. Others now have spoken dialogue and sound effects. So if you play it, it's almost, I mean it's not literally virtual reality in the sense that, you know, you put on the goggles, but you become very absorbed by this world that you're in.

Susan: Mm. Hmm. How long does it take to complete a game like this?

Kurtis: Well, it all depends on how smart you are.

Susan: And how much you keep track of where you are going?

Kurtis: Right. Yeah and very good planning. And actually that's a good thing. Is that there are intellectual challenges but if young people are playing this game, and it's completely appropriate for young people, they might learn that if they keep maps and they document things and they do some planning, then they're going to get through the game quicker. And that's an illustration of how the problem solving can teach you how to solve problems.

Susan: Some useful skills. Wandering around mindlessly might not get you very far.

Kurtis: Rather than wander around aimlessly. Correct.

Susan: Great. Great. What else did you want to show us today?

Kurtis: The Sims; some people call it the living dollhouse game, because, basically, you have these homes with cut-away walls and you can see the human beings inside of the houses living their lives and you basically run their lives. You're God.

Susan: (Laughs) I could see why that would be a popular game.

Kurtis: (Laughs.) Right. So you can play it... There's sort of a gaming objective where you try to become successful but you can play it however you want. If you want your Sim characters to party all night and not go to work then you can do that. You can just see what happens to them.

Susan: Are there consequences to this?

Kurtis: There are consequences, right. But basically it's a fun experimental model where you can do whatever you want with your characters and see what happens to them.

Susan: Now "Sims" makes me think of simulations.

Kurtis: Right.

Susan: Is this a simulation game, though?

Kurtis: I would think there is almost a genre called "simulation game" and I guess the first of those was probably Sim City. That was one of the first really popular ones. That one is about 10 years old—about the same age as Myst—and you were God and you had a city and they keep updating this. So now there's Sim City 3000, I think it's called, where they've improved the graphics and the interactivity as computers have gotten better. But, they've simulated everything from running railroads, running empires in the days of the Roman Caesars, building roller coasters, my favorite is a simulation golf course where you build a golf course and you can actually play golf on it against famous

golfers with names like Tiger Forest. But it's not a true simulation in that when I use the term simulation, I generally think of it as something that is supposed to be realistic, like a flight simulator, you're actually going to learn how to fly a plane. There is obviously an level of fantasy to that so it's sort of a simulation-type game—It's a genre of game.

Susan: And as far as games, there are several simulation games out there, like flight simulators or driving games that are actually used by folks are learning how to fly a plane.

Kurtis: Well, the commercial products you would buy would not be the same as the real-life simulations but a lot of times they're made by the same companies, so there are a lot of similarities. Pilots have said that, you know, the Microsoft Flight Simulator is like "scary--realistic." So that same company might also make an actual flight simulator that is used in pilot training.

Susan: So, an airbase somewhere?

Kurtis: Right

Susan: Sims; this is a very popular game. People like playing god.

Kurtis: Yes.

Susan: I know that games or computer games tend to be more popular with young males. But this is one that's popular with females as well.

Kurtis: Right. And I think that's why they've found such a big audience. It's kind of the video game counterpart to Titanic, the movie. They realized that all these girls out there were not getting the kinds of games that they wanted to play. And there were some really misunderstood attempts at getting the female gaming audience, Barbies this, or Brittany Spears that, but I think the Sims found the right balance. Girls are more interested in people, less interested in shooting. But they are not condescending to the girls by giving them Barbie dolls; they give them real people in real environments.

Susan: This is one game that has a lot of sharing aspects as well?

Kurtis: Yeah. I was going to talk about that too. The sharing of the Sims, and I was going to talk about Quake too, I'll show that next.

Susan: You can go ahead and talk about Quake if you want to.

Kurtis: Okay. The Sims is interesting because it became popular in sort of the age of the internet and so, you can not only play these games where you develop your characters and share those characters with other people. So people upload their games that they've played and people can download them and see what you've done with your characters and the neighborhoods you've built. And now there's an online Sims where your

characters can even interact in real time with the Sims characters that other people have made.

Susan: It becomes a complex language thing.

Kurtis: It becomes an online world where you can interact with other people all through your virtual characters.

Susan: Now what's the deal with Quake? I know Quake is a first-person shooter game which, of course, gets all of the bad rap.

Kurtis: Right. Okay and let's see if we can get that demo running.

Susan: So as a game it's obviously very violent.

Kurtis: Yes. Mm. Hmm. The main objective is to kill people.

Susan: (Laughs)

Kurtis: Now this was made by the same people who made Doom which was the first first-person shooter game or such notoriety and they made Castle Wolfenstein which was another big first-person shooter game back in the early 90's. And these are basically games where you don't even see your character you just see the gun and you can move around and they've gotten increasingly better with graphics and everything.

Susan: So, you really do see the gore and everything.

Kurtis: Yes.

Susan: Now, I know you have some positive things to say about Quake, though.

Kurtis: Yeah, well, the interesting thing about...what we're looking at here is Quake III, Arena. But what's interesting about the Quake games and similar games...and I just wanted people to see and we're not going to see what I'm really talking about...because this is just this is just moving around and...

Susan: But you can see the gun and things...

Kurtis: Yeah and you can see the gun and you pick up things and eventually I'll find some bad guy...

Susan: Mm. Hmm.

Kurtis: There you go (shows the gun shooting in the video game.)

Susan: Shooting the wall, yeah.

Kurtis: I feel gratified.

Susan: (Laughs)

Kurtis: What's interesting is that they started creating these virtual worlds and instead of... The old first-person shooter games, they always had some sort of gaming objective [e.g.] "You're going to try to bring down some sort of menace by killing a lot of humanoid characters." But the online version didn't necessarily have objectives because you're playing against one another.

Susan: One another's characters?

Kurtis: One another's characters. But the world is open sourced and the people could create components, they can create new territory, new maps to play the game. And so a lot of young people know how to write the programs to enhance the games. And so the players became involved in changing the landscape of the game and they created new aspects of the world and they ended up forming, because the more experienced players were basically better, they would just enjoy shooting the novices. And it wouldn't be very much fun for a novice to come in and play.

Susan: Obviously not. Not much of a chance.

Kurtis: But they started forming self-protective communities of "Let's keep ourselves safe from these predators" So, even though it's an incredibly violent game, it ended up being a lesson in, sort-of, conflict management, whereby working together and forming these communities, people were able to protect themselves.

Susan: So even in some of these violent games there may be some positive, social redeeming values?

Kurtis: There might be. Right.

Susan: There might be. I do want to get to, briefly, some of the terminology about, you know, we've got games for computers, games that are played on consoles, what's the difference there?

Kurtis: Well, a lot of the games that are available on consoles are also available for PC and vice versa. For instance, I think The Sims is available now for console even Myst might be. In the old days maybe some games were designed for the PC and others were designed for consoles, which are much cheaper and they're optimized for graphics when it was more just like video games.

Susan: Okay.

Kurtis: But now, it's really just a matter of, if all you want to do is play games, well if you bought a Playstation 2 it's about \$400.00. You're going to get the best games and it's optimized so the graphics are going to be very quick, the sound is going to be excellent and the games will be out sooner.

Susan: If you only want to play games, a console is a good way to go, but...

Kurtis: Right. But if you're looking to buy a personal computer and you like gaming, you might just look at getting a personal computer that's optimized for playing games. And it's going to cost more like \$1500.00. But, you'll have everything a personal computer would have, you can get the graphics accelerator and the sound card. Some games may take a little bit longer, but eventually almost all of the games that you are going to play on your Playstation 2 will come out for the PC as well.

Susan: And if you want to optimize your PC, you'll need that graphics accelerator; I would assume a lot of memory...

Kurtis: Especially the visual memory, v-RAM and speakers: make sure you have good sound.

Susan: Sounds good. Kurtis Scaletta, thank you so much for being with us today.

Kurtis: Thank you, Susan.

Susan: Earlier in this program series we talked with a communications scholar who said that email is changing the way that we communicate. On another program, a futurist told us a whole society is evolving around the computer and Kurtis indicated playing on computer games is becoming more and more cooperative.

(Scene of several young men playing video games; each on his own computer. Blake Krone, computer gamer and student says, "Tom do you want to get jet packs and go take that flag from them?")

Blake: Everybody's got a different computer and they're connected to a single computer that provides the game actually and we all connect to that and then we play off that one main computer using our computers.

All the games have what's called a browser in them, much like your internet browser that directs you to a web site. These browsers search for other servers out there on the internet that you can connect to and play.

There are people all over the country that do this. Anywhere you go in the world you're going to find people that are playing these video games online and anytime you start up a server you could have someone from another country join in on your server. I've played with people online in what's called a clan and that's a group of people playing together

on the same team in the same game-style and we've have members from California and East coast area and even out in Italy we had a member.

All these people that I've met online through the various games I've played, I've never really ever met any of them in person except the one who were living in the same dorm hall as me when we started up our group. Normally, we would just talk via instant messengers, or talk in-game via a headset which is instead of headphones with a microphone—much like your cell phone headsets. It's the same concept. And then we can talk to each other and have verbal communication while playing our games and help each other, tell each other where we are. In essence we are in the same location.

Susan: But what if you didn't want the hassle of dragging your computer from one friend's house to another friend's dorm room?

Jesse Huset, Manager of PC Palace: Well, basically this place is a gaming facility. That is our main function. People come here and they game. At an hourly rate, they can play a computer game or a console game and that's our main functionality and the only thing we do here. The people who come here, it's kind of like if you're a jock and you like to play sports, you know, you join a softball team or you play flag football, something of that nature, but if you are a gamer, you don't really have much, you know what I mean? You can sit at home and just play with yourself, basically, or play on the internet. But it's different when you are actually socially entangled with people, like playing right next to them and you know you have that interaction. And it's healthier too. It's human nature to come together and do things. So a place like this is for the type of gamers who want to get away from that sitting-at-home-by themselves-type-thing. This is a whole new atmosphere and like a social environment for them to come and play in. Our main demographics are probably between, I would say, 16-25 are the majority of the people. On the other hand, you do have the high-school kids, their parents come drop them off, they're under sixteen for the weekend, or they're going to go shopping downtown or something like that, so they'll drop their kids off for 3-4 hours, with a couple of their friends they'll hang out here. We have birthday parties for little kids and stuff like that. And then you do get the older crowd too, you know some of the guys who used to play the old-school games, you know they want to come in and try out some of these games before they buy them or they come in to try out some of this new stuff.

Susan: Gaming, whether in a group or by yourself, has become a normal part of many people's lives—young and old alike. Parents trying to decide whether a video game is appropriate for their child need only to read the label on the package and see the rating of the game. But is this rating system reliable? Congress woman, Betty McCollum, representing the fourth district in Minnesota is trying to identify just that. She has been a staunch advocate for a stronger rating system for computer games. Representative McCollum, it's very nice to have you with us today.

Betty: It's great to be here.

Susan: Now, the current rating system is completely voluntary, isn't it?

Betty: It's voluntary and it's controlled by the industry.

Susan: Is that the main problem with it?

Betty: The industry has a reason to make sure that the games that they want to promote, that are their big sellers, you know, fall into a category that will allow them to be sold a lot. So, a lot of people are a little suspicious about the rating system and I think that we need a rating system that instills confidence into parents.

Susan: Absolutely. Have you seen particular examples where games have been dubiously rated?

Betty: Well, even in the E-rating games a lot of people who work with early childhood and that, say, you know, a parent might buy an E-rated program thinking that it has no violent content at all and in fact it very well could.

Susan: The E rating is supposedly for everyone.

Betty: For everyone; for young children. So, there is plenty of opportunity to do better education, both for the industry and for parents and for the children who are consuming the game, too. To know that if I'm a teenager, this is a game I really should make sure my younger siblings or my younger cousin doesn't have access to it and I should take a minute and put it away.

Susan: Mm. Hmm.

Betty: But the real challenge for me is the rating means what? I mean parents are so confused. We've got ratings for the music industry, we have ratings for the movie industry, and now we have a new rating system.

Susan: And they are all a completely different system.

Betty: And people say to me, "I work full time, I'm raising my kids, I want to be a good parent. Could we have one rating system, so I know what it means? So when I walk in a store I don't have to take out my translation for the rating system.

Susan: Or a cheat sheet. So, what do you want to do with the legislation?

Betty: Well, there are a couple of things. First, I don't know if we necessarily need to legislate. I've been talking to two major retailers right here in the Twin Cities area; Best Buy and Target and saying, "What can do to make this work?" Because, we all know that a five-year-old, a nine-year-old, ten-year-old, thirteen-year-old cannot walk into a store and buy a Playboy.

Susan: Mm. Hmm.

Betty: So, why can't we, working with the retailers, establish the same kind of protocol, the same kind of safeguards for these sexually mature games and these games that have a lot of violent content in them.

Susan: Absolutely, absolutely. So you are thinking it doesn't, necessarily, need to be legislated on the national level, but instead we might be able to get retailers to...because one of the real issues is that children can go in, teenagers can go in, and buy these, whatever the rating is, they can buy the A, adult games, because there is nothing stopping them, in most cases.

Betty: And we have a lot of products that we say are off limits to teenagers, once again, certain types of, and I used Playboy as an example...

Susan: But, cigarettes...

Betty: Cigarettes, alcohol. We have a lot of things where we just say, you know, this isn't appropriate for children. Our retailers who are part of our community work along side with parents and community leaders to say, you know, this is off-limits. We're not going to sell it. And there are plenty of ways, I think, in which we can make the market place responsible for what it's selling.

Susan: How do we get retailers to do that without legislating?

Betty: I think you have parents...

Susan: Being corrective consumers...

Betty: Yeah. People want to go into a store that they know is going to be supportive of their family values. They also want a rating system that works and I think retailers have the strongest voice in going back and saying to the manufacturers, "You know what? I want to sell these products for you, but I want something that my customers have confidence [in] when they're buying it because I want them to come to my store to purchase it.

Susan: Right.

Betty: So, I think there are some ways to do it. But we really do need to do something because the amount of violence and sexually explicit material which, sometimes has actual footage intermixed with animated footage, is quite alarming.

Susan: It's not just the animated graphics, but some of these are real little movies inside.

Betty: And it's very, very disturbing to me to watch young people become virtual victimizers.

Susan: Absolutely, absolutely. I know that, I know we have to do this pretty quickly but on the state level there are some legislative things being done. In various states and I know that Minnesota had something up this last legislative session that will come up again, I think.

Betty: The had a fine and a good friend of mine, a colleague, when I served in the Minnesota House, Sandy Pappas, whose in the senate and has also a house author, I am sure, is working on this with her, has a fine for children if they purchase it. I'm sure that Sandy would agree that we also need to make retailers take the responsibility and this needs to be a full-fledged community effort. It has to be parents, it has to be retailers and it has to be the children knowing that they live in a community that is very, very serious about making sure that they have materials that are appropriate to them.

Susan: Absolutely. Representative McCollum, thank you very much for being with us today.

Betty: Great to be here.

Susan: Well, we've covered everything from gaming environments to sound cards to gaming societies to legislation and now here is some important information *For Your Files*.

Kurtis Scaletta talked about game consoles and games on personal computers.

Kurtis: It's really just a matter of, if all you want to do is just play games, well if you bought a Playstation 2 it's about \$400.00. You're going to get the best games and it's optimized so the graphics are going to be very quick, the sound is going to excellent and the games will be out sooner.

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Susan: Minnesota Representative, Betty McCollum, would like to see rating systems for movies, magazines and video games merged into one.

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Susan: And one last reminder: next week its cell phones. Karal-Ann Marling, America's chronicler of social mores looks at cell phones and how they've changed our lives. Also with us, the Minnesota Commissioner of Transportation and you can guess what she'll be talking about when it comes to cell phones. Plus we'll delve into what cell phones you should buy and for what reason. That's all next week, right here on Tech Talk.

For more information about this and future Tech Talk episodes, check out our website at www.techtalk.umn.edu. If you have a question about the program you've just seen you can post it on our website and we'll get you a response. And if you have an idea for a future program, let us know that too. Thank you for watching, and until next time, I'm Susan McKinnell.

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